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Sex differences in interpersonal sensitivities across acquaintances, friends, and romantic relationships

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ABSTRACT

Previous research suggests that women generally tend to be warmer and more submissive whereas men tend to be colder and more dominant. In comparison to work on sex differences in individual behaviors, there has been relatively less focus on sex differences in the experience of others' aversive behavior, particularly across different kinds of relationships. The purpose of this study was to investigate sex differences with respect to a range of interpersonal sensitivities across acquaintances, friends, and romantic relationships in a sample of 235 undergraduates. Results suggested that women were significantly more sensitive than men, in general, to others' aversive behavior. Consistent with our predictions, women were also found to be relatively more sensitive to coldness whereas men were relatively more sensitive to warmth across different kinds of relationships. No significant differences were found with respect to dominance, nor were there systematic differences across relationships that vary in their emotional closeness.

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Each of us has a set of interpersonal sensitivities, or aversions to specific behaviors in social interactions, that influence our behavior and relationship satisfaction (Hopwood et al., 2011; Horowitz et al., 2006). Previous research suggests that women are relatively more aware of and affected by interpersonal processes in general (Acitelli, 1992), and that they tend to be warmer and more submissive than men, whereas men tend to be more dominant and colder than women (Suh, Moskowitz, Fournier, & Zuroff, 2004). Gurtman and Lee (2009) extended these findings to the domain of interpersonal problems, finding that men had more problems with "hostile-dominant" behavior while women had more problems with "submissive-friendly" behavior.

A number of authors have proposed reasons why men and women may differ in their interpersonal dispositions. Some authors have proposed evolutionary reasons for such differences that are embedded in our genome (e.g., Buunk, Angleitner, Oubaid, & Buss, 1996), whereas others have emphasized the impact of socialization on interpersonal sex (Balliet, Li, Macfarlan, & Van Vugt, 2011; Eagly & Wood, 1999). Horowitz et al. (2006) suggested that behavioral differences in interpersonal behavior are due to different underlying motivations across the sexes for reasons related to dispositions, socialization, and the interaction between these factors.

In the interpersonal framework (Pincus et al., 2010), psychological attributes including behaviors and motives are organized around the concepts of agency (dominance vs. submission) and communion (warmth vs. coldness). In this system, dominance involves expressions of power or control whereas submission involves passivity and compliance. Warmth involves behaviors in the direction of increased closeness whereas coldness contributes to distance. These dimensions together comprise the interpersonal circumplex (IPC; Leary, 1957; Wiggins, 1996) which can be used to categorize individual differences in different kinds of interpersonal behavior including traits, values, or problems (Leary, 1957; Pincus & Wiggins, 1990).

These dimensions closely coincide with gender attributes (Bem, 1974), in that greater agency aligns with masculinity whereas communion aligns with femininity (Gurtman & Lee, 2009). To the extent that women tend to be more feminine and men tend to be more masculine, it may follow that women would therefore tend to be warmer whereas men tend to be more dominant. Indeed, Gurtman and Lee (2009) were able to locate a "gender axis" running from the hostile-dominant quadrant of the IPC down to the friendly-submissive quadrant, representing interpersonal problems for men and women respectively. Importantly, the hostile-dominant pole is located closer to the dimension of dominance than that of the pole associated with women in the sample, located closer to the dimension of communion. Such findings further suggest an association between sex and the dimensions of the IPC.

One limitation of research on sex-linked interpersonal tendencies is that it has focused primarily on characteristics of the actor, to the neglect of characteristics of the social situation. Hopwood et al. (2011) developed the *Interpersonal Sensitivities Circumplex* (ISC) to explicitly map interpersonal sensitivities, or what might bother an individual about other individuals, onto the IPC. Covariance analysis of the 64 ISC items revealed a three-factor structure that is commonly observed with

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interpersonal measures (e.g. Alden, Wiggins, & Pincus, 1990; Tracey, Rounds, & Gurtman, 1996), reflecting overall levels of non-specific sensitivities as well as individual differences in sensitivity to agentic or communal behaviors. The use of the ISC thus provides three basic parameters for measuring individual differences in interpersonal sensitivities. Specifically, the overall score, "elevation", can be used to index general, nonspecific sensitivity to others' aversive behavior, whereas scores on the dominance and warm vectors can be used to index specific sensitivities to particular kinds of behaviors (Gurtman & Balakrishnan, 1998).

Across two studies, Hopwood et al. (2011) observed that people tend to be most bothered by their interpersonal opposite (e.g., dominant people are usually most irritated by submissive people, and vice versa). Following the findings of Hopwood et al. (2011)) that people generally find interpersonal behavior that is most different from their own to be the most aversive, one might also predict that men (being more masculine and thus more dominant, on average) would tend be more sensitive to submissive behavior while women (being more feminine and thus warmer, on average) would be more sensitive to cold behavior.

