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In my mind, *we* all smile: A case of in-group favoritism☆

Martin G. Beaupré and Ursula Hess*

Department of Psychology, University of Quebec at Montreal, P.O. Box 8888, Station Centre-Ville, Montreal, Que., Canada H3C 3P8

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Abstract

The goal of the present study was to examine whether a highly valued social behavior—the smile—is attributed more frequently to in-group than to out-group members. For this, participants were asked to read a vignette describing a protagonist in a non-emotional situation, and to choose a facial expression that would be appropriate to the context. For Study 1 the vignette depicted a potentially social context, whereas for Study 2, the context was strictly non-social. In both studies, participants of European descent attributed smiles more often to members of their in-group, whereas they attributed a larger number of neutral faces to out-group members. In a third study the same pattern of attributions was found for recent immigrants from French speaking African countries and from Asian countries. These results suggest the presence of an in-group bias in the attribution of smiles.

Keywords: In-group bias; In-group favoritism; Smile; Culture; Emotion; Perception; Facial expression

People tend to favor a member of the in-group over an out-group member when distributing positive outcomes such as rewards to others (Turner, Brown, & Tajfel, 1979, for a review, see Brewer & Brown, 1998). Yet not only the distribution of tangible rewards, but also the attribution of socially valued characteristics is biased towards the in-group. People hold more positive views towards members of their own group and they therefore attribute more positive traits to in-group members than to out-group members (e.g., Allen, 1996; Rustemli, Mertan, & Ciftci, 2000). For example, in-group members are considered to be more loyal, honest, and reliable, than are out-group members (Rustemli et al., 2000). Allen (1996) found an in-group bias effect for individuals of European and African descent such that both groups attributed more positive traits to members of their respective in-group. Beauty, another valued characteristic, is also more likely to be attributed to in-group members. For example, supporters of three major political parties in Canada choose photos of more attractive individuals as depicting supporters of their own party and photos of less attractive individuals as depicting supporters of rival political parties (Johnson, 1981).

Another valued characteristic is a positive emotional disposition, which can be signaled by a smile. Smiling faces, in comparison to non-smiling or neutral faces, typically receive more favorable ratings. Smiling individuals are perceived as more sincere, sociable, and competent as well as more honest, more carefree, more relaxed, more polite, more emotionally warm, more successful, and more attractive (see Hess, Beaupré, & Cheung, 2002, for a review). In sum, we would expect that smiling is a highly desirable behavior for any in-group member and if in-group bias extends to the attribution of emotions then this positively valued emotional behavior should more likely be attributed to an in-group member. Attributing smiles and hence sociability and honesty, etc., to in-group members may be one of the means to reinforce the value of social contact within the in-group. Alternatively, according to social identity theory,

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* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: hess.ursula@uqam.ca (U. Hess).

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attributing smiles to in-group members could be due to the need for positive social identity which motivates the search for or the enhancement of positive distinctiveness of the in-group in comparison to the out-group (see Tajfel, 1978). Smile attribution to in-group members may also reflect a sampling bias due to the observation that in-group members, in comparison to out-group members are more likely to smile at us in everyday social interactions.

Some evidence suggests that socially valued emotions are indeed more frequently attributed to in-group members than to out-group members. For example, Leyens et al. (2000) describe a general tendency to attribute subtle, moral emotions more often to in- than to out-group members. Leyens et al. note that these emotions are more "mature" because they generally involve cognition, morality, memory, and an active rather than a reactive role. This is congruent with the notion that these emotions are in some way more valued. However, because Leyens et al. did not provide a specific context for the attribution of emotions, this allows for the possibility that participants' judgments were influenced by a sampling bias for the types of situations they imagined the in- and out-group members in.

The goal of the present research was to assess whether there is evidence for in-group favoritism in the attribution of smiles. For this, we chose a minimally social, emotionally neutral context for which a neutral facial expression would be appropriate. The use of an emotionally neutral context is necessary because the prevalent social rules require that individuals smile in situations where positive affect (e.g., joy, happiness, and amusement) is experienced. This rule would likely apply to both in- and out-group members. As a consequence we would expect ceiling effects when asking about the likelihood that an individual smiles in such a context. However, smiling in an emotionally neutral situation can be seen as reflective of a generally positive disposition and thus as a valued characteristic. We phrased the question in terms of the intensity and the type of smile that the protagonist would be expected to show. In-group favoritism would be shown by attributing more smiles and more intense smiles as well as less neutral faces to in-group members than to out-group members. For the present study, ethnic background was used to manipulate in- and out-group membership. This choice was made because the participants' task was to look at different types of facial expressions and to choose the one most appropriate to the context described. Consequently, the morphological traits that serve to identify a person as a member of an ethnic out-group are immediately and inevitably available and any existing in-group/out-group distinctions are expected to be activated automatically during the decoding process (see Brewer, 1988).

