

Emotion

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Emotional Restraint Is Good for Men Only: The Influence of Emotional Restraint on Perceptions of Competence

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The present research investigated the notion that passionate restraint or “manly emotion” is a relevant emotion norm not only for men but also for women in modern Western society (MacArthur & Shields, 2015). For this, 2 studies were conducted to assess whether restraint in emotional reactivity is perceived as a sign of both emotional and general competence. Restraint was induced by delaying the onset of the emotional reaction to a purported emotion elicitor. The results show that men were indeed rated as both more emotionally competent and more intelligent in general when they showed restraint, confirming the notion that such restraint fits a positively valued Western ideal of emotional reactivity. For women, however, the opposite pattern emerged in that they were perceived as more emotionally competent and intelligent when they reacted immediately than when restraint was induced. Thus, manly emotions were good for men only.

Keywords: emotion expression, manly emotions, gender differences

One of the more pervasive stereotypes are gender stereotypes of emotion. The content of these stereotypes can be subsumed under the idea that women are more “emotional” than men for most emotions (Heesacker et al., 1999; Hess, Adams, & Kleck, 2005; Plant, Hyde, Keltner, & Devine, 2000; Robinson, Johnson, & Shields, 1998). This stereotype is contrasted by a matching stereotype of masculine inexpressivity (Wong & Rochlen, 2008). Such stereotypical views about emotional expressiveness often shape observers’ perceptions and expectations (Hess, Blairy, & Kleck, 1997; Plant et al., 2000).

Shields and colleagues have coined the expression “manly emotion” or “passionate restraint,” described as an expressive mode valued in Western cultures for men but also for women. It is important to note that this expressive style is said to signal both emotional and general competence in the sense of the ability to exercise good (emotional and intellectual) judgment (MacArthur & Shields, 2015; Shields, 2005; Warner & Shields, 2007). Specifically Shields (2005) outlined the importance of authentic and appropriate emotion expression for a person’s identity and its recognition by others as well as the importance of social norms in this context. On the basis of a historical review, she emphasized the difference between (male) passion and (female) emotionality and that well-controlled or directed male passion was perceived as more superior to the uncontrolled female emotionality. However, both an extravagantly expressive and a restrained emotional ex-

pressive style are expected of both genders to some degree and depending on the context. Thus, MacArthur and Shields (2015) underlined that passionate restraint represents a relevant norm for women as well, especially in contexts that demand “good judgment.”

Passionate restraint is not the same as being inexpressive. In this sense Zawadzki, Warner, and Shields (2013), for example, found that participants rated both inexpressive and “extravagantly expressive” targets as less competent than those who demonstrated passionate restraint in response to a sad situation.

In the research cited above, restraint was operationalized by the amount of tears—just a slight tearing up versus actual tears. In the case of tears, such a reduction in intensity is indeed closely related to control, yet for other emotions this is less the case. Thus, for example, a less-intense expression of anger may simply indicate less emotional involvement, rather than more control.

In the present research, the effect of restrained emotion expression was assessed with a different operationalization of restraint, namely a short delay before the emotion was shown. Hesitating before reacting is perceived as a sign of restraint as part of common lore and has been found to actually induce restraint in emotion experience and reaction for anger (Wang et al., 2011). Also, so far, the impact of emotional restraint on person perception has been tested for only the somewhat limited case of tears. It is therefore important to attempt to extend the understanding of the role of restraint to other emotions. We therefore added anger as a second emotion of interest. Anger is an especially interesting emotion in this context because it is linked to aggression (Berkowitz, 1999) on the one hand, but in the form of “righteous” anger it is linked to goal-conducive acts that redress injustice on the other (Hess, 2014). As such, the perception that anger was shown in an “appropriate” way should be relevant to assessing the angry other, in the same way that the perception of sadness as “appropriate” rather than hysterical is relevant to understanding the sad other.

