



Interdisciplinary Center of Research on Emotions

# How the situative informativeness of emotions affects social inferences drawn from them – The case of awe and happiness



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## Introduction

Emotions can be viewed as compacted and encapsulated messages where each emotion conveys unique specific information (Hareli & Hess, 2012).

Others' expressed emotions are an important source of social context information in particular when we are not familiar with the situation and the standards that apply (Van Kleef, 2010).

However, emotions vary in how much information about the situation they provide - situative informativeness.

To make sense of the situation, observers rely more on context information when observing emotions low in situative informativeness than when observing emotions high in situative informativeness.

Reported are the results of two studies in which participants were asked to evaluate the quality of a player's performance in an unknown sports game based on the emotional reactions of spectators of the game.

Spectators reacted either with awe (high in situative informativeness), or with happiness or neutrality (low in situative informativeness).

## Awe vs. happiness and neutrality as indicators of performance quality

Expressions of awe indicate that the emoter is overwhelmed by the vastness of the object of the emotion, for example, the greatness of an achievement.

Thus, independent of context, expressions of awe in response to a certain performance should indicate a high quality performance.

By contrast, deducing the quality of performance based on expressions of happiness and neutrality depends on the context, specifically on who showed the expression.

This, because happiness reflects a desirable situation yet desirability depends on the point of view of the expresser.

Likewise, neutrality reflects that noting notable or desirable had happened. In this case too, making sense of what this means for a given performance depends on who the expresser is.

## Study 1

416 (254 men) participants recruited through Mturk were asked to evaluate the quality of a player's performance based on the emotional reactions of spectators to an unknown ball game. Spectators reacted either with awe, or with happiness or neutrality and were described as player's or opponent's supporters or unaffiliated observers.



The blue player is about to throw the last ball in this match; fans appear in the background

In a set of 10 pictures, participants saw the final throw of one player in the game followed by the reactions of one individual who was identified either as a supporter, an opponent or an unaffiliated spectator based on the color of their shirts.



The game status before the last ball is thrown by the last player



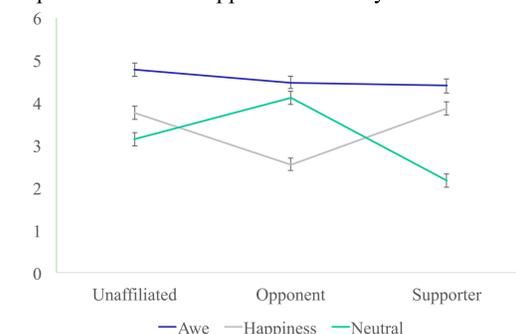
Close up: The final result of the three balls thrown by the blue player

Opponent's supporter    Player's supporter    Unaffiliated observer



## Results

Perceived performance quality as a function of emotion expressed and the supporter's identity.



Study 1 showed that participants interpreted expressions of awe as indicative of a high quality performance independent of context whereas the conclusions drawn from happy and neutral expressions depended on who showed the expression.

In Study 2 increasingly explicit information clarifying the nature of the performance was provided to show that situative informativeness rather than other aspects reflecting differences between the emotions are responsible for the results.

## Study 2

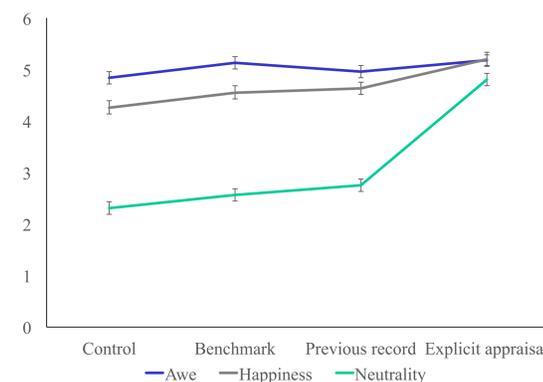
820 (506 men) participants saw the same game as in Study 1 but only reactions of unaffiliated observers were shown. First, prior to the throw by the last player they saw three additional slides showing the previous player's game, which was labeled as "typical" and was inferior to the last player's throw. This provides benchmark information on the standard relevant to the evaluation of the performance. In two additional conditions we provided increasingly explicit appraisal information about the performance. Specifically, participants saw the original game but prior to the last throw a slide was added with a sign that marks the record throw for that field so far or they saw the original game with the addition that a speech bubble was added to the spectator reaction which read "Unbelievable ... This is a far better performance than I have ever seen in all the years I have been following this."

## Hypothesis

To the degree that additional information congruent with the presumed awe appraisal is provided, the difference in the evaluation between happy and awe reactions by an unaffiliated observer will disappear.

## Results

Perceived performance quality as a function of emotion Expression and information provided.



## Conclusions

The situative informativeness of an emotion determines the extent to which observers can make sense of the emotion-eliciting event without recourse to other context information.

Performance ratings based on happiness and neutral reactions depended on which additional information was provided. Yet, for awe expressions, which already contains performance information, the added information had no effect.

The present research strongly suggests that context effects may not be equally strong or relevant for all emotions in all contexts. Future research on context effects on emotion expressions should consider situative informativeness as a potential moderator of such effects.

## References

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- Van Kleef, G. A. (2010). The Emerging View of Emotion as Social Information. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 4*(5), 331-343.

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