Study 1

Method

Participants

A total of 387 participants of European descent (52.7% female) with a mean age of 27.2 years were recruited by research assistants of European descent in parks and public places in the Montreal and Gatineau regions. Participants were generally people strolling in the park or waiting for an event (e.g., concert, fireworks, etc.). Except for the requirements that individuals be of European descent and that we recruit an approximately equal number of men and women, no inclusion or exclusion criteria were employed. The vast majority of the participants were francophone (97.7%), and residents of the province of Quebec (96.4%).

Material

Vignettes. The two vignettes varied only with regard to the sex of the protagonist and described an individual in an emotionally neutral situation: "Marc/Anne is walking to the store in order to buy some milk." The names Marc and Anne were chosen, because members of all three ethnic groups depicted in the study and living in Montreal use them. The story was presented in both English and French on one page in order for the participant to be able to read the vignette in his/her language of preference.

Expressions. In order to manipulate the group membership of the protagonist, participants were shown photos of Marc (or Anne). The individual shown was either of European, Asian or African descent. The sex of the protagonist was counterbalanced within protagonist ethnic group.

The smiles varied with regard to both intensity and the presence of wrinkles around the eye. Certain combinations of these two factors tend to not occur in normal situations or are impossible to achieve. For example, intense smiles are always accompanied by wrinkles around the eye as the cheeks are pushed up. Conversely, it is almost impossible for most people to combine a weak smile with wrinkles around the eye. Based on these considerations, the expressions retained for the present experiment, were ecologically valid smiles of different intensities with and without wrinkles around the eye. Specifically, the expressions were: (1) a strong intensity smile with wrinkles around the eyes (Duchenne smile; Duchenne, 1862/1990), (2) a medium intensity Duchenne smile, (3) a medium intensity smile without presence of wrinkles (non-Duchenne smile), and (4) a weak smile. In addition we included (5) a neutral face, and (6) a miserable smile (smile with a frown).

The Duchenne smiles and the weak smile were elicited using a guided facial action procedure. For this, men

and women of European, Asian, and African descent were instructed how to move various facial muscles separately and in combination. The non-Duchenne smile was produced by combining a medium smile with a neutral upper face and the miserable smile by adding a frowning upper face using Adobe Photoshop 4.0. Although these expressions occur naturally, they are more difficult to achieve voluntarily. To obtain "clean" expressions the use of digital image processing techniques was therefore preferred.

Procedure

Experimenters approached potential participants by introducing themselves as a student at the University of Quebec at Montreal and then asking if they would accept to participate in a short study on facial expressions. Each participant read one vignette (featuring either a male or a female protagonist) and then chose one of the six expressions from a set showing a person of either European, African, or Asian descent. Following the experiment, socio-demographic information was obtained, participants were debriefed and were offered a business card of our laboratory with the address of a website that describes ongoing research projects. Participants were not compensated.

Results and discussion

In order to examine in-group bias for the type of facial expression attributed to the protagonist in an emotionally neutral context, χ^2 tests were performed. Initial analyses revealed no effect of sex of the participant and this factor was subsequently dropped from the analyses. A marginally significant sex of protagonist effect emerged for protagonists of European descent, $\chi^2(4, N = 128) = 9.05$, $p = .060$, which was significant for protagonists of African descent, $\chi^2(4, N = 125) = 12.43$, $p = .014$. More specifically, a larger percentage of participants attributed a strong intensity Duchenne smile to the female protagonist than to the male protagonist of European descent (27.7% versus 12.7%), whereas more participants attributed weak and medium intensity smiles to the male than to the female protagonist of African descent (42.6% versus 28.1% and 21.3% versus 11.0%, respectively).

Participants chose different facial expressions as a function of ethnic group membership for both male $\chi^2(10, N = 185) = 51.33$, $p < .001$, and female protagonists $\chi^2(10, N = 202) = 51.74$, $p < .001$. As expected, smiles were generally more frequently attributed to ethnic in-group members. When combining the percentages for all smiles (except the miserable smile, which suggests unhappiness, Ekman & Friesen, 1982), we found that 79.1% of the participants attributed a smile to the Caucasian man, 63.9% to the African man, and only 32.3% to the Asian man. The same general tendency was found for female protagonists: 80% of the participants attributed a smile to the Caucasian woman, 50.7% attributed a smile to the Asian woman, and only 39.1% to the African woman. In contrast, the neutral face was attributed more frequently to the men and women of the out-group. Thus, only 9% of the participants selected the neutral face for the Caucasian man, whereas 54.8% attributed this expression to the Asian and 29.5% to the African men. Similarly, for female protagonists, 13.3% of the participants attributed a neutral face to the Caucasian woman, whereas 37.0% attributed this expression to the Asian and 42.2% to the African women. In contrast, the miserable smile was attributed approximately equally to the male protagonists of European (11.3%), Asian (12.9%), and African (6.6%) descent. It was also attributed relatively equally to the women of European (7.7%) and Asian (12.3%) descent, but slightly more frequently to the African woman (18.8%).

