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Sex differences in emotion expression

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Why study sex differences in emotion?

In this thesis research will be presented which studies the emotional behavior of men and women. Emotionality is conceived to be one of the most salient dimensions on which the sexes can be distinguished: One of the most persistent sex stereotypes is that women, in general, are more emotional than men are.

Throughout the history of academic thought women were seen as closer to nature, and blessed with less intellect and with more intuition than men. It was believed that the nature of men and women fundamentally differ whereby rationality was associated with men and emotionality was associated with women. Thus, women were thought to be concerned with the social and emotional aspects of life, whereas it was assumed that men were focused upon individual achievements (Fischer, 1993).

During the past decades, in both society and academic thought, this conception of men and women has been changing, and the thought that emotionality cannot be equated with irrationality or femininity, or is not the opposite of rationality, is beginning to take hold (see e.g., Oatley, 1992). However, emotionality is still considered to be a characteristic that women possess and that men lack (Fischer, 1993). Even feminist authors consider emotionality as the most salient dimension on which the sexes can be distinguished (see e.g., Chodorow, 1987; Gilligan, 1982; Tannen, 1990).

There are some problems with this conception of emotionality. It is striking that emotionality is conceived as a personality characteristic that is not dependent on context and does not take into account the differences between emotions, or the differences between emotional experiences and emotional behavior. For example, when distinctions between emotional experiences and emotional expressions are made, empirical studies show that women and men differ more in their expressions than in their experiences of some specific emotions (e.g., Brody & Hall, 1993; Kring & Gordon, 1998; LaFrance & Banaji, 1992).

The general sex stereotype of the emotional woman is not an accurate reflection of the actual differences between the emotional lives of men and women. Moreover, this

stereotype may have negative implications for both women and men in daily life. For example, the perception of being emotional can be an obstacle to take women seriously in conflicts. If men are seen as merely rational while lacking emotionality this can also have unfavorable effects, as when men aspire to certain jobs which require qualities which are associated with emotionality.

Therefore, it is relevant to study the actual differences in emotional reactions between men and women in a way that makes distinctions between different emotions, social contexts, emotional experiences and emotional expressions. In order to get insight into the determinants of the emotional behavior of men and women, the processes underlying sex differences in emotions have to be studied. One such process refers to the different goals men and women have in relation to expressing emotions. The investigation of sex differences in emotion expressions may also increase our understanding of sex differences at a more general level, because emotions are an integral part of the social behavior of men and women.

In the current chapter an introduction to the theory of sex differences in emotions will be presented. Before doing this, some theoretical issues concerning sex, gender and emotion will be discussed.

Sex and gender

There is much debate, especially within feminist research traditions, concerning the use of the terms 'sex' and 'gender', and what these terms mean (e.g., Butler, 1990; de Castro, 1993; Outshoorn, 1989). Therefore, I want to clarify how both terms are used in the present thesis.

In general, the term 'sex' refers to the biologically - based distinction between men and women. 'Gender' on the other hand refers to differences between men and women based on social criteria and to the characteristic traits and behaviors that are seen as appropriate for members of each sexual category (Archer & Lloyd, 1985). It explicates the cultural inscription of meaning on a particular sex, and how in a particular culture masculinity and femininity are conceived. The term also refers to gendered beliefs and lay theories about men and women. Children become gendered by learning to perceive

themselves as and to act in the way that their culture thinks appropriate for boys and girls (i.e., Butler, 1990; Outshoorn, 1989).

In the present thesis, the term 'sex' is used as a categorical variable, referring to the biological categories 'man' and 'woman'. The term 'gender' is used to refer to the social contents of sex stereotyped beliefs. It refers, for example, to cultural beliefs about which emotional behavior is appropriate for men and women (e.g., Zammuner, 2000). In the present series of studies we have not used an additional measure of gender identity (Bem, 1974), because this measure is thought to be confounded with emotionality: Gender identity is assessed by traits, some of which are similar to or at least associated with emotionality. For example, a feminine identity is identified when someone merely possesses traits such as affectionate, emotional, tender, warm and shy. A masculine identity is identified when someone merely possesses traits such as aggressive, forceful, strong and dominant.

