Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 55 (2014) 228–233

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Experimental Social Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jesp

Impact of money on emotional expression ☆

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Money-primed individuals see public emotional expressions as less appropriate.
- Money-primed individuals show less emotional expressions themselves.
- Money-primed individuals judge others' emotions to be more extreme.
- Money-primed individuals avoid interacting with emotional others.
- These effects disappear when emotional expressions are believed to be private.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 26 August 2013
Revised 19 July 2014
Available online 31 July 2014

Keywords:
Psychology of money
Emotional expression
Social cognition
Interpersonal relationships

ABSTRACT

Activating the concept of money can influence people's own expressions of emotion as well as their reactions to the emotional expressions of others. Thinking about money increases individuals' disposition to perceive themselves in a business-like relationship with others in which transactions are based on objective criteria and the expression of emotion is considered inappropriate. Therefore, these individuals express less emotion in public and expect others to do likewise. Six experiments show that subtle reminders of money lead people to have more negative attitudes toward expressing emotions in public and to avoid expressing emotion in their written communications. In addition, money-primed participants judge others' emotions to be more extreme and are disposed to avoid interacting with persons who display these emotions, especially when participants believe that these emotions are expressed in public.

Money is the most common medium of exchange and pervades many aspects of daily life. Consequently, most research has traditionally focused on the motivational and functional effects of money. For example, some studies have addressed the impact of having money on subjective well-being (Diener, Ng, Harter, & Arora, 2010); others have identified situational and individual difference variables that affect how people perceive money (Furnham, 1984; Belk, 1991; Tang, 1992), save money (Jahoda, 1981; Sonuga-Barke & Webley, 1993), spend money (Lunt & Livingstone, 1992), and give away money (Knight, Johnson, Carlo, & Eisenberg, 1994); for a review, see Lea and Webley (2006). More recent research, however, indicates that the mere exposure to money, devoid of any goal to which it might be relevant, can influence people's behavior. For example, it may stimulate the adoption of a utilitarian and business-like mindset (Kouchaki, Smith-Crowe, Brief, & Sousa, 2013; Tong, Zheng, & Zhao, 2013) that leads to behaviors that are relatively impersonal and self-focused, showing little concern for the needs of others (Vohs, Mead, & Goode, 2006, 2008).

These findings have implications for a broad range of phenomena, many of which have not yet been considered. The present research is concerned with people's willingness to express emotion and their reactions to others' emotional expression. Business relationships are relatively impersonal and are guided by objective criteria. Emotions, however, typically convey information about one another's needs (Ekman, 1993), and consequently the expression of these emotions is often considered inappropriate in business relationships. Therefore, if activating a concept of money stimulates the adoption of a business-like mindset, it may dispose people to think of social interactions in impersonal terms and thus may not only inhibit their own expressions of emotion but also influence their reactions to others' emotional expressions.

Our research evaluated implications of this general hypothesis. Six experiments showed that exposure to money, out of the context of its functional utility, leads people to have more negative attitudes toward the public expression of emotion and to avoid expressing their emotions when communicating about emotion-laden events. Furthermore, it leads people to evaluate others' expressions of emotion as more intense and to avoid interacting with them, especially when they believe that these emotions are expressed in public.

☆ The preparation of this manuscript was supported by Grants GRF 640011, GRF 452813, GRF 493113, and PolyU 5514/12H from the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2014.07.013
0022-1031/

Money and interpersonal relationship

Because money is a quantifiable medium of social exchange, it has become associated with the use of objective, rational bases for interpersonal transactions. These transactions are generally impersonal (e.g., Simmel, 1978; Parry & Bloch, 1989). Vohs and colleagues proposed that the mere exposure to money induces a feeling of self-sufficiency that leads individuals to pursue their own objectives without involving others (Vohs et al., 2008). Thus, their interactions with others exemplify an exchange relationship in which transactions are impersonal and governed by quid pro quo (Clark & Mills, 1979, 1993). To this extent, these individuals tend to be concerned with the relative contribution that each person makes to an interpersonal transaction rather than with the needs of other individuals (Vohs et al., 2006; Caruso, Vohs, Baxter, & Waytz, 2013).

Money-induced feelings of self-interest can influence people's judgment and behavior in various ways. For example, exposure to money increases the focus on utilitarian consequences of a decision (Tong et al., 2013) and prompts a self-interested cost–benefit analysis of social interactions (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 1999). People who are reminded of money are less likely to offer help to others (Vohs et al., 2006), prefer to play or work alone (Vohs et al., 2006), and are more supportive of free-market systems that foster social inequality (Caruso et al., 2013).