As predicted, participants not only attributed more but also more intense smiles to members of their ethnic in-group. For male protagonists, the participants selected the strong intensity Duchenne smiles more frequently for the Caucasian man (12.9%) than for the Asian (4.8%) and African (0%) men. This trend is even more salient for female protagonists for whom 27.6% of the participants selected a strong intensity Duchenne smile for the Caucasian woman in comparison to 2.7 and 0%, respectively, for the Asian and African women.

In sum, French Canadians attributed more smiles and more intense smiles to in-group members. In contrast, the neutral face, which is the most appropriate expression given the nature of the protagonist's activity, was attributed more frequently to out-group members. This is even more astounding as one might argue that ethnic in-group members might be considered to be more likely to follow socially shared display rules and hence to show the "proper" expression for the situation. For the situation used here, the most appropriate expression would have been the neutral face. However, it remains arguable that the vignette used in Study 1 (i.e., an individual walking to the store to buy milk) could be conceptualized as a potentially social context, since there exists a possibility of encountering people in this type of situation. Thus, the participants may have perceived the situation as a context in which it is appropriate for a person to display positive emotional behavior such as greeting smiles (Eibl-Ebesfeldt, 1989), when encountering another individual. To assess this possibility, Study 2 was conducted. Study 2 used the same procedure as Study 1; however, the vignette described a strictly non-social situation.

Study 2

Method

Participants

A total of 406 participants (44.6% women) of European descent with a mean age of 36.6 years participated in the study. Participants were recruited in parks and public places in the Montreal and Gatineau regions using the same procedure as for Study 1. Nearly all participants were francophone (99.5%) and all were residents of the province of Quebec.

The material and procedure in Study 2 were the same as for Study 1 except for the vignettes. Again, the two vignettes varied only with regard to the sex of the protagonist but this time described an individual in a strictly non-social context: "Marc/Anne is alone in a room sitting in front of a computer screen while the computer is starting up."

Results and discussion

As in Study 1, χ^2 tests were performed in order to examine the relationship between protagonist group membership and the types of facial expressions attributed to the protagonist. Initial analyses revealed no effect of sex of the participant and this factor was subsequently dropped from the analyses. A sex of protagonist effect emerged for protagonists of Asian descent only, $\chi^2(5, N = 135) = 14.20$, $p = .014$. More specifically, participants were more likely to attribute a weak smile to the female protagonist than to the male protagonist of Asian descent (21.2% versus 5.8%) whereas they were more likely to attribute a medium intensity smile to the male protagonist (10.1% versus 1.5%).

As in Study 1, participants attributed different facial expressions to the protagonists as a function of ethnic group for both male $\chi^2(10, N = 208) = 34.75$, $p < .001$, and female protagonists $\chi^2(10, N = 198) = 43.3$, $p < .001$. When combining the percentages for all smiles except the miserable smile, we found that 49.2% of the participants attributed a smile expression to the Caucasian man, 44.9% attributed a smile expression to the African man and only 20.6% to the Asian man. Similarly, 65.1% of the participants attributed a smile to the Caucasian woman, whereas only 26.1% attributed a smile to the Asian woman and 34.4% to the African woman. Further, as in Study 1, the neutral face was attributed more frequently to the members of the out-group. For male protagonists, 26.8% of the participants attributed a neutral face to the Caucasian man, whereas 60.3 and 36.2% of the participants selected this expression for the Asian and African men, respectively. For female protagonists, only 17.4% of the participants attributed a neutral face to the Caucasian protagonist, whereas 58.5 and 51.6% of the participants attributed this expression to the Asian and African women, respectively. The miserable smile was attributed approximately equally to both the male protagonists of European (23.9%), Asian (19.1%), and African (18.8%) descent and the female protagonists of European (17.4%), Asian (15.4%), and African (14.1%) descent. In contrast to Study 1, the strong intensity Duchenne smile was not more frequently attributed to in-group than to out-group members.