In the general domain of sex differences two so-called 'origin theories' can be distinguished. The first is an evolutionary theory that claims that the dispositions of men and women have evolved during the course of evolution. The second is a social structuralist theory in which it is argued that sex differences stem from the different roles of women and men in the social structure (Eagly & Wood, 1999). Although the two origin theories are associated with different predictions, they share the assumption that there is something basic (i.e., evolved dispositions or social structure) which causes sex-differentiated behavior. Biological, psychological and social processes mediate between the basic cause and behavior. Thus, both origin theories emphasize adjustment to environmental conditions. They differ in their beliefs whether the origins of behavior of men and women may lie in early human history as evolutionary psychologists believe, or in more recent cultural history as social structuralists claim. What both views share is that behavior has to be functional in its adjustment to actual environmental demands (Eagly & Wood, 1999).

In this thesis a social functional framework is used to study sex differences in emotion. The general assumption guiding this thesis is that emotions are not simply overwhelming or disrupting responses, but rather are displays with specific functions in

social interactions. Emotionality is not seen as an attribute of men or women, but rather as a function of goals and motives in a particular social situation.

Following Keltner and Haidt (1999), a social functional account of emotion argues that people are social by nature and have to deal with the problems that arise in relationships. Emotions are means of coordinating social interactions and relationships to address the problems that arise in relationships. Hence, emotions are dynamic processes that mediate the individual's relation to a continually changing social environment.

Before continuing the argument about how men and women may differ with respect to the social functionality of emotions, I will first describe how an emotion can be conceived.

Emotion

An emotion follows from an interaction of a person with his or her environment. It is not what happens in the environment as such, but rather the interaction of a person with the environment, and the meaning this person ascribes to what happens, that is the origin of the emotional experience. Personal factors, such as expectations or beliefs, influence the process of giving meaning to events. An emotion can be conceived of as a process that is elicited by situations or objects that are relevant to the individual's goals, concerns or wishes. The emotion process consists of several steps, each of which can be studied separately. This description derives mainly from Frijda (1986), but is in accordance with the views of most emotion researchers (e.g., Averill, 1982; Oatley, 1992). For the present research it is relevant to be able to distinguish between emotional experiences and emotional expressions, because an important question in this thesis is why sex differences in emotional expressions are greater than sex differences in emotional experiences.

The emotion process consists of two basic processes: the 'core process' and the 'regulatory process' (Frijda, 1986).

The core process. After an event is encoded in sensory terms, it will be appraised. When appraising an event, an individual is evaluating its relevance to and evaluative implications for his or her well-being or his or her concerns. An emotion only occurs when the event is appraised by the individual as relevant (Frijda, 1986). When an event is appraised as relevant to one's concerns, this leads to the next step in the emotion process:

a change in action readiness. This is the intention to do something, or the disappearance of the intention to do anything at all. The emotional experience consists of this awareness of these changes in action readiness, together with the experience of physiological changes (heart-rate, blood pressure, skin conductance and so forth, Frijda, 1986).

The overt response consists of visible physiological changes, such as trembling and blushing, overt behavior such as facial expressions, and emotional behavior, such as shouting, running away, or hugging someone. Overt responses are intended to change, maintain or influence the relationship between the individual and the object of the emotion, that is the thing or person the emotion is about (Frijda, 1986).

Regulation process. People not only passively experience emotions, they also actively cope with them. They take a stance towards their emotions and have to deal with the consequences of their emotional behavior (Frijda, 1986). People influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions: In short, people regulate their emotions (Gross, 1999). People can influence all steps of the core process. This is what is called the 'regulatory process' (Frijda, 1986). An emotion-eliciting event can be avoided, for example, by not walking through the park if one is afraid of dogs. The importance of a certain event can also be reappraised ('It was not so important after all to win that prize in the lottery'). The possibilities of coping with a situation can be interpreted with the help of unrealistically optimistic thoughts such as 'these kind of things do not happen to me'. The emotional experience can be suppressed by thinking about something else, or intensified by an extra focus on the situation. Emotional behavior can be regulated by acting in an opposite way to what one feels, for example by engaging in some bodily exercise when one is angry (Frijda, 1986).

