



The illusion of courage in social predictions: Underestimating the impact of fear of embarrassment on other people [☆]

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Abstract

The results of two experiments support the thesis that emotional perspective taking entails two judgments: a prediction of one's own preferences and decisions in a different emotional situation, and an adjustment of this prediction to accommodate perceived differences between self and others. Participants overestimated others' willingness to engage in embarrassing public performances—miming (Experiment 1) and dancing (Experiment 2)—in exchange for money. Consistent with a dual judgment model, this overestimation was greater among participants facing a hypothetical rather than a real decision to perform. Further, participants' predictions of others' willingness to perform were more closely correlated with self-predictions than with participants' estimates of others' thoughts about the costs and benefits of performing.

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Accurately predicting others' reactions to emotional situations is an important part of everyday social life. Knowing how an employee will deal with criticism is helpful for deciding how best to provide performance feedback. Knowing how a friend will respond to long-term physical duress is useful in deciding whether to invite him on an extended wilderness adventure. And knowing how much co-workers will enjoy (or dread) singing in front of friends and colleagues is important for deciding whether to schedule a karaoke contest for the company retreat.

How do people predict others' preferences and decisions in emotional situations? That is, how do people engage in emotional perspective taking? We examine this question in the context of people's predictions of others' reactions to embarrassing situations.

Fear of embarrassment is an important determinant of social behavior. Social psychologists have cited the impact of fear of embarrassment in non-intervention in emergency situations (Latané & Darley, 1970), failures to oppose unpopular policies or social norms (Miller & McFarland, 1987; Prentice & Miller, 1993; Van Boven, 2000), obedience to authority (Sabini, Seipmann, & Stein, 2001), and lovers' failure to use contraception (Herold, 1981; Leary & Dobbins, 1983). And fear of embarrassment is one reason why regrettable inactions are more durable than regrettable actions (Gilovich, Kerr, & Medvec, 1993; Gilovich & Medvec, 1995). Because fear of embarrassment is such a potent barrier to social action (Miller, 1992; Miller & Leary, 1992),

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making good decisions in social situations and accurately interpreting social behavior often depends on accurately predicting the impact of fear of embarrassment on other people.

Based on our own and others' research, we hypothesized that people underestimate the impact of fear of embarrassment on others' preferences and decisions. Specifically, we hypothesized that people overestimate others' willingness to engage in embarrassing public performances. This "illusion of courage" in social predictions follows from a model of emotional perspective taking in which predictions of others' preferences and decisions in emotional situations depends partly on predictions of one's own reactions to those situations. Because people underestimate the impact of fear of embarrassment on themselves, overestimating their own willingness to engage in embarrassing public performances (Van Boven, Loewenstein, Dunning, & Welch, 2004), we expected them to overestimate others' willingness to engage in public performances.

A dual judgment model of emotional perspective taking

We propose that emotional perspective taking entails two, distinct judgments, represented by the two solid arrows in Fig. 1 (Van Boven & Loewenstein, 2003, in press-a, in press-b). The first is a prediction of what one's own preferences and decisions would be in a different emotional situation (the vertical solid arrow in Fig. 1). For example, one might predict whether a colleague would enjoy karaoke by first predicting whether oneself would enjoy singing popular tunes in front of an audience. The second judgment is an estimation of how simi-

lar the other person is to the self, and, hence, how informative the self-prediction is about others' reactions (the horizontal solid arrow in Fig. 1). Believing that a colleague is more extroverted than oneself suggests adjusting one's own reluctance to sing to accommodate the colleague's outgoing personality.

Our dual judgment model of emotional perspective taking differs from other models of perspective taking in two important ways. First, many models of perspective taking focus on people's predictions of others' reactions to situations or decisions that are exactly the same as those faced by the self—for example, others who are faced with a similar decision to wear a sandwich board or not (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977), asked a similar question about their preference for 1980s or 1960s music (Gilovich, 1990), confronted with a similar decision about whether to donate to charity (Epley & Dunning, 2000; Goethals, Messick, & Allison, 1991), or asked a similar question about their attitudes toward social norms (Miller & McFarland, 1987; Prentice & Miller, 1993; Van Boven, 2000). Because this previous research (represented by the horizontal dashed arrow in Fig. 1) has focused on perspective taking within the same, typically non-emotional, situation, previous theorizing has focused primarily on factors that influence judgments of how similar or dissimilar others are to the self (e.g., Krueger & Clement, 1994; Prentice & Miller, 1996). Emotional perspective taking, in contrast, concerns predictions of how other people would react to being in a different emotional situation from the situation the self is currently in. Accordingly, we suggest that emotional perspective taking entails the additional judgment of how the self would respond to being in a different emotional situation.

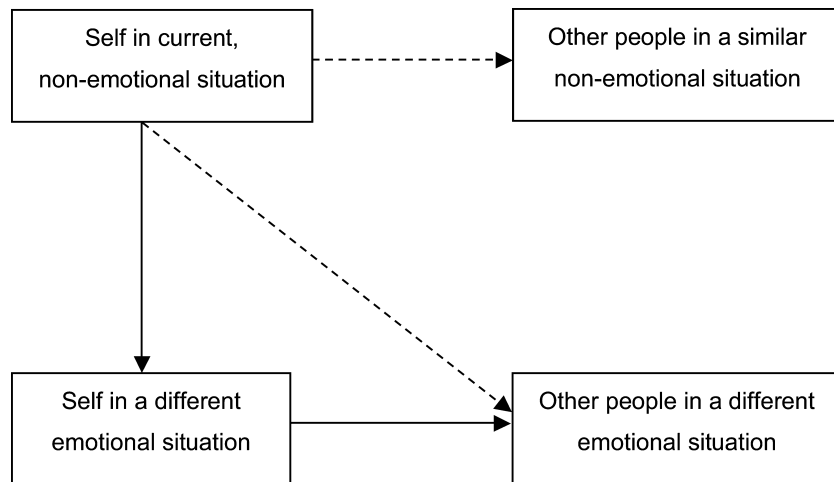


Fig. 1. Schematic representation of perspective taking across similar situations and across different emotional situations. The dual judgment model of emotional perspective taking is represented by the two solid arrows. The horizontal dashed arrow represents predictions of others who are in similar situations as the self. The diagonal dashed arrow represents simultaneously accounting for the reactions of different people who are in different situations than the self.

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