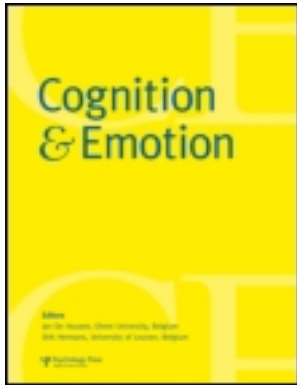


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### The social signal value of emotions

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# INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL SECTION

## The social signal value of emotions

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Human interactions are replete with emotional exchanges. In these exchanges information about the emotional state of the interaction partners is only one type of information conveyed. In addition, emotion displays provide information about the interaction partners' disposition and the situation as such. That is, emotions serve as social signals. Acknowledging this role of emotions, this special section brings together research that illustrates how both person perception and situational understanding can be derived from emotional displays and the modulation of this process through context. Three contributions focus on information about expressers and their intentions. An additional article focuses on the informative value of emotional expressions for an observer's construal of social situations and another article exemplifies the way context determines the social impact of emotions. Finally, the last article presents the dynamic nature of mutual influence of emotions. In an attempt to integrate these contributions and offer lenses for future research, this editorial offers a contextualised model of social perception which attempts to systematise not only the types of information that emotion expressions can convey, but also to elaborate the notion of context.

*Keywords:* Emotion perception; Emotion theory; Social inferences; Social perception.

It is hard to imagine a social interaction that is bereft of emotion expressions. Yet, the emotion expressions can serve different functions at the same time (Hess, Kappas, & Banse, 1995). For example, the smile of the person who greets us may signal their honest pleasure at seeing us, but also simply be a sign of affiliative intent that is shown as part of an over-learned greeting ritual and were it absent we would worry that the person is angry at us. Thus, emotions serve as symptoms

of an emotional state but also as signals about the situation. But the emotions we express also provide information that goes beyond the immediate situation. Specifically, the emotions that are expressed provide observers with information about the expressers themselves. Among other things, emotional displays are used to derive information about the characteristics of the expresser (e.g., Hareli & Hess, 2010; Hareli, Shomrat, & Hess, 2009; Hess, Blairy, & Kleck,

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2000; Knutson, 1996; Tiedens, 2001; Trope, 1986) and what they intend to do (van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2004a, 2004b). Accordingly, emotions can be seen as containers of information that is available to observers who either directly witness others' emotion displays or learn about them. Even though such inferences about the person are not always correct (e.g., Bond, Berry, & Omar, 1994; Zebrowitz, Andreoletti, Collins, Lee, & Blumenthal, 1998), they tend to be made with considerable reliability across observers (e.g., Hess, Adams, & Kleck, 2005; Said, Sebe, & Todorov, 2009). This raises the interesting question of how we arrive at such inferences and what the impact of such inferences for the resulting interaction is. This special section on the social signal value of emotions tries to present representative studies from the domain of emotion research that address these issues.

For many years emotion research was mostly concerned with identifying the non-verbal manifestations of discrete emotional states and the ability of observers to reliably recognise such states (see, e.g., Ekman & Friesen, 1971; Ekman, Friesen, & Ellsworth, 1972; Ekman & Oster, 1979; Ekman, Sorenson, & Friesen, 1969; Izard, 1971).

The study of person perception or situational information contained in emotion displays was conducted mainly by researchers whose research focus was social perception or interpersonal relations. However, in recent years research in the domain of emotion psychology has begun to devote *specific* attention to the social signal value of emotions. This may have been, at least partially, the result of a shift in the view on emotions from one that considered them as a essentially intra-personal phenomenon and thus emphasises the role of emotion displays as *symptoms* of emotional states to one that conceives of emotions as an interpersonal phenomenon and thus emphasises the *communicative* aspect of emotion displays (see, e.g., Borghi & Cimatti, 2010; Fridlund, 1991, 1994; Glaser & Salovey, 1998; Manstead, 1991; Parkinson, 1996).

Acknowledging this shift in views, this special section brings together research that illustrates

how both person perception and situational understanding can be derived from emotional displays and the modulation of this process through context. Three contributions focus on information about expressers and their intentions. First, Martens, Tracy, and Shariff (this issue) review the literature on the social perception of expressions of pride and shame and discuss the social function of these expressions both for observers and expressers. They conclude that whereas pride displays function to signal high status, shame displays function to signal a desire for appeasement after a social transgression. Second, Stearns and Parrott (this issue) report on the expression of the moral emotions of guilt and shame and how their expression affects perceptions of the moral character of the expresser as well as their likeability. Finally, Adams, Nelson, Soto, Hess, and Kleck (this issue) show that first impressions formed on the basis of neutral facial appearance are likely to be driven by over generalised responses to emotion resembling cues. That is, some features of neutral faces resemble emotionally expressive features and even this slight resemblance is enough to activate the process that derives person perception information from emotionally expressive displays. Van Doorn, Heerdink, and van Kleef (this issue) focus on the informative value of emotional expressions for an observer's construal of social situations as either cooperative or competitive.