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However, coming back to the gender stereotypes mentioned earlier, these two emotions are not gender-neutral. Women are expected to show more sadness even when not feeling sad but angry (Plant et al., 2000) and report doing so themselves (Hess et al., 2000). Because sadness expressions are signals for emotional support that serve to create empathy (Eisenberg et al., 1991, 1988) and women are considered to be more empathic overall, it is likely that showing sadness is perceived as more diagnostic of emotional competence especially when shown by women. Thus, we predicted that showing sadness would result in being perceived as more emotionally competent and that women overall would be perceived as more emotionally competent than men.

Overview

Two experiments were conducted.¹ Study 1 assessed the effect of restraint on perceived emotional competence, and Study 2 tested the notion that emotional restraint may have effects on general good judgment or competence. It should be emphasized that we were specifically interested in the impact of restraint on person perception. We were not interested in the accuracy of such an observation. We therefore did not instruct participants with precise definitions but wanted them to apply their naïve understanding of these constructs as they would in real life. For this, we asked participants to rate their perception of a person by using simple terms such as are used in everyday speech to describe others.

Study 1

Method

Participants. A total of 59 (30 male) undergraduate students at the University of Haifa with a mean age of 25 years ($SD = 2.03$) were recruited via advertisements announcing a study on social perception. Participants were paid 30 Israeli shekels (around US\$8).

Procedure. Participants arrived at the laboratory in groups of up to five and, after informed consent was obtained, were seated in front of computer screens in separate compartments. The experimenter explained that the study was about person perception and that they were about to see a series of videos showing how a person reacted in a specific situation and that their task was to describe their impression of this person by using a series of rating scales.

Stimulus material. As the notion of emotional restraint focuses on the reaction to an event and is strongly linked to notions of appropriateness in reacting, we felt it was important that participants knew what event the target person reacted to. We therefore showed them a photo, which was supposedly the emotion elicitor.

Eight photos from the International Affective Picture System (IAPS; Bradley & Lang, 2007) served as the supposedly emotion eliciting stimuli. The photos² were chosen because they elicit comparable degrees of sadness and anger (Mikels et al., 2005). By using images that may equally plausibly elicit either emotion, we could counterbalance images across all conditions. Thus, no image was associated with a specific emotion and hence could have served to prejudice the appropriateness of the expression.

Facial expressions. Videos depicting expressions of sadness and anger for four different men and women were taken from the Amsterdam Dynamic Facial Expression Set (ADFES; van der Schalk, Hawk, Fischer, & Doosje, 2011). The expression lasted for 4 s before it disappeared and the rating scales appeared.

Restraint manipulation. In order to manipulate restraint, we inserted a temporal delay. Participants first saw the IAPS picture showing the supposed “emotion elicitor” for 5 s and then a video of a person reacting with either anger or sadness. The reaction was either immediate or delayed by an additional second. Previous research on facial mimicry reactions has suggested that an automatic facial reaction to an emotional stimulus can be discerned via electromyography at 300–500 ms after stimulus onset (Dimberg, Thunberg, & Grunedal, 2002). We therefore started the immediate stimulus video at 500 ms after the emotional image appeared on top of the screen. The video started with a neutral expression, which developed naturally into a full-blown emotion expression. For the restraint manipulation we used a 1-s longer delay (1,500 ms) because extremely long delays can be expected to appear unnatural.

A pretest with 40 (14 female) individuals was conducted to assess whether participants considered the above-described delayed onset of the expression as a sign of restraint and conversely the nondelayed expression as comparatively rushed or spontaneous. Significant effects of delay emerged for speed, $F(1, 36) = 104.10, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .74$; spontaneity, $F(1, 36) = 39.97, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .53$; rushed, $F(1, 36) = 60.57, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .63$; and restrained, $F(1, 36) = 8.73, p = .005, \eta_p^2 = .20$, such that participants rated the expression with the longer delay as slower, less spontaneous, and less rushed as well as more restrained, supporting this choice of manipulation. A 2 (expresser gender) \times 2 (emotion expression: sadness, anger) \times 2 (delay, no delay) within-subject design was used.

