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Emotion in the Assessment of Personality

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One of the central problems in personality psychology and related disciplines, such as clinical psychology and psychiatry, is how to evaluate a personality. Psychological assessment requires the evaluation of many things about a person, including such characteristics as the individual's motives, emotions, intelligence, and overall mental pathology or health. These personality judgments fall along continua laden with emotion. Indeed, when people are asked to rate almost anything—even near-neutral cognitive concepts such as “house,” “map,” and “soil”—on almost any kind of scale (e.g., “smart–dumb,” “correct–incorrect,” “active–passive”), their judgments are most readily summarized according to a pleasant–unpleasant dimension (e.g., Osgood, 1969). This evaluative first dimension runs through most, if not all, cognitive processing (Mayer, 1986).

The evaluative first dimension is plainly present in such considerations as whether a person's motives are socially acceptable or unacceptable, whether the individual's judgments are incapacitating or brilliant, or whether the person is mentally healthy or disordered. Moreover, these evaluations are of real-world importance. People undergo psychological evaluations all the time. Sometimes these are informal and involve feedback from friends, or taking a quiz in a magazine, or the internet for purposes of self-understanding. At other times, the evaluations are more formal and occur for purposes of school placement or job selection. When a person is evaluated according to a theory or by a test of personality, that individual is likely to be affected in two critical ways. First, he or she may undergo a change in self-concept. Second, the person may be subject to potential outcome decisions, such as school or job placements, for which the assessment was undertaken.

Forgas's (this issue) target article on the mood-congruence effect outlines its basic premise very well: Good moods promote positive thinking, and bad moods promote negative thinking. As elaborated in the work of Forgas and others, this positive versus negative thinking extends far beyond the traditional limits of optimism versus pessimism. For example, changes in judgment and memory extend to such matters as identifying the most representative example of a category, such as the category “type of physical contact.” In a good mood, “kissing” seems more typical of physicality than does “kicking.” Similarly, such changes include alterations in simple associations, such as what a person associates to the concept “mar-

riage.” “Anniversary” comes to mind most frequently in a good mood; “divorce” in a less good mood (Mayer, Gaschke, Braverman, & Evans, 1992; Mayer, McCormick, & Strong, 1995). Whether mood (or emotion or affect) is infused into cognition, as Forgas's model has it, or whether mood is always there, part of cognition and looking for ambiguous areas in which to express itself, there is little question that mood influences thought on an ongoing basis.

Forgas's theory is one possible account of how a portion of personality itself may operate. It also includes a discussion of how mood congruence influences social perceptions; such social perceptions are important in personality assessment, which involves an assessor judging a target person. Recently, new models of personality and personality assessment have been emerging. It is useful to examine what mood-congruent cognition tells us about the practice of personality assessment. Here, we focus on what mood-congruent cognition has to say about the professional evaluation of people. Surely, there is great ambiguity in evaluating personality. For that reason we may expect some emotion to enter into such evaluation.

Examples of Evaluative First-Factor Problems in Personality Assessment

The problem for personality and clinical psychology is that personality characteristics are often ambiguous and sometimes elicit subjective, fuzzy, judgments. It is under such circumstances that, according to Forgas's affect infusion model (and independent empirical observations), affect enters in. Certainly, there are many examples of how judgments about personality vary along that first pleasant–unpleasant dimension of evaluation. Levinger (1961) examined the personality traits of mothers, fathers, and 11-year-old children across 31 families. The parents rated their own traits and those of their children and were then rated on which traits they possessed by clinicians and teachers familiar with them. Parents' ratings of themselves and their children were consistently more favorable than those of the professional observers (Levinger, 1961). In another study, Davenport (1952) drew six TATs from four clinical patients and two nonclinical staff members in a hospital. She then drew 207 mostly negative interpretive statements from hospital records on the four patients and wrote 43 more positive interpretive statements. Six new clinicians ap-

plied these to the patients and staff members. The judges used statistically significantly fewer new (i.e., more positive) interpretive statements, even in relation to the two healthy staff members. Davenport concluded that the clinicians avoided descriptions of positive assets when evaluating personality.

Little and Shneidman (1959) found that the blind interpretation of test protocols (where information is more ambiguous than when knowing some case history) led expert raters to evaluate target people as far more pathological than did the clinicians who had access to the case material. It is unclear what led to the negative shift: the expertise of the test interpreters or not knowing the person. Tallent (1958) described a sort of "prosecuting-attorney" psychological assessment, "saturated with negative dynamics." Alluding to the proverbial monkeys who "Hear no evil, see no evil, and speak no evil," he ridiculed those who made such judgments as "psychological simians who hear no good, see no good and report no good!" (p. 244).

