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The social consequences of empathic and counter-empathic emotions: contextual influences on social perception and evaluation

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Summary

This dissertation examines the social consequences of expressing empathic and counter-empathic emotions. Empathic emotions refer to emotions that are congruent with another person's positive or negative experience, such as happiness in response to another's fortune (happy-for-ness) or sadness in response to another's misfortune (sympathy). Counter-empathic emotions are emotions that are incongruent with another's experience, such as sadness in response to another's fortune (glückschmerz) or happiness in response to another's misfortune (schadenfreude). Across studies, the dissertation examines when expressions of these emotions are considered appropriate, and how they impact trait impressions, inferred prosociality, and perceived attractiveness of the expressers.

The research in the dissertation is organized into two parts. **Part I** consists of three series of studies (Chapters 2-4). Through these studies, it examined how variations in event valence (whether others experience positive or negative outcomes) shape social perceptions of individuals who display smiles or frowns. Specifically, it investigated how appropriate observers perceive expressions of empathic emotions (happy-for-ness and sympathy) and counter-empathic emotions (glückschmerz and schadenfreude), and how observers evaluate expressers of these emotions. In addition, this part examined the moderating role of event magnitude (whether others experience major or minor outcomes), and the gender of the participant, the expresser, and the target.

Chapter 2 examined the perceived appropriateness of empathic and counter-empathic emotion expressions. The findings showed that perceptions of appropriateness were not determined simply by whether an expression was positive (i.e., smiling) or negative (i.e., frowning) in valence, but by whether it aligned with the meaning of another person's experience. Generally, empathic emotions were

revealed differences between the two empathic emotions and the two counter-empathic emotions: happy-for-ness was evaluated as more appropriate than sympathy, and schadenfreude was evaluated as more inappropriate than glückschmerz. Event magnitude moderated these evaluations: both empathic expressions were evaluated as more appropriate in response to major events,

Chapter 2 examined the perceived appropriateness of empathic and counter-empathic emotion expressions. The findings showed that perceptions of appropriateness were not determined simply by whether an expression was positive (i.e., smiling) or negative (i.e., frowning) in valence, but by whether it aligned with the meaning of another person's experience. Generally, empathic emotions were evaluated as more appropriate than counter-empathic emotions. Results also revealed differences between the two empathic emotions and the two counter-empathic emotions: happy-for-ness was evaluated as more appropriate than sympathy, and schadenfreude was evaluated as more inappropriate than glückschmerz. Event magnitude moderated these evaluations: both empathic expressions were evaluated as more appropriate in response to major events, whereas schadenfreude was evaluated as more inappropriate in response to major events. Moreover, the results indicated that female participants evaluated empathic emotions as more appropriate and counter-empathic emotions as more inappropriate than male participants. This chapter did not reveal robust effects of the gender of the expresser, or the target.

Chapter 3 extended our analysis to trait impressions, investigating how expressers of empathic and counter-empathic emotions were evaluated on three core dimensions of social perception: morality, warmth, and competence. Results revealed that expressers of empathic emotions were perceived as more moral, warmer, and more competent than those expressing counter-empathic emotions. Within the emotion categories, expressers of happy-for-ness were more positively evaluated than expressers of sympathy, while expressers of schadenfreude were more negatively evaluated than expressers of glückschmerz. Moreover, expressers of happy-for-ness and sympathy were evaluated more positively in response to major events than to minor events, whereas expressers of schadenfreude were evaluated more negatively in response to major events than to minor events. This

chapter did not reveal robust effects of the gender of the participant, the expresser, or the target on these trait impressions.

Chapter 4 examined the behavioral consequences of expressions of empathic and counter-empathic emotions, focusing on how they shape inferences about prosociality and subsequent interaction partner preferences. The findings indicated that individuals who expressed empathic emotions were perceived as more prosocial and were more likely to be chosen as interaction partners in cooperative settings. These results highlighted the interpersonal significance of expressions of empathic and counter-empathic emotions in guiding social interaction and cooperation. This chapter did not reveal robust effects of the gender of the participant, the expresser, or the target.

The findings from Part I demonstrated that expressions of empathic and counter-empathic emotions systematically shape multiple dimensions of social evaluation, including perceived appropriateness, trait impressions, inferred prosociality, and behavioral preferences.

Part II shifted the focus to the perceived physical attractiveness of expressers of empathic and counter-empathic emotions.

Chapter 5 investigated how expressed empathic and counter-empathic emotions influence perceived facial attractiveness. Results showed that individuals who had previously expressed empathic emotions were subsequently rated as more attractive than those who had expressed counter-empathic emotions. This effect emerged for both smiling (happy-for-ness versus schadenfreude) and frowning (sympathy versus glückschmerz) expressions, indicating that attractiveness perceptions were shaped by the interpersonal meaning of expressions rather than the emotion valence alone. Notably, this effect was driven primarily by increased attractiveness following empathic expressions rather than decreased attractiveness following counter-empathic ones. Importantly, in all studies, attractiveness was assessed when expressers displayed neutral expressions, meaning that differences reflected the carried-over social meaning of prior emotion displays rather than immediate perceptual effects of smiles or frowns.

Together, the studies in this dissertation show that emotions are not merely expressions of internal states; they also operate as context-dependent social signals

Summary

that influence how individuals are perceived, trusted, and interacted with. The findings contribute to multiple strands of literature, including research on emotions, social perception, and aesthetic evaluation. In addition, they offer practical implications for domains in which emotional communication is central, such as workplace interactions, leadership development, therapeutic settings, and the management of interpersonal relationships.