In sum, results from Study 2 confirm the finding from Study 1 that French Canadian perceivers show an in-group bias in the attribution of smiles in general. However, this bias was not found with regard to the intensity of smiles attributed to protagonists from different ethnic groups.

Does the social context affect the attribution of smiles?

In order to examine if the type of facial expression selected was related to the type of vignette used (potentially social versus strictly non-social), χ^2 tests were calculated on the data from Studies 1 and 2. Significant differences were found for the types of expressions attributed to the Caucasian male $\chi^2(5, N = 133) = 21.77$, $p < .001$, Caucasian female $\chi^2(4, N = 134) = 17.8$, $p < .001$, Asian female $\chi^2(5, N = 138) = 11.28$, $p < .046$, and African male $\chi^2(5, N = 130) = 18.82$, $p < .002$, respectively. The main difference between the types of responses selected for both vignettes consisted in a higher frequency of attribution of neutral facial expressions to the protagonists in the strictly non-social context in comparison to the potentially social context. This tendency was also found for the Asian man and African woman protagonists although the difference in the distribution of the types of expressions selected for both vignettes was not statistically significant. These results suggest that the potential for a social contact present in the vignette from Study 1, was a criterion for the participants' choice of the most appropriate expression for the protagonist. However, this effect did not eliminate the tendency to favor the in-group in the attribution of smiles.

Study 3

Studies 1 and 2 provide strong evidence that individuals of European descent preferentially attribute smiles to protagonists who are also of European descent rather than to protagonists from a different ethnic group. This was interpreted as a sign of in-group bias. Yet, another possible explanation is that the judgments reflect a simple ethnic bias. That is, individuals of European descent may value smiling more and also smile more than individuals of African or Asian descent and hence rate members of their group as more smiling as

well. This rating would then simply reflect their observations and not be a sign of in-group bias. To address this issue we conducted a third study. If individuals of European descent do in fact smile more than members of other ethnic groups who live in Quebec, then perceivers of European, Asian, and African descent should all attribute more smiles to individuals of European descent than to those of African or Asian descent.

For Study 3, immigrants from French speaking African countries and from Asian countries were recruited. They completed the same task as the participants in Study 2. The data were analyzed for in-group bias.

Method

Participants

A total of 128 participants (32 men and 32 women of African and Asian descent, respectively) with a mean age of 28.6 years participated in the study. Participants were recruited in parks and public places in the Montreal and Gatineau regions using the same procedure as in Study 1. The majority of the participants spoke French (73.4%), 19.5% spoke English, and the remainder spoke another language but was comfortable reading either English or French. All participants were first generation immigrants to the province of Quebec.

The same procedure and vignette as for Study 2 was used. Participants of African descent were shown faces showing either individuals of African or of European descent. Similarly, participants of Asian descent were shown faces showing individuals of either Asian or European descent. Hence the protagonist (either male or female) of European descent was used as a member of the out-group for both groups of participants.

Results

χ^2 tests were performed in order to examine the relationship between protagonist group membership and the types of facial expressions attributed to the protagonist. Initial analyses did not reveal an effect of sex of the participant and this factor was subsequently dropped from the analyses. No statistically significant effect of sex of protagonist emerged; however, as the power to detect such an effect was low in Study 3, we decided to analyze the data separately for male and female protagonists as was done in Studies 1 and 2.

Data from both ethnic groups were coded as in-group versus out-group judgments. Specifically, faces depicting individuals of African descent were coded as in-group faces for immigrants from French speaking African countries, whereas faces depicting individuals of Asian descent were coded as in-group faces for the immigrants of Asian origin. Faces depicting French–Canadians were coded as out-group faces for both groups. The results show that overall participants attributed different facial expressions to protagonists from their in-group than to protagonists from their out-group, $\chi^2(5, N = 128) = 11.01$, $p = .05$. The difference in distribution was significant for male protagonists, $\chi^2(5, N = 64) = 11.89$, $p < .036$ only; however, the data for female protagonists showed the same trend.

When combining the percentages for all smiles except the miserable smile, we found that 59.4% of the participants attributed a smile to a man of their in-group, but only 21.9% attributed a smile to a man from the out-group. This tendency was also shown for female protagonists. Thus, 46.9% of the participants attributed a smile to an in-group woman, whereas 40.7% attributed a smile to an out-group woman. Specifically, the weak smile was attributed to an in-group woman by 43.8% of the participants, but to an out-group woman by only 28.1% of the participants.