Social functional account of emotions

Experience, expression and regulation of emotions can be functional on an intrapersonal level and on an interpersonal level. Experiencing an emotion has an *intrapersonal* function when an emotion is a signal helping someone to prioritize in situations of multiple goals (Keltner & Haidt, 1999). It can point to aspects of one's goal structures that one may have been unaware of (Oatley, 1992), or it may serve to monitor and safeguard one's concerns (Frijda, 1986). For example, the amount of relief and joy

after passing an exam signals the importance of that exam. The unexpected trembling of one's hands when knocking on the door of one's boss may point to the fact that one is more nervous about the coming conversation than one was aware of.

Emotion regulation has intrapersonal functions when someone wants to experience less disruption, discomfort, feelings of incapability, or more pleasure. This is especially the case when emotion regulation is applied to the emotional experience (by thinking about something else), or when, for example, the event is reappraised ('It was not such a great job after all').

Emotions may also be functional on an *interpersonal* level. Expressing emotions has systematic effects on others. The interpersonal function of emotions is based on one's knowledge of, or previous experience with, emotions in social interaction. Displaying emotions informs others about one's emotional state (Ekman & Friesen, 1969), and indicates to others the emotional potential of the situation (Frijda & Mesquita, 1994). For example, when someone suddenly expresses his fear, he is showing that there is something frightening nearby. He is also displaying his social position and role: Expressing fear may lead one to be seen as vulnerable (Frijda & Mesquita, 1994). By contrast, expressing joy and pride is likely to lead to being seen as victorious and self-confident.

Emotions not only direct one's own social behavior, they may also elicit social behavior from the target of the emotion, that is the person to whom someone expresses his or her emotion. For example, when someone is shouting at someone else because he is angry as a result of unjust criticism, this may have an intimidating effect on the other person. As a result, this person may react with anger herself, or may not dare to criticize the other person the next time. Expressing fear, for example by means of crying, may make apparent one's need for support, which will probably lead to some comfort from the target person. Expressing happiness increases our sociability and may lead to openness to new ideas from others. In other words, expressing emotions has *social consequences*. Expressing an emotion may have consequences for the relationship with others, for the impression that one makes on others and is likely to influence the behavior of the target person. For example, sharing one's love or happiness generally adds to the positive quality of one's relationship with another person. Expressions of anger or disappointment can lead

to changes in the situation, or to control over others, by trying to change the behavior of others (Frijda & Mesquita, 1994).

Because expressing emotions has effects on others, emotion regulation also has functions in social interactions. For example, if a salesperson is irritated, but at the same time knows that acting irritated would not contribute to selling his products, he would probably try to regulate his irritation. In order to regulate emotions, some degree of awareness of these outcomes of emotional behavior is required. Different studies have shown that people are aware of the consequences of their emotional expressions (e.g., Clark, Pataki & Carver, 1995; Frijda, 1986; Oatley 1992; Saarni, 1984; Zammuner & Fischer, 1995). Such studies show that people know that expressing happiness increases the chance of being liked, that expressing anger increases the chance of being disliked, and that expressing sadness increases one's perceived neediness and dependency on others. These studies also show that people anticipate these social consequences and present their emotions to others in order to accomplish specific social goals. In this thesis, an important question to be addressed is whether people have different *social motives* to regulate their emotions due to (different) expectations about the social consequences. For example, if someone wants to make a cool impression on his friends, he might suppress his fear of dogs when walking through a park.