Dependent measures. As a manipulation check, participants rated the expressions regarding the intensity of both sadness and anger on 7-point Likert scales anchored with 1 (*not at all*) and 7 (*very intensely*). They then rated the expressers on a series of single-item scales regarding their emotional intelligence, sensitivity to others, sociability, appropriateness of the reaction, level of caring, and authenticity of the reaction on 7-point Likert scales anchored with 0 (*not at all*) and 6 (*very much*). These items were intended to span the domain of emotional competence, including both emotional intelligence and aspects of sociability and caring. In the pilot study (see footnote 1), these six items correlated substantially (between $r = .48$ and $r = .79$), and a factor analysis revealed a one-factor solution, which explained 64% of the variance. We therefore combined the six items into a composite Emotional Competence scale ($\alpha = .74$ to $\alpha = .83$).

¹ We also conducted a pilot study with 123 (66 male) participants using still photos to assess differences in perceived emotional competence as a function of gender and emotion without any restraint to assess to what degree the emotion shown as well as the gender of the expresser influences perceived emotional competence. The pilot study confirmed that women’s expressions were rated as more emotional and supported the notion that women are overall perceived as more emotionally competent. In addition, men’s expressions were rated as more restrained even in the absence of a restraint manipulation.

² IAPS Images 2710, 3180, 3500, 6212, 6313, 9180, 9560, and 9810.

Results

Manipulation check. A 2 (expression: sadness, anger) \times 2 (expresser gender) \times 2 (delay: no delay, delay) repeated-measures analysis of variance was conducted on ratings of anger and sadness. For anger, significant main effects of emotion, $F(1, 58) = 339.59, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .85$, and gender, $F(1, 58) = 7.68, p = .008, \eta_p^2 = .12$, emerged as well as a Delay \times Gender interaction, $F(1, 58) = 4.98, p = .030, \eta_p^2 = .08$.

Anger expressions were rated as more angry ($M = 4.73, SD = .67$) than sad expressions ($M = 1.74, SD = 1.03$), and expressions shown by women ($M = 3.41, SD = .70$) as more intense than expressions shown by men ($M = 3.06, SD = .85$). However, whereas for delayed expressions no difference in anger ratings as a function of expresser gender emerged ($M_{\text{women}} = 3.29, SD = .95$ vs. $M_{\text{men}} = 3.22, SD = 1.05$), post hoc tests ($p < .05$) revealed that women's immediate expressive reactions were rated as more angry overall ($M = 3.53, SD = .91$) than men's ($M = 2.90, SD = 1.15$).

For sadness ratings as well, significant main effects of emotion, $F(1, 58) = 222.57, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .79$, and gender, $F(1, 58) = 12.03, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .17$, as well as a Delay \times Gender interaction, $F(1, 58) = 4.37, p = .041, \eta_p^2 = .07$, emerged. However, the latter was qualified by a significant Delay \times Gender \times Emotion interaction, $F(1, 58) = 6.82, p = .011, \eta_p^2 = .11$.

Simple-effects analyses ($p < .05$) were conducted. Overall, sad expressions were rated as sadder ($M = 4.66, SD = .73$) than angry expressions ($M = 2.21, SD = 1.05$), and expressions shown by women ($M = 3.67, SD = .87$) as more intense than expressions shown by men ($M = 3.20, SD = .80$). Further, delayed sadness expressions shown by women were rated as significantly less sad ($M = 4.49, SD = 1.43$) than immediate sadness reactions ($M = 5.39, SD = .79$). In sum, for women but not for men, delayed expressions were perceived as less intense.

Emotional competence. Significant main effects of emotion, $F(1, 58) = 19.14, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .24$; gender, $F(1, 58) = 9.02, p =$

$.004, \eta_p^2 = .14$; and delay, $F(1, 58) = 9.78, p < .003, \eta_p^2 = .14$, emerged. The latter was fully qualified by a Delay \times Gender interaction, $F(1, 58) = 60.27, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .51$.

