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Sex differences in emotion expression

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Chapter 6

Summary and Conclusions

The main question addressed in this thesis was: "Why do women and men differ in their expressions of certain specific emotions?" In the preceding chapters seven studies, all of which addressed this question in a different way, were reported. In the current chapter I will first discuss some methodological issues. Then I will summarize and discuss the findings. Finally, I will discuss the theoretical implications of the findings.

Methodological concerns

Despite the fact that this thesis is about one of the most persistent sex stereotypes in our society (i.e., that women are more emotional than men), not much systematic research has previously been done on this topic. Because of the lack of an established paradigm, I had to explore and at the same time find out a good way to study sex differences in emotion. The methodology was eclectic, that is, I chose to use a range of different methods to explore determinants of sex differences in emotional behavior: questionnaires, vignettes, a diary study and experiments.

The different methods all had their pros and cons, which I will briefly describe. The experiments described in Chapter 2 and Chapter 5 provided the opportunity to test the relationship between different variables and to get insight into how specific variables (i.e., sex of actor, type of emotion, object-target relationship, social motives) affect the emotional behavior of men and women in different ways. A great advantage of using vignettes in an experimental design is that different scenarios could be used, in such a way that different emotional contexts can be studied and compared. Another advantage is that unintended factors, such as the effects of an experimenter or a confederate which could affect the results, are minimized. However, a disadvantage is that unintended influence of memory processes, i.e., the influence of emotion beliefs, may influence the self-reported ratings of participants (Feldman Barrett, 1997; Feldman Barrett et al., 1998). Another limitation of a vignette method is that respondents, in order to imagine that they are in an emotional situation, have to internally represent the meaning of the situation. This may be

The 'real-life' experiment described in Chapter 5 overcame these disadvantages, and appeared to be quite optimal with respect to other criteria as well: A real emotion, in this case anger, was elicited, and the effects of a 'real' social motive could be systematically studied. However, there were also some disadvantages. First, because it is time-consuming and ethically difficult to create different emotional eliciting situations, only one emotion was studied in one social context. Also, the behavior of the experimenter and confederate could have given rise to unintended effects.

The use of a diary method was a means of getting a recollection of emotional behavior in real life, that is, insight into the complexity of different variables, and the possible relationships between variables which play a role in sex differences in emotional behavior. Also, it provided insight into how people themselves conceive of their emotional behavior, which need not necessarily to be true in a scientific sense, but could be important, because these conceptions may influence emotion beliefs and social motives. Another important benefit of a diary method is that it can generate research questions or point to variables which might otherwise not be detected. For example, we did not hypothesize about, but nonetheless found, that fear situations described by men differ systematically in one respect from the situations described by women: Those of men were about other people, those of women were about themselves. The disadvantages of using a diary method are that variables described by respondents may be confounded, that data are (at best) correlational and that it is therefore impossible to detect causal relationships. The adherence to different emotion beliefs was studied with the use of a questionnaire, which appeared to be quite optimal for this kind of research.

To prevent the findings being based on the answers of one single group, different groups of people (with respect to age and education level) were recruited to participate in the studies.

Social motives, social consequences and emotion beliefs

Emotional expressions show others one's emotional state. This implies that they have consequences for the impression that one makes on others, that they elicit social behavior from others, and that they contribute, positive or negatively, to the relationship one has with others: Emotional expressions have *social consequences* in social

interactions. People are aware of these social consequences, anticipate them and express their emotions to others in order to accomplish specific goals (Clark et. al, 1995; Frijda, 1986; Oatley, 1992; Saarni, 1984; Zammuner & Fischer, 1995).

Because expressing emotions has effects on others, people are motivated, i.e., have *social motives*, to regulate their emotions. The intention to regulate stems from both individual and social concerns. An example of an individual concern is that when someone knows that expressing anger will damage his chances of being liked (and he thinks that it is important to be liked in this particular context), he will probably try to suppress his anger. On the other hand, when someone is in need of help, he may regulate emotional expression in such a way that the chance of getting help is increased. Social concerns are also sources for emotion regulation, particularly to channel emotional expressions in such a way that they are appropriate within a particular culture. 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 & Parrott, 1996; Hochschild, 1983; Parkinson, 1991; Saarni, 1984). Social norms are not well defined, but become apparent when someone breaches a social norm (Baanders, 1997; Forsyth, 1995). Social norms about emotions can be studied by asking people about the *emotion beliefs* to which they adhere.