Regarding the attribution of neutral faces and of the miserable smile, differences between participants of Asian and African descent emerged. Participants of Asian descent attributed more neutral faces to members of the out-group (53.1%) than to members of their in-group (37.5%) but attributed miserable smiles approximately equally to members of both groups (12.5% for the out-group versus 15.6% for the in-group). In contrast, participants of African descent attributed miserable smiles more often to members of the out-group (50.0%) than to members of the in-group (21.9%), but attributed neutral faces approximately equally to members of both groups (21.9% versus 18.8%).

In sum, Study 3 suggests that the effects observed in Studies 1 and 2 are not due to a simple ethnic bias effect. Further, there is evidence that, at least as far as men are concerned, a bias for attributing smiles to in-group members exists also among individuals born in French speaking African or in Asian countries. This suggests that smiling is a valued social behavior in these cultures as well.

General discussion

The present studies provide evidence for the notion that a valued emotional behavior is attributed more frequently to in-group than to out-group members. This tendency is evident even in contexts where the potential for eliciting or generating emotions is extremely low—such as walking to the store in order to buy milk or waiting alone in front of a computer while it is starting up. Further, some evidence suggests that this bias may not be specific to Western cultures.

As mentioned above, smiling is a highly valued behavior and can therefore be seen as another instance where a positive attribute is associated with an in-group. In contrast to the study by Leyens et al. (2000) where participants made general judgments about out-group

members, participants in our studies actually saw the expressions they attributed to in- and out-group members. The strong intensity Duchenne smile is in many ways a highly incongruent expression given the non-emotional contexts used in the vignettes. In fact, the most appropriate expression for the given contexts would have been the neutral face that was most frequently attributed to the out-group members. It is interesting that for in-group members, the positive value of the smile expression seems to have overridden this emotion judgement.

That the present findings represent, at least for raters of European and Asian descent, in-group favoritism rather than a tendency to attribute negative emotions to out-group members is also suggested by the fact that the only emotional expression revealing negative affect, the miserable smile, was attributed equally to in-group and out-group members. This finding is convergent with the literature on the positive–negative asymmetry in the allocation of resources and in inter-group evaluations, showing that in-group bias occurs more strongly for the positive than for the negative domain under categorization (e.g., Blanz, Mummendey, & Otten, 1995). Although participants of African descent attribute a miserable smile preferentially to out-group members, there are no relevant data for members of this group that allows us to assert that they view a miserable smile as a negative emotion expression.

In the present context, this in-group bias in smile attribution was interpreted as a case of in-group favoritism. Yet, it could be posited that our findings are due to a sampling bias. That is, people are more likely to encounter in-group members rather than out-group members in social situations that are conducive to smiling and that is what they report. Moreover, this could be linked to the use of expectancy-confirmation mechanisms (see Neuberg, 1996) such as biased perceiver information-gathering strategies (e.g., initiating only superficial interactions with out-group members, therefore allowing them little opportunity to display positive affect) or expectancy-revealing perceiver expressive behaviors (e.g., out-group members notice the perceiver's cold behaviors and respond in the same way, thus fulfilling the perceiver's initial negative expectancies). The present in-group bias effect can also be seen as yet another instance of the tendency to attribute more positive personality characteristics to in-group members and in the present study, smiling was the only index of a positive personality that was available for attribution.

Yet, these different explanations converge to the notion that even in a situation where smiling is not socially demanded or even appropriate, in-group members are described as more smiling. What are the implications of the in-group bias in smile attribution for everyday life? If we expect in-group members to be more smile-prone we may also expect them to be more open to interaction. An obvious consequence is that we are more willing to approach and to interact with a member of our in-group. Conversely, the attribution of fewer smiles and more neutral expressions to ethnic out-group members suggests that individuals may be less inclined to approach out-group members socially. Such a tendency to assume that ethnic in-group members will have a more positive emotional disposition than will ethnic out-group members may be one of the many factors that impede easy contact between members of different ethnic groups. In fact, as mentioned earlier, interactions between members of different ethnic groups can be inherently biased by expectancy-confirmation mechanisms. Thus, if individuals do indeed assume that ethnic out-group members will be less affiliative and sociable in general, they may hesitate to approach members of other ethnic groups or alternatively use a more restrained and wary approach that sets a less positive tone for the ensuing interaction. The importance of the present finding for potential social contact is underlined by the results of Study 1. In this study, which admitted the potential for social contact, the full-blown Duchenne smile was chosen for almost 20% of the in-group protagonists but only for less that 5% of the out-group members. This smile, incongruous in a non-social setting, is a prototypical greeting smile and hence suggests that individuals somehow expect even a stranger who is member of their in-group to invite contact. Conversely, the out-group member is imagined as closed to contact. Thus thinking about others as smiling versus non-smiling might be one of the ways that guide whom we approach and how.

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