Simple-effects analyses ($p < .05$) were conducted. Overall, as in the pilot study (see footnote 1) and congruent with stereotype expectations, women were rated as more emotionally competent ($M = 3.71, SD = .54$) than men ($M = 3.46, SD = .60$). Further, as predicted, expressers showing sadness were perceived as more emotionally competent ($M = 3.79, SD = .59$) than expressers showing anger ($M = 3.37, SD = .60$). Finally, as predicted by the passionate restraint hypothesis, men whose expressions were delayed were rated as significantly ($p < .05$) more emotionally competent (see Figure 1, left half) than men who reacted immediately. However, for women the opposite pattern emerged, such that women who reacted immediately were rated as more emotionally competent than those who showed a delayed reaction.

Discussion

In Study 1, we manipulated emotional restraint by introducing a delay between the purported emotional stimulus and the emotional reaction shown. In line with stereotype expectations and as in the pilot study, women were overall rated as more emotionally competent than men. Also as predicted and as in the pilot study, showing sadness seemed to signal more emotional competence. In this study, the purported emotion-eliciting stimuli were selected to be equally likely to elicit anger and sadness. Hence, the specific emotion shown can be considered diagnostic for the expressers' personality. In fact, facial expressions of sadness are signals for emotional support that serve to create empathy (Eisenberg et al., 1991, 1988) and are thus linked to such notions as showing an appropriate and caring expression, which are part of emotional competence.

We had predicted that people who show restraint would be perceived as more emotionally competent. For male expressers this



Figure 1. Mean perceived emotional competence (Study 1) and intelligence (Study 2) as a function of gender and manipulated restraint. Error bars represent standard error of the means.

was indeed the case. However, for women the pattern was reversed such that women who responded immediately to the emotion-eliciting stimulus were perceived as more emotionally competent.

There are several possible explanations for this finding. First, it may be that the societal prescription for restraint really only applies to men. However, we found that not only was there no effect of restraint for women, but rather that restraint resulted in a perception of lower emotional competence.

This reversal of the effect of a delay in responding might be interpreted in light of the shifting standards model (e.g., Biernat, 1995). This model proposes that social judgments are made according to standards or expectations, which may shift for members of different groups as a function of group stereotypes. Biernat (1995) noted, as an example relevant to the present line of inquiry, that men are generally expected to be more aggressive than are women. Hence, a given aggressive behavior is perceived as more aggressive when shown by a woman than when shown by a man. Conversely, the pilot study confirmed that women are expected to be more emotionally competent than men, and the speed of response is considered diagnostic for restraint (according to the pretest to Study 1), which in turn is a marker of emotional competence. Hence, participants may assume that a person high in emotional competence should not require as much restraint (because an emotionally competent person naturally shows the appropriate emotion), and consequently the same delay may appear as too much restraint and hence as suspect. As such it is possible that for women the delay was perceived as a sign of lack of overall good judgment (in the sense of “if she needs that much time, she must be incompetent”) or, alternatively, of faking.

We assessed the perceived authenticity of the expression, but in the context of the other dependent variables, participants seemed to have applied the rating in the sense of “authentic person,” because the rating correlated very highly with our other measures of emotional competence.

In Study 1, we focused on perceived emotional competence as a function of restraint. However, as mentioned in the introduction, Shields and colleagues (MacArthur & Shields, 2015; Shields, 2005; Warner & Shields, 2007) cast the effect wider and talk about good judgment in general. We therefore conducted a further study in which we assessed whether the observed pattern of results applies to a more general judgment of competence or good judgment by asking about the expresser’s intelligence. We used intelligence as the dependent variable on the basis of the common use of this word as illustrated by *Merriam-Webster*, which defines *intelligence* in terms that include “the skilled use of reason” and “the ability to apply knowledge to manipulate one’s environment or to think abstractly.” We also assessed the hypothesis, derived from the shifting standards model, that the expressions by women who react with a delay are perceived as less authentic.