In this thesis sex differences were expected in the *social motives* to express emotions, the *social consequences* encountered when expressing emotions, and in the type and contents of the *emotion beliefs* people endorse.

Social motives. Chapter 2 dealt primarily with self-reported motives for emotion regulation. Due to physical sex differences, socialization processes and gender role expectations, men and women have different goals in social interactions (Eagly & Wood, 1999; Saarni, 1984). Women are more focused on relational consequences, that is, they are motivated to keep others happy and to maintain close relationships with others, whereas men are more concerned with gaining or maintaining control over themselves, the situation or others (Deaux & Major, 1987). As a result, it was expected that men and women would report different social motives for regulating their emotions. Four social motives for the regulation of anger, fear, sadness and disappointment were distinguished:

seeking relief, because of the expected cathartic effects of the emotion expression, impression management, power-based motives, and relationship-oriented motives.

The findings supported the expectation that women and men differ especially in the extent to which they report having relationship-oriented and power-based motives when regulating emotions. Women empathized more than men with other persons (i.e., were afraid of hurting other people's feelings) in the case of anger, and expected others to show empathy (i.e., comfort) when expressing sadness and disappointment. Men reported more power-based motives in relation to anger than women did, and they expected to be seen as making an inappropriate emotional impression when venting their anger towards people other than the object of the anger. This may be because venting anger towards an innocent person is judged as irrational, because it does not seem to be functional.

These different social motives of men and women ran parallel with the differences in expressing emotions reported by men and women. The findings showed that men and women did not differ in their subjective experiences of anger, fear, sadness and disappointment. However, women reported displaying more fear, sadness and disappointment, and more anger towards people other than the object of the anger than men did, whereas men reported displaying more anger towards the object of the anger than women did. This is in line with the idea that women suppress powerful emotional displays, whereas men suppress powerless emotional displays.

The findings generated several questions. First of all, an important shortcoming of this study is that it was correlational in nature and that it was not possible to draw firm conclusions regarding the extent to which different social motives actually lead to different types of emotion expression. In Chapter 5 two experimental studies are described in which it was investigated to what extent social motives actually lead men and women to regulate anger. Respondents were manipulated into adopting different social motives: self-confidence or empathy. The findings suggested that social motives are determinants of expressing emotions: In general, self-confidence led to more anger expression when people are angry than did empathy, for both men and women.

These findings connect to what we found in the diary study that is reported in Chapter 3. In this study male and female respondents recorded, among other things, why they expressed anger, fear, sadness or disappointment. The diary results showed that the

social motives for expressing anger, fear, sadness or disappointment were approximately the same for men and women. Respondents reported mainly instrumental motives for expressing powerful emotions, and mainly relational motives for expressing powerless emotions.

These results seem inconsistent with those described in Chapter 2, because we did find sex differences in social motives in the vignette study. This may be due to the fact that different questions were posed. Respondents in the diary study were asked "Why did you express anger, fear, sadness or disappointment?", *after* they had reported having expressed a specific emotion. As a result, male and female social motives for *expressing* the same emotion could be compared. In the vignette study described in Chapter 2 respondents first were asked "Would you express this emotion?" which was followed by the question "Why would you (not) express this emotion?" This latter method leaves more room for sex-specific variations.

In sum, the studies of the social motives for expressing an emotion showed that, at a general level, power-based motives are more salient for men, whereas relational motives are more salient for women. These differences lead women to express more powerless emotions, and men to express more powerful emotions. However, when expressing the same emotions, men and women report the same social motives. Further, it seems that the endorsement of a different social motive (self-confidence or empathy) leads to different amounts of anger expression.

Another important finding in Chapter 5 was that women were found to be more influenced by the experimental instruction. For women, self-confidence led to a greater amount of anger expression than did empathy, whereas empathy led to a greater amount of anger suppression than did self-confidence. This suggests that, at least in the case of expressing anger to a stranger, women are more easily affected by contextual demands than men are. This finding was explained by the fact that the men in our study were more self-confident than women were. This is consistent with other research, where it has been found that women are more insecure than men in anger-eliciting situations because expressing anger, especially towards the object of the anger (see Chapter 2). This is contra-stereotypical emotional behavior for women, because, in the eyes of women, it may

disrupt their relationships (Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Fischer, 1993). This insecurity may have led to a greater adherence to contextual cues by the women in our study.