Money and emotional expression

The expression of emotion is a key ingredient of social communication (Friedman & Miller-Herringer, 1991). Emotions play different roles in different types of interpersonal relationships. Expressions of emotion in an interaction often convey important information about the needs of the persons involved (Bell & Ainsworth, 1972). However, they are considered less appropriate in business relationships that are primarily impersonal and concerned with maintaining equity independent of other considerations (Clark & Finkel, 2005). Financial analysts often advise investors to avoid letting emotions influence their investment decisions (Lichtenfeld, 2009). Businessmen are also told to control their emotions during negotiations, and one of the keys to successful business leadership is believed to be the ability to exercise this control (Williams, 2007).

If thoughts about money dispose individuals to view their interactions with others as business-like relationships, and if the expression of emotion is considered inappropriate in these relationships, it seems likely that activating concepts of money will influence not only people's own expressions of emotion but their expectations for others also. That is, it should lead them both to express less emotion themselves and to react negatively to others' expressions of emotion in interpersonal contexts.

Six experiments confirmed these expectations. In each study, we unobtrusively primed the concept of money by either showing participants pictures of banknotes or asking them to perform a sentence-construction task in which money-related words were used (for the use of these procedures, see Vohs et al., 2006, 2008). Experiment 1 showed that subtle reminders of money dispose individuals to report less favorable attitudes toward expressing emotion. Experiment 2 and Experiment 3 found that monetary reminders decrease the extremity of participants' actual expressions of emotion in communications about both a negative experience (a customer service failure) and a positive one (a funny movie). Experiment 4 and Experiment 5 found that priming the concept of money led participants to judge others' facial expressions of emotion as more extreme, especially when these emotions are expressed in public. Finally, Experiment 6 revealed that priming money concepts decreases participants' desire to interact with persons who are likely to display strong emotions.

Experiment 1: money and emotion expressiveness

Experiment 1 investigated the possibility that activating the concept of money decreases the favorableness of individuals' attitudes toward overt expression of emotions.

Method

Twenty-three male and 71 female Hong Kong undergraduates participated for extra course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two priming conditions (money vs. control). To prime the concept of money, we adopted a money-prime manipulation frequently used in past research (e.g. Vohs et al., 2006). Specifically, participants were asked to rate 10 color pictures in terms of their lighting and clarity. In the money-priming conditions, the pictures were of banknotes and coins. In the control-priming conditions, the pictures showed various types of seashells. After performing this task, participants reported their current mood along a scale from 1 (*bad/negative*) to 9 (*good/positive*). Responses to the two mood items were averaged ($r = .78$).

Next, as part of an ostensibly unrelated task, participants indicated their agreement with six statements that concerned the desirability of expressing emotions adopted from the Emotional Expressivity Scale (Kring, Smith, & Neil, 1994): (a) I should keep my feelings to myself, (b) even when I'm experiencing strong feelings, I shouldn't express them outwardly, (c) what I'm feeling is not other people's business, (d) it's inappropriate to display your emotions in public, (e) I don't want other people to think I'm very emotional, and (f) I don't want to be an emotionally expressive person. Participants reported their agreement with each item along a scale from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 9 (*totally agree*). Responses to these items were averaged ($\alpha = .63$) to provide a single index of participants' attitudes toward expressing emotions.

Results

Analyses of participants' attitudes toward emotional expressiveness indicated that money-primed participants reported less favorable attitudes toward expressing emotions ($M = 3.89$, $SD = .99$) than neutral-primed participants did ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.03$; $F(1, 92) = 6.87$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$). In contrast, priming had no effect on participants' mood ($p > .50$).

Experiment 2: expression of negative emotions

If activating money concepts decreases individuals' favorable attitudes toward the expression of extreme emotions, it should decrease their own emotional behavior in situations in which these emotions come into play. This is in fact the case. Experiment 2 showed that reminding individuals of money decreases their expression of negative emotions, and Experiment 3 showed that it decreases the expression of positive emotions as well.

These effects might seem inconsistent with the results of Experiment 1, which found that priming money concepts had no influence on participants' mood. However, mood is typically a diffuse, low-intensity affective reaction whose cause is unclear, whereas an emotion is a high-intensity experience that is attributed to a specific source (Wyer, Clore, & Isbell, 1999). More importantly, emotions typically contain corresponding expressive elements (e.g., facial expressions) whereas moods do not (Ekman, 1993). To the extent that thoughts about money decrease the desire to display extreme feelings overtly, they are more likely to influence emotional expression than to influence mood.

Method

Sixty-eight men and 82 women (averaging 31 years of age) from the United States were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk website and participated online in exchange for a small monetary reward. Participants first completed the same priming task as in Experiment 1 except that the pictures in control conditions showed furniture (e.g. chair and table) instead of seashells.

Next, in an ostensibly unrelated task about online behavior, participants were told to imagine that their newly purchased laptop had broken down and they were dissatisfied with how this issue was handled by the company's customer service department. They were then asked