

When sad is better than happy: Negative affect can improve the quality and effectiveness of persuasive messages and social influence strategies [☆]

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Abstract

Based on recent affect-cognition theories and research on social influence strategies, four experiments predicted and found that people in negative mood produced higher quality and more effective interpersonal persuasive messages than did people in positive mood. This effect was obtained for messages advocating both popular and unpopular positions (Experiments 1 and 2), and arguments produced in negative mood actually induced greater attitude change in naïve recipients (Experiment 3). Experiment 4 replicated these effects in an interactive situation, and mediational analyses showed that mood influenced processing style, resulting in the production of more concrete and thus more effective messages when in a negative mood. The role of negative affect in information processing and the production of interpersonal influence strategies in particular is discussed, and the implications of these findings for everyday interaction strategies, and for contemporary affect—cognition theorizing are considered.

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Introduction

What is the role of affect in the way people use language to influence others? In particular, are happy or sad persons better at producing persuasive arguments? Language is the primary medium of interpersonal communication and social influence strategies, and the ability to use language effectively is a common and challenging task in everyday social life. Although affect obviously plays an important role in many aspects of interpersonal behavior (Berkowitz, 2000; Fiedler, 2001; Fletcher, 2002; Forgas, 1994, 2002; Sinclair & Mark, 1992), the influence of moods on the production of social influence strategies received almost no

attention in the past. Based on recent affect-cognition theories and past research on interpersonal communication, this paper will explore the possibility that low-intensity negative moods may have a beneficial influence on the quality and effectiveness of persuasive messages, due to the more concrete and externally focused information processing strategies they promote (Bless, 2001; Fiedler, 2001; Forgas, 1995, 2002).

Affect and persuasion

Social living is only possible because human beings possess an elaborate cognitive capacity to interpret social situations, and produce appropriate interpersonal strategies (Heider, 1958; Mead, 1934). Modern industrial mass societies in particular, where interacting with strangers has become the norm, place great demands on us to coordinate our behaviors and achieve our interpersonal objectives. The study of social influence processes has long been one of the core areas of research in social psychology, and a

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disproportionate number of our ‘classic’ studies deal with social influence phenomena (Forgas & Williams, 2001). It is all the more surprising, then, that relatively few attempts have been made to explore the role that affective states play in the way social influence strategies are *produced* and used. Whether one considers research on conformity, obedience, social facilitation or attitude change, the role of affect in these social influence phenomena received only limited attention (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Forgas & Williams, 2001).

One of the most ubiquitous influence strategies in everyday life is verbal persuasion. To get what we want from others, we typically rely on the medium of language to present as convincing a case as possible for a proposed view or action. Language represents a universal and highly flexible medium of social interaction (Mead, 1934), allowing almost unlimited scope for producing an almost infinite variety of more or less effective persuasive strategies.

Of course, there has been extensive and long-standing interest in how persuasive messages are processed by *recipients* (e.g. Berkowitz, 2000; Bless, Mackie, & Schwarz, 1996; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Fabrigar & Petty, 1999; Petty, DeSteno, & Rucker, 2001; Petty, Wegener, & Fabrigar, 1997; Razran, 1940; Sinclair, Mark, & Clore, 1994). The complementary question of how affect influences the way persuasive messages are actually *produced* attracted far less attention (but see Bohner & Schwarz, 1993). Yet, in everyday life we are all practicing persuaders, and we must rely on verbal communication to get our way with others. Amateur persuaders—and that means all of us—must plan and produce their persuasive strategies instantaneously, and be sensitive to the immediate feedback they receive from their interlocutors. This paper will investigate the possibility that affective states may significantly influence the persuasive strategies of *senders*, and the quality and effectiveness of the verbal messages they produce.

Generating effective persuasive messages requires sophisticated and elaborate cognitive processes (Heider, 1958). Interestingly, recent evidence suggests that it is precisely the complexity and indeterminacy of many social encounters that increases the likelihood that affect will influence responses (Forgas, 2002). The principle appears to be that the more complex and ambiguous an interpersonal situation, the more likely that interactors will need to engage in open, and constructive thinking. Paradoxically, it is such more elaborate and constructive processing strategies that are most likely to be influenced by affective states, according to strong recent evidence (Fiedler, 2001; Forgas, 1995, 2002). For example, several recent experiments found that mood states significantly influence the way people produce, and respond to verbal requests. Further, these effects are greater when more elaborate processing is required to deal with more complex and demanding social situations (Forgas, 1999, 2002). As successful persuasion also requires highly elaborate cognitive strategies, affect may have a significant influence on such communications.

The lack of research on affective influences on the production of persuasive messages is particularly surprising considering that affect has long been considered one of the primary forces driving interpersonal behavior (Fletcher, 2002; Zajonc, 1980). Several lines of evidence seem to support such a view. Affect is implicated in how people deal with relationship conflicts, how they respond to persuasion, the way they categorize social stimuli, and the way they evaluate others (Clore, Gasper, & Garvin, 2001; Fiedler, 2001; Fabrigar & Petty, 1999; Fletcher, 2002; Forgas, 1994, 2002; Niedenthal & Halberstadt, 2000; Petty et al., 1997, 2001; Sinclair & Mark, 1992, 1995). Despite some early evidence for affective influences on interpersonal behaviors, the theoretical explanation of these effects remained unsatisfactory until recently. It was only with the emergence of information processing theories in recent years that we gained a better understanding of the psychological mechanisms that link affect to cognition and the production of interpersonal behavior (Fiedler, 2001; Forgas, 2002).

Contemporary explanations linking affect and interpersonal behavior

There are several cognitive mechanisms that can explain affective influences on interpersonal behavior. By selectively priming access to mood-congruent constructs in memory (Bower, 1981), affective states can exert a powerful *informational* influence on the kind of information people selectively access and use when constructing a response in a social situation (Berkowitz, Jaffee, Jo, & Troccoli, 2000; Bower & Forgas, 2001; Eich & Macauley, 2000; Fiedler, 2001; Forgas, 1995, 2002). Thus happy persons may recall and use more positive information, and those in a negative mood access more negative information in their verbal messages, a prediction that will be investigated here. In addition, mood states can also serve as heuristic cues influencing some global evaluative responses in a mood-congruent direction (Bless et al., 1996; Clore et al., 2001; Martin & Clore, 2001; Schwarz, 1990).

Of greater relevance for our purposes is that in addition to such *informational* effects, moods can also exert a significant *processing* effect on *how* people deal with social information. Several experiments suggested that positive moods may simply lead to less effortful and systematic processing, while negative moods promote a more careful, vigilant and systematic processing style (Clark & Isen, 1982; Schwarz, 1990; Sinclair & Mark, 1992, 1995; Soldat & Sinclair, 2001). These mood-induced differences in thinking style were initially explained either in *functional* terms (bad mood signals the need for more systematic processing; Schwarz, 1990), *motivational* or *hedonistic* terms (happy people preserve their good mood by avoiding cognitive effort; Clark & Isen, 1982; Wegener & Petty, 1994), or in terms of mood-induced impairments in *processing capacity* effects (Ellis & Ashbrook, 1988; Stroessner & Mackie, 1992). It was soon recognized however that mood does not simply influence processing effort or processing capacity, as performance on

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