Social Consequences. The question remains why women regulate their emotions in such a way that they express more powerlessness than men, whereas men express more power than women. Men and women have knowledge of, or previous experience with, the effects of their emotional expressions in social interaction. One factor that could account for the different social motives reported by men and women for regulating emotions is that current emotional situations may activate schemata or scripts about experiences that have happened in the past. It may be that these past experiences are different for men and women. To investigate this, a diary study was conducted in which the main aim was to study the social consequences encountered by men and women as a result of expressing an emotion. This study was described in Chapter 3. Male and female respondents recorded why they expressed anger, fear, sadness or disappointment, and what happened afterwards.

As noted before, the social motives for expressing anger, fear, sadness or disappointment were approximately the same for men and women. However, the consequences of expressing powerful emotions differed for men and women: Men reported primarily instrumental consequences, i.e., a change in the situation, or in the behavior of the target person, whereas women reported primarily relational consequences, namely a change in the relationship. The social consequences of expressing *powerless* emotions did not differ between men and women. In general, they were relational: "The other person was compassionate and understanding" or "The other person felt sorry for me". This implies that the expression of powerful emotions may evoke a wider range of reactions in others than does the expression of powerless emotions.

The fact that women reported encountering more relational consequences after having expressed powerful emotions may be explained by the actual social consequences experienced in daily life. However, it may also stem from the fact that women are more relationship oriented and therefore tend to focus more on relational consequences: We found that the relational consequences reported by women were not only negative, but in contrast with other studies (Averill, 1982) also positive, which may reflect the salience of any change, whether positive or negative, in relationships for women.

The fact that no sex differences were found in consequences of powerlessness can be explained by the fact that the men, in contrast with the women, did not describe fear and sadness situations in which their own self was at stake; rather, men tended to describe situations about others. Men's descriptions of expressions of both fear and sadness implied compassion for others. Therefore, men reported more relational consequences of their powerless expressions than we had expected.

Emotion beliefs. A second possible explanation for sex differences in social motives for regulating emotions is that men and women (probably as a result of different socialization practices) may have different beliefs concerning the expression of emotions. The most prevailing belief 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 may stem from women's role of caretaker in which they are only supposed to show emotions that promote harmony and cooperation between people, and from men's role of status-oriented, competitive achiever. Research on emotion beliefs was described in Chapter 4.

We investigated the extent to which people's beliefs concerning emotion expression, and especially sex differences in emotion expression, are prescriptive and stereotypical. First, it should be noted that people's beliefs generally were not very prescriptive. They were found to agree less with prescriptive beliefs such as 'Women should not be aggressive' than with descriptive beliefs such as 'Men are more direct in expressing anger than women'. Respondents may be anxious about displaying outspoken beliefs, or generalizations, about others because their awareness of the cultural unacceptability of outgroup stereotyping, which have led many people in Western countries to be cautious about doing that (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995).

The beliefs people agreed with were nevertheless stereotypical, although the endorsement of stereotypical beliefs was not symmetrical for male and female targets. The adherence to stereotypical beliefs about women's emotional behavior was greater than the adherence to contra-stereotypical beliefs about women, but this was not true of beliefs about men's emotional behavior. Beliefs about women's emotional behavior conformed to the classic stereotype of the 'emotional woman', and were related to vulnerability, loss of control and powerlessness. Beliefs about men's emotional behavior on the other hand

suggested a greater tolerance of divergence from the stereotype of the 'unemotional men', and were associated with power as well as with emotional ability and skilled behavior.

This difference between the beliefs about men and women may result from emancipation processes which, among other things, have led to changing cultural views of emotionality (Wouters, 1990). The belief that emotional skills are important, or even indispensable in (working) life, has become more widely held, as evidenced by the currently fashionable concept of 'emotional intelligence' (Goleman, 1995). When emotional behavior is seen as skilled rather than as irrational, it may be more appropriate for men to display emotions. Moreover, at work male managers may be seen as managers with an open style of communication, or as skilled 'people-managers'.

The fact that the changing beliefs about emotions seem more applicable to the emotional behavior of men than to that of women might reflect the fact that 'abilities' or 'skills' are features that are, in general, more associated with men. In combination with the fact that emotionality is traditionally seen as the domain of women, this may have led to a different interpretation of emotionality in the context of male and female behavior (see also Zammuner, 2000). Rapid associations with vulnerability and powerlessness may be made with the emotional behavior of women, whereas rapid associations with ability and skills may be made with the emotional behavior of men.