A second limitation to previous research is that studies examining sex differences in interpersonal functioning have tended to focus on romantic relationships (e.g., Cunningham, Shamblen, Barbee, & Ault, 2005; Laak, Olthof, & Aleva, 2003). Therefore, these results are limited in that they cannot extrapolate to other types of relationships, such as between acquaintances or platonic friends. This is particularly important because, when asked to identify a person whose behaviors were most bothersome, participants identified friends, family, co-workers, supervisors, and teachers in addition to close romantic partners (Cunningham et al., 2005). As both men and women have been found to have more problems in close relationships as opposed to more casual interactions (Riding & Cartwright, 1999), it might be hypothesized that people would be more interpersonally sensitive in closer (e.g., romantic) relationships.

In the current study we compare the interpersonal sensitivities of men and women as measured by the ISC with respect to acquaintances, friends, and romantic partners. Given findings from past research we hypothesized that (a) women would show higher rates of interpersonal sensitivity in general, (b) women will be more sensitive than men to coldness while men would be more sensitive to warmth, (c) men would be more sensitive to submissive behavior while women would be more sensitive to dominance, and (d) these effects would be stronger in closer relative to more casual relationships.

1. Methods

This study uses data collected by Hopwood et al. (2011; Study 3) in which 315 college students completed three versions of the ISC focused on relationships with acquaintances, friends, and romantic partners in a randomized order. General interpersonal sensitivities on the ISC were calculated using averages across the eight octants of the circumplex scale, with scores standardized against the validation sample collected by Hopwood et al., 2011). There were 56 participants removed for missing 20 or more items (greater than 3% unanswered). Also, 18 participants were removed for disqualifying scores (>74*T*, Morey, 2007) on the *Personality Assessment Inventory* Infrequency scale, a measure of random responding. Finally, data for six individuals who did not report their sex were removed.[1] The resulting sample consisted of 235 participants who were primarily European-American (200; 85%) and between the ages of 18–20 (186; 79.1%). Of these, 177 (75%) were women and 5 (2 men and 3 women; < 1%) were homosexual.

[1] Respondents were asked to describe themselves as male or female in a forced choice format. The six individuals who did not respond may have declined to answer for a number of reasons, including that they do not identify as either male or female.

1.1. Procedures

Three versions of the ISC were given to participants in a randomized order in a self-report protocol with instructions asking participants to describe what bothers them in "face-to-face interactions" within the three relational contexts of interest (friends, acquaintances, and romantic partners; see Hopwood et al., 2011, Study 3). Participants were then asked to think of an imagined other across the three categories and rate behaviors which they found aversive on an 8-point scale from 1 (Never, Not at All) to 8 (Extremely, Always Bothers Me).

1.2. Measures

1.2.1. Interpersonal sensitivities complex

The interpersonal sensitivities complex (ISC; Hopwood et al., 2011) is a 64-item interpersonal circumplex self-report measures that assesses sensitivities within interpersonal relationships. It has eight octant scales with alphas that ranged from .68 to .88 across all three versions of the ISC in this sample. Three ISC variables were computed using normative data from Sample 1 of Hopwood et al. (2011). *Elevation* (Gurtman & Pincus, 2003) depicts the respondent's overall level of sensitivity to others' behaviors. *Dominance* and *warmth* are calculated using weighted scores on the eight ipsatized octant scales. These three parameters are statistically independent of one another (Fig. 1).

2. Results

Table 1 represents mean sex differences between interpersonal sensitivities, sensitivities to warmth, and sensitivities to dominance in relationships with acquaintances, friends, and romantic partners. Mixed model ANOVAs were conducted for each ISC variable, with sex as the between subjects factor and role (romantic, friendship, acquaintance) as the within subjects factor. The overall *F* tests showed that women were more sensitive, in general, than men (elevation; $F_{1,268} = 28.09$, $p < .001$) and that women were more sensitive to coldness, in particular, relative to men ($F_{1,268} = 33.06$, $p < .001$). No significant differences were found for dominance. Post-hoc analyses revealed that the nature of relationship did not impact the level of sensitivities, nor were there any significant interactions between the type of relationship and the sex of the imagined other.

3. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to evaluate whether women and men differ in their sensitivities to the potentially aversive behavior of the people with whom they interact, and if sex differences were impacted by the level of intimacy characterizing the interaction. Overall, data were consistent with study hypotheses in suggesting that (a) women tend to be more interpersonally sensitive than men in general and that (b) women are particularly sensitive to others' coldness whereas men are relatively more sensitive to others' warmth. However, our third and fourth predictions that (d) men would be more sensitive to submission whereas women would be more sensitive to dominance and (c) these findings would be stronger in closer relationships were not evident in our results.

Our first finding suggesting that women were generally more interpersonally sensitive than men is consistent with research which suggests that women are more likely to find a romantic partner's behavior aversive (Felmlee, 1998) and be more aware of and sensitive to interpersonal processes in general than men (Acitelli, 1992). Further research could use these data to better understand sex differences in interpersonal motives in terms of psychologically important phenomena such as helping behavior (Erdle, Sansom, Cole, & Heapy, 1992) or the satisfaction of self-preservation and reproduction goals (Maner et al., 2005).

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