Social and Personality Influence on Emotions

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Emotions play an important role in people's lives and are heavily studied by psychologists. It's clear that people can vary greatly in how they react to the exact same emotional stimuli. To understand this variation, some research has focused on personality. For example, people high on extraversion usually react more strongly to positive emotional stimuli than people low on the trait (Larsen & Ketelaar, 1991). Likewise, people high on neuroticism usually respond more strongly to fearful stimuli, and those high on agreeableness typically have strong reactions to sad stimuli (Reynaud, Khoury-Malhame, Rossier, & Blin, 2012; Pearman, Andreoletti, & Isaacowitz, 2012). We're interested in finding out if the social situation -- being alone or with others when exposed to the emotional stimuli -- might influence (moderate) these patterns.

The main purpose of study was to examine how personality and the social context would influence participants' emotional reactions to fearful and non-fearful situations. Drawing from social-functional theories of emotions (Keltner & Haidt, 1999), we expected participants to have stronger emotional reactions to a fearful situation when the experience was shared vs. not shared. We next mean-centered the personality variables and examined their interactions with the manipulated variables. Extraversion was a stronger predictor of fear when playing a scary game with a co-actor (B = 1.023) vs. alone (B = .341). However, when playing a non-scary game, extraversion was unrelated to fear, regardless of the social context (respectively B’s = .169 and .074).

In contrast, social anxiety was a stronger predictor of fear when playing a scary game alone (B = .517) vs. with a co-actor (B = -.293). Social anxiety also predicted more fear when playing a non-scary game alone (B = .619) vs. with a co-actor (B = .450).

A very similar pattern emerged with Joviality as the DV. Fear and Joviality items may represent a single construct, “fear/fun” (α=.898).

The results support social-functional models of emotions. Participants’ emotions were clearly influenced by the social context. However, our findings also highlight the importance of considering personality characteristics, along with social psychological processes, when predicting people’s emotional reactions to situations. Our findings have theoretical and practical implications and may serve to stimulate additional empirical studies.

Additional research is needed to further our understanding how personality characteristics interact with social situational forces to shape emotional reactions. Future research could examine different emotional stimuli, different personality traits, and different social settings.