Because expressing emotions has social consequences, the intention to engage in regulation stems not only from individual concerns, but also from social concerns. Emotion regulation serves to channel emotional responses in a way that is appropriate within a particular emotion culture (Hochschild, 1983). Emotions have significance, that is the meaning of the emotion for the individual and his or her target (Frijda & Mesquita, 1994). This significance is an important source of emotion regulation: There exist *social norms* that provide prescriptions for emotional experiences and behavior (e.g., Baanders, 1997; Ekman & Friesen, 1969; Fischer & Jansz, 1995; Goffman, 1961; Harré, 1996; Hochschild, 1983; Parkinson, 1991; Saarni, 1984). When an individual breaches these social norms, there is a chance that he or she will be negatively evaluated during social interaction (Forsyth, 1995). These emotion norms exist for the experience of emotions, i.e., feeling rules (Hochschild, 1983; 'you should not feel happy when someone else has broken his leg'); however, they are more pronounced for expressive behavior, i.e., display

rules (Ekman & Friesen, 1969; 'you should not burst into tears if a colleague spills coffee over your new blouse'). Also, the individual evaluates the experience and expression of emotions with respect to his or her self-image or self-ideal: I am not the kind of person who envies my best friend because he earns more money than I do' (Frijda & Mesquita, 1994; Jansz & Timmers, in press)

In sum, emotions are often functional on an intrapersonal level and on an interpersonal level. Because in the present thesis the main question is why men and women differ in their emotional expressions, the primary focus is on the interpersonal functions of emotion. Thus far, it has been argued that emotional expressions are functional in social relations in that they serve social goals and concerns, and that people attempt to regulate their emotions in accordance with these goals. I now turn to the ways in which men and women differ in the way they experience, express and regulate their emotions.

Sex differences in emotion

Sex differences in emotions that have been reported in previous studies are more pronounced for emotional expression than for emotional experience (e.g., Brody & Hall, 1993; Kring & Gordon, 1998; LaFrance & Banaji, 1992). The results of these studies can be summarized as follows: Men are less inclined than women to express "powerless" emotions, such as fear and sadness (Brody, Lovas & Hay, 1995); women, on the other hand, are more hesitant about expressing "powerful" emotions, such as anger and pride (Brody & Hall, 1993; Fischer, 1993; Helgeson & Golob, 1991).

Having a sense of powerlessness is characterized by specific appraisals and action tendencies (e.g., Frijda, Kuipers, & ter Schure, 1989; Roseman, 1984; Manstead & Tetlock, 1989) that are related to vulnerability. For example, if a negative event is appraised as caused by unknown factors, as being out of the individual's control, and as exceeding his or her coping resources, the experienced emotion is likely to be one of sadness or fear; in this sense, expressions of these emotions display powerlessness and vulnerability. By contrast, if a negative event is appraised as caused by external factors, as being within the individual's control, and as one which he or she can change, the

experienced emotion is likely to be anger or contempt; expressions of these emotions therefore display power.

Women, compared to men, disclose their feelings to a greater extent (Dindia & Allen, 1992); report expressing negative emotions, such as shame, sadness and fear to a greater extent (Allen & Haccoun, 1976; Brody & Hall, 1993; Cornelius & Averill, 1983); cry more often, also when they are angry (e.g., van den Berg, Kortekaas, & Vingerhoets, 1992; Lombardo, Cretser, Lombardo, & Mathis, 1983), and show more non-verbal expressions (Hall, 1984). Men, on the other hand, express their anger more often and with greater intensity, at least when the more aggressive form of this emotion is considered (van den Berg et al., 1992; Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Frodi, Macaulay, & Thome, 1977). Men have also been found to express pride more than women do (Brody & Hall, 1993).

One explanation for these sex differences in emotion expressions investigated in this thesis, is that men and women regulate their emotions differently because of *gender-specific emotion norms*. The most prevailing norm governing the emotional expressions of men and women is that men should suppress most of their emotions, whereas women are permitted to be more emotionally expressive, anger being an exception (Grossman & Wood, 1993). This norm may stem from women's role as caretaker and nurturer in which they are only allowed to show emotions that serve harmony and cooperation between people, and from men's role as status-oriented, competitive achiever.