Study 2

Method

Participants. A total of 58 (28 male) undergraduate students at the University of Haifa with a mean age of 25 years ($SD = 2.0$) were recruited via advertisements announcing a study on social perception. Participants were paid 30 shekels (around US\$8). The same design, procedure, and stimuli as in Study 1 were used.

Dependent measures. The same emotion ratings as in Study 1 were used. On a series of 7-point Likert scales anchored with 0 (*not at all*) and 6 (*very much*), participants further rated the perceived intelligence of the expresser as well as how hesitant, appropriate, and authentic the reaction seemed on single-item scales anchored with 0 (*not at all*) and 6 (*very much*).³

Results and Discussion

Manipulation check. A 2 (expression: sadness, anger) \times 2 (expresser gender) \times 2 (delay: no delay, delay) repeated-measures analysis of variance was conducted on ratings of anger and sadness. For anger, only the significant main effect of emotion reached significance, $F(1, 57) = 339.64, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .86$, such that anger expressions were rated as more angry ($M = 5.65, SD = .81$) than sad expressions ($M = 2.54, SD = 1.21$). For sadness, the more-complex pattern found in Study 1 was replicated with a significant main effect of emotion, $F(1, 57) = 380.84, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .87$, as well as an Emotion \times Gender interaction, $F(1, 57) = 6.14, p = .016, \eta_p^2 = .10$, which in turn was fully qualified by a significant Delay \times Gender \times Emotion interaction, $F(1, 57) = 9.61, p = .003, \eta_p^2 = .14$.

Simple-effects analyses ($p < .05$) were conducted. Overall, sad expressions were rated as sadder ($M = 5.87, SD = .65$) than angry expressions ($M = 2.89, SD = 1.08$). Replicating the finding from Study 1, sadness expressions shown by women without delay were rated as significantly ($p < .05$) sadder ($M = 6.41, SD = .75$) than sadness expressions with a delay ($M = 5.64, SD = 1.68$).

Perceived intelligence. A significant main effect of gender, $F(1, 57) = 11.21, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .16$, such that women were rated as overall more intelligent, was qualified by the expected Delay \times Gender interaction, $F(1, 57) = 17.19, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .23$. Specifically, men who showed delayed reactions were perceived as significantly more intelligent than those who reacted immediately, whereas for women delayed reactions resulted in less perceived intelligence (see Figure 1, right half). Thus, only for men did restraint result in perceptions of higher general intelligence.

Perceived authenticity, appropriateness, and hesitancy of the expression. To assess whether participants considered delayed expressions shown by women to be a sign of lack of authenticity or hesitancy or as less appropriate, we conducted a 2 (emotion expression: sadness, anger) \times 2 (gender of the expresser) \times 2 (delay: no delay, delay) repeated-measures analysis of variance on each of these ratings. For hesitancy only a main effect of emotion emerged, $F(1, 57) = 40.53, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .42$, such that sad expressions ($M = 2.71, SD = .92$) were perceived as more hesitant than angry expressions ($M = 1.98, SD = .86$). This may be in line with notions of anger as a reaction to immediate threat (Berkowitz, 1999).

For ratings of authenticity only a significant Delay \times Gender interaction emerged, $F(1, 57) = 11.28, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .17$, such that for women immediate reactions were perceived as more authentic ($M = 3.01, SD = 1.45$) than delayed reactions ($M = 2.34, SD = 1.45$), whereas for men delayed reactions ($M = 2.78,$

³ Because three of the scales probed the perception of the reaction rather than the perception of the person, scales of dominance and submission were included to make the study believable as a study on person perception. These scales are not analyzed.

$SD = 1.45$) seemed more authentic than immediate ones ($M = 2.34, SD = 1.33$).