Context influences are discussed by Parkinson and Simons (this issue) who investigate the social-communicative function of expressions of anxiety by describing different facets of a process they term interpersonal anxiety transfer. More generally, anxiety may serve as either a warning signal to other people about threat (alerting function) or as an appeal for emotional support or practical help (comfort-seeking function). Which of the two functions is more prevalent depends on situational and relational factors in a specific interaction. Finally, Bruder, Dosmukhambetova, Nerb, and Manstead (this issue) analyse social facilitation and emotional convergence in amusement, sadness, and fear in dynamic interactions. Their findings suggest that not only emotional

contagion but also social appraisals are differentially relevant for different emotions

What all of these studies show is that emotion displays not only serve as symptoms of an underlying emotional state, but have an inherent and important communicative function (Hess et al., 1995). This communicative function in turn is inherently contextualised. That is, even though emotional states can be identified from emotion expressions that are shown without any explicit context, and from these expressions inferences, for example, regarding behavioural intentions (Hess et al., 2000) can be drawn, the full communicative force of the expression only develops within a situational and relational context.

Hareli and Hess (2012) recently elaborated a contextualised model of social perception (see Figure 1), which attempts to systematise not only the types of information that emotion expressions can convey, but also to elaborate the notion of context.

In fact, social perception is comprised of two central stages (Trope, 1986). In the initial stage a cue is identified or categorised. This first process

has been the topic of extensive research and will therefore not be discussed in the present context. We simply assume that at the start of the inference process, the observer knows which emotion the observed person shows. The interested reader is asked to consult Buck (1984) or Hess and Thibault (2009) for overviews detailing this process.

Once an expression has been labelled as, for example, anger, the perceiver can draw inferences regarding the target's dispositions, the situation (Gilbert, 1998; Trope, 1986; Trope & Liberman, 1993), and/or the prevalent norms and standards. This process is influenced by three types of context information that are usually conflated as information about one may imply information about the other. Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that these are separate sources of information. First, context as defined by the other cues available in the situation—what is generally described as the context of the situation in everyday language, and second, the context that the perceiver provides, that is, the perceiver's knowledge about the expresser, the situation,

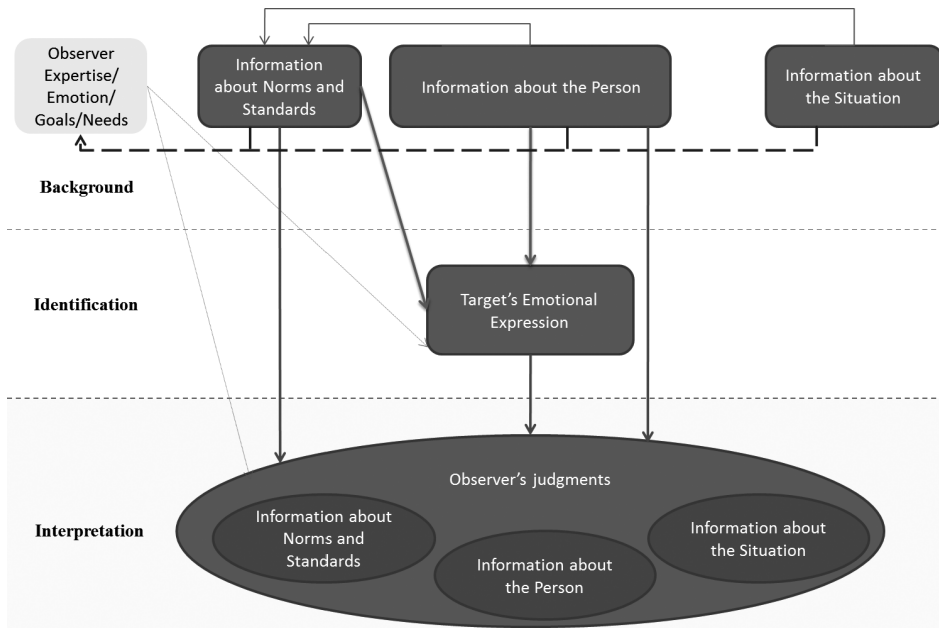


Figure 1. *The social perception of emotions in context (SPEC) model.*

and the pertinent norms, the impact of these context influences is illustrated by Van Doorn et al. (this issue) as well as by the top-down influences discussed by Adams et al. We will refer to this as perceiver information. A final contextual aspect are the perceiver's own characteristics in terms of goals, motivations, abilities and own affective state, an issue pertinent to the discussions by Parkinson and Simons (this issue). Finally, it should be added that when emotions are displayed in the face, they invariably carry context with them. This because on one hand, faces inform about the social group the expresser belongs to and thus provide stereotype information about the expressers' likely characteristics, which can be used in lieu of personalised information (Hess, Adams, & Kleck, 2009b). Second, as shown by Adams et al. (this issue) facial appearance is used to derive expectations about the pertinent social interactional dimensions of dominance, affiliation (Hess, Adams, & Kleck, 2009a) and trustworthiness (Oosterhof & Todorov, 2009), which set important initial expectations.

In sum, the research presented in this special section illustrates these processes and emphasises the richness of information provided by emotional behaviour. This research demonstrates the fruitfulness of considering emotions in a wider social context and of fully exploring their social functions. Finally, our model suggests that emotions have the potential to convey a wealth of information to the observer that is yet to be elaborated by future research.

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