The negative bias in assessment (if there is one) seems also to extend to the field more generally. Myers (2000) reported that his computer search of Psychological Abstracts since 1887 turned up a 14-to-1 ratio of studies on negative emotions (e.g., anger, anxiety, depression) to positive emotions (e.g., joy, happiness, life satisfaction).

Of course, discrepancies in the positive or negative quality of evaluations are far from limited to psychology. Several biographies of Diana, Princess of Wales have disagreed in their evaluations of her character. For example, her charitable work was often remarked upon favorably for its focus on helping the poor, ill, and sick—in contrast to the more traditional good works of the House of Windsor such as those on behalf of the Royal Ballet. Although some biographers saw "something noble about her in the truest sense" (Edwards, 2000, p. 214), others emphasized a defensive and even pathological quality to her concerns, stating that such caring for others "grew out of her tenuous sense of herself" and was a consequence of the "sort of compassion she desperately wanted for herself" (Bedell-Smith, 2000, p. 237).

Can Discrepancies in Evaluation Be Attributed to the Moods of Psychologists?

Might some of the negativity in evaluation be due to the evaluator's moods? It is provocative to note that among the medical disciplines, psychiatrists are sometimes thought of as depressed. For example, they apparently committed suicide at a rate higher than that of other medical professions (Freeman, 1967; Ross 1971). Still, we could find few studies indicating any problems with psychologists' mood levels. What stud-

ies there were suggested a more complex picture (Cattell, 1973). Psychologists (undifferentiated as to specialty) score as interpersonally Cold (relative to Warm) on the 16PF, and above average in Ego Strength. They similarly score low on Superego Strength and show low Guilt Proneness. This is echoed in a study of graduate students in psychology at the University of California at Berkeley (Gough, 1992). These students scored high on the MMPI scale of Psychopathy (also indicating lower guilt). More positively, they showed elevations on CPI scales for Capacity for Status, Achievement via Independence, Psychological Mindedness, and Flexibility. About the only mood-related difference from the population norm seems to be that psychologists score far below average on the 16PF scale of Surgency, which suggests they possess low levels of positive affect, low enthusiasm, and high seriousness. Such findings suggest that the negative assessment of client's personality is not necessarily a product of psychologist's mood alone but may be institutionalized in the field. This may be due to the use of a medical model or due to social influences, or even to a legacy of pessimism in the field from its founders, especially Freud (see Gay, 1998; Hall & Lindzey, 1978; Monte, 1995; see also Mayer & Carlsmith, 1997, for Freud's continuing influence).

Calibrating Personality Evaluations and Psychological Evaluation More Generally

Whatever the cause, the ambiguities of personality assessment seem to invite discussion of where such evaluations should lie along the evaluative first dimension of cognition. Exactly how these evaluations ought to be calibrated has been a matter of some discussion. Ryff (1995) noted that "... studies of psychological problems dwarf the literature on positive psychological functioning" (p. 99). Seligman (1999), in his presidential address to the American Psychological Association, called for a new "'positive psychology,' that is, a reoriented science that emphasizes the understanding and building of the most positive qualities of an individual ..." (p. 559). If psychologists are indeed calibrated negatively, we are sympathetic to this goal.

In terms of cognition and affect research, there is some genuine debate as to whether personality evaluation comes out in the right place on this first evaluative dimension of cognition. Some argue that personality evaluation is too negative. At the same time, there is modest evidence at best to suggest that over-negativity is due to the negative affect of the profession. Instead, it may be a professionally developed role, perhaps a legacy from the medical profession, or due to other social influences.

One important attribute of any personality evaluation is its position on that pleasant–unpleasant dimension. The pleasant–unpleasant evaluative dimension is plainly of importance to cognition, and moods definitely influence it. At the same time, there is far more to evaluations of personality than how positive or negative it is. Only three of the Big Five personality dimensions are closely related to affect (with Openness and Conscientiousness fairly independent), and the Big Five is (in our view) a very small part of the overall personality. Perhaps there is another low-level system like emotion that can be used to explain part of personality. Motivation, perhaps.