Theoretical implications

A tentative answer to the question why men and women differ in their expressions of some specific emotions may be formulated as follows: We can distinguish theoretically between two types of social motives that play a role in emotional behavior. The *general social motives* of men and women in social interaction, respectively power/instrumentally-based versus relationship-based lead to the suppression of contra-stereotypical emotional expressions. The distinction between power/instrumentally-based versus relationship-based has been shown to be durable over time and place (Deaux & Major, 1987), implying that it can be generalized to other domains of social behavior, such as occupation choices, relationship engagement, etc. (Chodorow, 1978; Eagly, 1987; Gilligan, 1982).

A second type of social motives is *emotion-specific social motives*. These are directly related to the expression of specific emotions. Men and women do not differ with

respect to this type of social motive: When men and women express a specific emotion they have the same social motive for doing so. For both men and women, specific motives seem to be intrinsically connected to specific emotional expressions. Despite the fact that expressing anger may sometimes be a sign of powerlessness, it seems unlikely that either men or women ever express anger with the conscious intention of appearing vulnerable. Men and women express anger with the intention of changing the behavior of someone else, to show that he or she is not someone to be mocked, or to make the other person express regret. In other words, expressing anger *is* the display of instrumental goals. In a comparable way, expressing sadness is the display of powerlessness.

If we acknowledge both the stability and the flexibility of sex differences (Deaux & Major, 1987) we can accommodate these two types of social motives. Sex differences in general social motives point to relatively *stable* differences between men and women which might be explained by *distal* forces, such as cultural expectancies: The distribution of men and women in different social roles, socialization processes, and biological endowment. The finding that women are more relationship-oriented whereas men are more power/instrumentally-oriented is considered to be the most important dimension for distinguishing the sexes (see Deaux & Major, 1987). Both evolutionary and social structuralist psychologists try to account for the origins of these differences. According to evolutionary psychologists men's evolved dispositions favor violence, competition and risk-taking, while women developed a preference for nurturing and the maintenance for long-term relationships. According to social structuralists, on the other hand, physical sex differences and societal expectations influence the social roles held by men and women. Men accommodate to roles with greater power and status, which produces dominant, assertive, independent and agentic behaviors. Women's interiorization of domestic roles with lesser power and status produces more subordinate communal behavior that centers on care, intimacy, friendliness and the avoidance of conflict (Eagly & Wood, 1999; Gilligan, 1982).

These stable differences between men and women probably also lead to culturally shared emotion beliefs (Timmers, Fischer & Manstead, 2000) prescribing different emotionally expressive behaviors for men and women. This in turn will lead to different expectations of the social consequences of emotional expression by men and women, and,

at least in the case of powerful displays, to the fact that men and women encounter different social consequences of their expressions.

It seems unlikely that these general differences between men and women in their social motives for expressing emotions only originate from differences in the social consequences encountered as a result of expressing emotions by men and women in daily life. These social motives also reflect different attitudes and concerns of men and women in social interactions.

However, gender specific behavior is also *flexible* and dependent on *immediate* influences on behavior, such as situational pressures (Deaux & Major, 1987). The second type of social motive points to flexible differences between men and women, and does justice to the fact that men sometimes display powerlessness and report relational motives, whereas women sometimes display power and report instrumental motives. Because emotional experiences reflect personal goals and concerns (Frijda, 1986), it seems likely that emotional situations sometimes involve 'immediate' situational demands, which lead men and women to accommodate their behavior to these demands.

These immediate influences sometimes may have the potential to 'overrule' the basic instrumental or relational concerns of, respectively, men and women. An example from the diary study is that if a woman is offended, she will sometimes express her anger with the intention of stopping the offender's behavior (instrumental motive). However, as was also shown in the diary study, the expression of these emotions does not necessarily have to be inconsistent with the more general social motives of women. If women express their anger with the goal of changing the other person's behavior, they may focus more on the relational consequences than men do. Similarly, our diary study showed that men do express powerlessness, albeit not especially when they are concerned about their own well-being. The focus of men on the well-being of others may reflect their general power-related social motive, namely their role as protectors.

Thus, men and women experience the same emotions with similar intensity and have the same potential to express different emotions. However, as a result of distal influences on behavior, men and women regulate their emotional behavior in different ways.



