

THE EFFECT OF FACIAL EXPRESSION ON THE PERCEPTION OF SOCIALLY IRRITATING BEHAVIORS

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Introduction

Studies have revealed that parents of the children with developmental disorders suffer from high stress. This high stress consists of daily hassle, which is “experiences and conditions of daily living that have been appraised as salient and harmful or threatening to the endorser’s well-being” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and most of them is relevant with interpersonal communication.

One of the elements of interpersonal communication is facial expression. It expresses one’s emotion and affects the understanding of others’ mental states.

From this nature of facial expressions, it is hypothesized that the facial expression of the behavior affects the appraisal of the event.

The daily events caused by children with developmental disorders are quite diverse in each child and difficult to be formulated. This research aims to explore the difference in the appraisal of the socially irritating behaviors, which are formulated in terms of the type of the behavior and annoyance, with different facial expression of the behavior.

Methodology

92 Japanese university students were shown a scene where a target acted out one of three annoying behaviors (being late for a class and making noise / forcibly squeezing into a narrow space between people on the train seat / speaking in the library in a loud voice) with four expressions (sadness, anger, happiness, neutral).

The participants were asked to rate the level of their irritation, their impression toward the target (familiarity, social desirability, and activeness) and how they felt toward the target.

Literature cited

Festinger, L. (1957). A theory of cognitive dissonance. Stanford University Press
Lazarus, R., & Folkman, S. (1984). Stress, Appraisal, and Coping. New York: Springer.

Further information

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Results

In order to examine the effect of target’s facial expression on participants’ irritation and all impressions (familiarity, social desirability, and activeness), one-way ANOVA and post hoc test were conducted. It showed a significant main effect of facial expression on irritation and all the impressions (Table1). Particularly, irritation was the lowest and social desirability was the highest when the target acted out the behaviors in a sad face.

Table 1. One-way ANOVA and multiple comparison results

	<i>F</i> (3,91)	η^2	multiple comparison
irritation	34.459***	.12	$s < a \cdot h \cdot n^{***}$, $n < a^{***} \cdot h^{\dagger}$, $h < a^{\dagger}$
familiarity	74.065***	.34	$a < h \cdot s \cdot n^{***}$, $n < h \cdot s^{***}$, $s < h^{*}$
social desirability	51.695***	.24	$a \cdot h \cdot n < s^{***}$, $a \cdot h < n^{***}$
activeness	171.002***	.59	$n \cdot s \cdot a < h^{***}$, $s < a \cdot n^{***}$, $n < a^{***}$

[†] $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$ / s = sadness, a = anger, h = happiness, n = neutral

Content analysis in free-responses was conducted to clear the difference in what participants felt toward the target depending on the target’s facial expression (Table 2).

It revealed that those shown the sad face were more likely to infer the reasons for the target’s behavior.

Table 2. Content analysis in free-responses towards a target

category	content	sadness	anger	happiness	neutral	<i>Q</i> (<i>df</i> =3)
(affective arousal of the participants)						
irritation / denial / anger	negative feelings toward the target such as irritation, denial, and anger	15 (15.0%)	22 (21.7%)	13.5 (13.1%)	17.3 (16.0%)	19.28***
(cognition of the target)						
understanding of facial expression / emotion / the characteristic of the target	facial expression, emotion and character of the target	28 (28.0%)	38.5 (38.1%)	34.5 (33.6%)	26.3 (24.4%)	30.00***
no offense / not on purpose	no malice intended	3 (3.0%)	1.5 (1.4%)	10 (9.7%)	7.8 (7.2%)	18.87***
lack of consideration	lack of consideration toward the surroundings	2 (2.0%)	4 (3.9%)	10.5 (10.2%)	12 (11.1%)	21.36***
inference	the reason for the target’s socially irritating behavior	17.5 (17.5%)	5.5 (5.4%)	3.5 (3.4%)	3.3 (3.0%)	37.09***
tolerance / concern	tolerance or concern for the target	13 (13.0%)	1 (0.9%)	3.5 (3.4%)	4.6 (4.2%)	27.48***
unclear intention / fear	unclear intention of the target’s act or fear of the target	5 (5.0%)	7.5 (7.4%)	7 (6.8%)	9.8 (9.1%)	8.00†
wish for act	ask the target to act differently	4 (4.0%)	6.5 (6.4%)	6.5 (6.3%)	5.1 (4.7%)	4.71
miscellaneous	presumption, desire to infer, describing, apathy	3.5 (3.5%)	5.5 (5.4%)	4.5 (4.3%)	10.8 (10.0%)	15.81**
no response		9 (9.0%)	9 (8.9%)	9 (8.7%)	10.6 (9.8%)	0.00
reproducibility		78.2%	70.6%	68.4%	67.7%	

[†] $p < .10$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Conclusions

These findings suggest that participants tried to reduce cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) of sad expression and problem behavior by inferring the reason of the behavior, and this leads to the lower irritation comparing to other facial expressions.

The result of text analysis reveals the difference in those who tried to infer or not in the situation involving the cognitive dissonance. Further research regarding the personality factors that contribute to the occurrence of inferring in the conflicting affective situation is required.