Summary and Conclusions

The implications of Forgas's target article to psychology generally is that we must be very specific about what we are describing about an individual's personality to avoid bias. That is, the more data the better, because the less ambiguity, the less pure mood—and other motives—will enter into assessment. Of course, getting to less ambiguity may call for more bad moods, because as Forgas points out, that is when people search more carefully for information. We need to learn more about the substantive parts of personality to disambiguate our evaluations of others. This disambiguation needs to proceed on two fronts. First, it goes almost without saying that we need more information about how the human personality operates. Clear systems integrations of personality are required to create and foster a common language across the discipline of personality and then to employ that language to understand how the person functions (e.g., Mayer, 1998).

In addition, we need to be aware of just what sort of evaluation we are carrying out. Some of our evaluation of personality is with regard to making prediction and control statements. Statements of the sort, "IQ predicts high school grades between $r = .45$ and $r = .50$," or "multiple raters can evaluate the personality trait of (self-reported) extroversion with an $r = .30$ " are of that sort. However, this level of analysis—prediction and control—is embedded in a larger context: Personality is typically compared to various social standards. In this sense, personality is the grown-up, official version of our parents comparing us to others (e.g., "May keeps her room clean."). Statements such as "Michael suffers from a personality disorder" reflect judgments high in evaluation. We need to be careful that our criteria for "personality disorder" and "self-actualization" are adequate. The unreliability of the personality disorder section of DSM-IV raises questions of whether we are being careful enough. In this regard, a better understanding of our criteria for judging health and disorder is needed (McHugh & Slavney, 1999). Whatever the

cause of positivity (or negativity) in judgments of others, it is possible that a blanket decision to be more positive is not the last word in improving assessment. Rather, recent work in emotional intelligence suggests that a realistic understanding of emotional difficulties may be more important to accuracy in prediction than whether one is positive or negative (Epstein, 1998; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2000).

Note

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Explaining Emotion Congruence and Its Absence in Terms of Perceptual Simulation

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One of the key assumptions of the affect infusion model (AIM) is that processing strategy moderates the occurrence of affect infusion. In particular, the AIM predicts the absence of affect infusion, or specifically, of emotion congruence in the cases of direct access and motivated processing and the presence of affect infusion in the cases of substantive and (under certain conditions) heuristic processing. In the target article, Forgas (this issue) specifies a range of variables related to the task (e.g., novelty, complexity, typicality), the person (e.g., motivation, cognitive capacity, personality traits) and the situation (e.g., social norms, public scrutiny) that influence choice of processing strategy and thus the kind and the extent of affect infusion into judgment and behavior. Specifically, he claims that the degree of emotion congruence depends on the extent to which substantive processing is required. Substantive processing is presumably enhanced when a task is unusual, demanding, complex, or personally relevant, when there are no simple, direct-access responses available, and when processing time and resources allow.¹ This prediction has been tested by Forgas in numerous studies in which he created experimental

situations that apparently involved more or less substantive processing resulting in more or less emotion-congruent judgment and behavior.

In this commentary we describe Barsalou's (1999b) recent perceptual symbols view of concepts and his perceptual simulation account of conceptual processing. We suggest that emotion-congruent processing can be conceptualized within this approach. The resulting predictions are consistent with those of Forgas; however, unlike the multiprocess AIM model, the perceptual-symbols approach assumes that the same concept representations and same processes are involved regardless of whether emotion congruence is observed or not; emotion congruence is determined by extent of simulation rather than type of processing strategy adopted. The perceptual symbols account is thus a potentially more parsimonious way to derive predictions about affect-cognition interactions. In our commentary we do not discuss predictions of the perceptual symbols approach concerning the choice of processing strategy (e.g., systematic vs. heuristic) but focus primarily on the influences of emotion on the content of thought.

¹We focus here only on the distinction between two processing strategies: substantive and less substantive processing. Indeed, although a discussion concerning the kinds of processing strategies people use in social judgment is beyond the scope of this commentary, the distinction proposed by Forgas among four strategies is rather atypical, and its implications concerning the impact of emotions on social judgments still require further empirical support. Most recent social cognitive theories opposed two strategies (Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; see Chaiken & Trope, 1999) or evaluated a continuum of processing strategy (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Kruglanski & Thompson, 1999). Consistent with this view, Forgas's experiments typically contrast conditions that elicit more or less substantive processing and demonstrate that the former lead to more marked emotion congruency effects than the latter.

Perceptual-Symbols and Perceptual Simulation

Barsalou's (1999a, 1999b, in press) perceptual-symbols approach to concepts departs in two important senses from recently fashionable models of concepts. Most such models assume, first, that concept representation is *amodal*, such that it does not preserve anything perceptual about a concept or interaction with its instances. Second, in most extant models, concept representation is arbitrary such that there is no relation