As regards the appropriateness of the expression, significant main effects of emotion, $F(1, 57) = 20.98, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .27$, and delay, $F(1, 57) = 6.44, p = .014, \eta_p^2 = .10$, emerged, which were fully qualified by an Emotion \times Delay interaction, $F(1, 57) = 11.48, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .17$. Simple-effects analyses revealed that immediate sadness was perceived as the most appropriate reaction ($M = 4.29, SD = .98$, vs. $M = 3.29, SD = .93$). Finally, a Delay \times Gender interaction emerged, $F(1, 57) = 104.36, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .65$, which matched the findings for authenticity, such that for women immediate reactions were perceived as more appropriate ($M = 4.16, SD = 1.03$) than delayed reactions ($M = 2.64, SD = 1.34$), whereas for men delayed reactions ($M = 4.14, SD = 1.12$) were deemed more appropriate than immediate ones ($M = 3.22, SD = 1.20$).

Discussion

In Study 2, we addressed the question of whether emotional restraint, operationalized by a delayed reaction, would be considered, as suggested by Shields (2005), as a sign of good judgment. Replicating the finding for emotional competence in Study 1, this more general competence was rated higher for men who showed a delayed reaction, whereas the opposite pattern emerged for women.

A second aim was to assess the prediction, on the basis of the shifting standards model, that delayed reactions are seen as less authentic and appropriate when shown by women. This was indeed what we found, suggesting that a longer delay may be seen as indicative of restraint for men but as strategic or inappropriate for the more emotionally competent women. This is also matched by the perception found in the pilot study (see footnote 1) that women's expressions are perceived as less restrained even when stills were shown—hence, when additional control is introduced through the restraint manipulation, the resulting expression may be seen as strategic rather than spontaneous.

General Discussion

The present studies are the first to extend research on the person perception effects of showing emotional restraint to emotion expressions other than tears. We also used a novel restraint manipulation that is independent of expression intensity but is clearly perceived as restraint by observers. In addition, the expressions were shown in a meaningful emotional context—the purported emotion elicitor—further enhancing the pertinence of the findings for real-world situations for which knowledge about the elicitor of an emotional reaction is typical.

Specifically, in the pilot study, we found evidence for stereotype expectations suggesting that women are perceived as more emotionally competent as well as less likely to control their emotional reactions. When restraint was manipulated by delaying the onset of the emotional reaction to a purported emotion elicitor, men were rated as both more emotionally competent and more intelligent in general, confirming the notion that such restraint fits a positively valued Western ideal of emotional reactivity (MacArthur & Shields, 2015). For women, however, the opposite pattern emerged, in that they were considered more emotionally compe-

tent and intelligent when they reacted immediately rather than when restraint was induced. That is, emotional restraint does indeed seem to mark something like “good judgment” for men, in that it affects both perceptions of emotional competence and perceptions of general intelligence.

In our studies, restraint was manipulated by introducing a delay between the purported emotion-eliciting stimulus and the onset of the expressive reaction. Reactions then dynamically developed the same way for all expressers.

Interestingly, Study 2 showed that for both genders, the specific emotional delay that signaled greater emotional competence also appeared more authentic and appropriate. Together, these findings suggest that gender stereotypes about women as more emotionally volatile but also more emotionally competent interact with the effect of delay, such that their immediate reactions are seen as more appropriate and authentic as well as making women appear more emotionally competent and intelligent, whereas longer delays seem suspect. This could be interpreted in line with the shifting standards model (Biernat, 1995), such that the impression arises that if someone who is expected to be emotionally competent needs too much time, “something must be wrong.” This is similar to such effects of shifting standards as reactions to housework in men and women, where the same performance may be perceived as excellent when shown by a man and as below standard when shown by a woman.

By contrast, restraint when practiced by men is appreciated as the more-authentic and appropriate reaction for them and therefore signals greater emotional competence. In sum, for both men and women what is perceived as authentic and appropriate is also perceived as emotionally competent—however, what differs between the sexes is what is perceived as authentic and appropriate for them. In consequence, showing restrained or “manly” emotional reactions has positive consequences only for men. This also has implications for how we give advice about appropriate emotional responding—for example when coaching leaders in transformational leadership strategies, which rely on the showing of appropriate emotions (Gardner & Avolio, 1996).

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