A second explanation, investigated in the present thesis, is that men and women, probably as a result of these gender-specific emotion norms, anticipate different *social consequences* when expressing emotions. Most of the studies in which the consequences encountered by men and women have been investigated have focused on anger expressions. Such studies have shown that men anticipate more positive consequences than do women (Averill, 1982; Campbell & Muncer, 1987; Fehr, Baldwin, Collins, Patterson & Bendit, 1999). According to Eagly and Steffen (1986) the tendency for men to be more aggressive than women might be a function of the perceived consequences of aggression that are learned as aspects of gender roles.

A third explanation is that men and women may have different *social motives* in social interactions, which lead to different emotion regulation strategies. For example, it may well be that as a result of socialization processes, men are more likely than women to

endorse the motive to appear self-confident in social interactions, whereas women are more likely than men to endorse the motive to appear nice and friendly. Which social motive men and women think their emotion expressions will accomplish is dependent on gender-specific emotion norms and on the consequences men and women encountered in the past. As a result, it may be, for example, that women think that expressing sadness because a friend is moving away would lead to the perception of appearing nice and friendly; whereas men may think that expressing sadness in this situation does not help the friend any further.

To sum up, the central questions addressed in this thesis are: (1) Do men and women have different *social motives* when expressing specific emotions? (2) Do these social motives account for sex differences in emotion expression? (3) Do men and women encounter different *consequences* as a result of expressing specific emotions? (4) Which gender-specific *emotion beliefs* do people endorse?

Overview of this thesis

In Chapter 2 the central question to be addressed is whether sex differences in emotion expression are based on differences in social motives held by men and women in social interactions. A vignette study is described in which four emotions are manipulated: anger, disappointment, fear and sadness. We examined whether the respondent's sex, the type of emotion, the sex of the target and the nature of the object-target relationship (that is, whether object and target are the same or different) influence one's social motives and the subsequent expression and regulation of one's emotions.

In Chapter 3 the central question is whether gender-specific expectations of expressing powerful emotions and powerless emotions are reinforced by social reality. The aim of this study is to investigate the actual consequences of expressing powerful and powerless emotions, as perceived by male and female expressers. In a diary study we examined the extent to which people react differently to women's and men's expressions of powerful or powerless emotions. An event-contingent method (Wheeler & Reis, 1991) is used: Respondents had to record what had happened as soon as possible after an emotional incident.

In Chapter 4 the main research issue is the nature of gender-specific beliefs about emotional behavior. Beliefs are studied with respect to the extent to which they are prescriptive, descriptive, stereotypical, and contra-stereotypical regarding the emotional behavior of men and women. Three studies are described. In Study 1, male and female student respondents rated the extent to which they agreed with different types of beliefs. To study whether educational level influences the outcomes, the study was replicated with a sample of shop-workers who had a lower level of education than the participants in Study 1. In Study 3, male and female respondents rated the extent of their agreement with the same items, but this time with respect to their own emotional behavior.

Chapter 5 reports an experiment in which the social motives for anger expressions were manipulated. The central question is whether sex differences in anger expressions decrease when men and women have the same social motive in an anger-provoking situation. Two studies are described which focus on the relation between social motives and anger expression by manipulating social motives in anger-evoking situations. The aim of both studies is to investigate whether different social motives lead to different types of anger expression. In Study 1, anger was evoked in a 'real-life' experimental situation, and males and females were primed to adopt a certain social motive (or not, in the case of the control condition). Intensity of emotional experiences, action tendencies, and emotional behavior were studied, using videotapes of respondents' behavior and the self-reports made by respondents. In Study 2 the experiment was replicated in written form. Again, respondents were manipulated into adopting a social motive, but this time they had to imagine themselves in an anger-provoking situation, and to indicate their experience of emotion, action tendencies, and expression of emotion.

Chapter 6 summarizes, integrates and discusses the findings of the studies that are described in the previous chapters. Theoretical implications are considered and the methodology used in this thesis is evaluated.

Finally, the chapters of this thesis are written in such a way that it is possible to read them independently. They are based on articles that are either already published, or have been submitted to journals for publication.

