Dispositional Emotional Clarity Influences When Affect is Used as Information

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INTRODUCTION

The affect-as-information hypothesis proposes that people use their current affective state as a source of information when evaluating a person, an event, or an object. For example, Schwarz and Clore (1983) found that participants reported being more satisfied with their lives after describing a positive life event than after describing a negative life event. While these findings are representative of a consistent effect, people differ in the degree to which they are clear about their current mood state (Salovey, Mayer, Goldman, Turvey, & Palfai, 1995). Therefore, the degree to which people use their mood as a source of information may depend on the extent to which they are clear about their current mood state (see Gohm & Clore, 2002). Specifically, we expected that participants high in emotional clarity would be more influenced by their affective state than participants low in emotional clarity when estimating the likelihood of a series of events occurring to them.

METHOD

To examine our hypothesis, participants watched either a positive or negative movie, intended to elicit a positive or negative mood. Participants, then, estimated the likelihood of a series of negative events occurring to them. Following these risk estimates, participants watched another movie of the opposite emotional valence and rated the likelihood of another series of negative events occurring to them. Finally, participants completed personality measures, including an assessment of trait clarity (see Figure 1).

RESULTS

Analysis of the risk estimates revealed a three-way interaction of Mood Manipulation, Movie Valence, and Trait Clarity, F(1, 136) = 4.78, p < .05. Specifically, low clarity participants rated the negative events as more likely to occur after watching the first movie than after watching the second movie, regardless of the movie’s valence, F(1, 67) = 19.62, p < .001 (see Figure 2a). Thus, mood had no effect on low-clarity participants’ estimates of risk. However, there was a significant Mood Manipulation × Movie Valence interaction for high clarity participants, F(1, 67) = 11.20, p = .001 (see Figure 2b). Specifically, high clarity participants rated the likelihood of negative events in a manner consistent with the movie valence following the first mood manipulation, t(25) = 5.85, p < .001, and the second mood manipulation, t(42) = 2.87, p < .01.

CONCLUSION

Using current mood states to guide judgment and decision-making is an adaptive and advantageous process (Damasio, 1994). The present work finds that this adaptation depends on the extent to which people are able to identify their current mood state. Therefore, this work provides the basis for future work, investigating how trait clarity influences other types of judgments, as well as decision-making processes. Moreover, from an emotional intelligence perspective, understanding one’s emotional states may provide benefits beyond judgments and decision-making (see Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2008).


Figure 1: Procedure Outline

Figure 2a: Low-Clarity Participants’ Risk Judgments as a Function of Movie Valence and Mood Manipulation

Figure 2b: High-Clarity Participants’ Risk Judgments as a Function of Movie Valence and Mood Manipulation

*Poster presented at the 2009 Meeting of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology in Tampa, FL. • Correspondence can be sent to Michael Kitchens, Ph.D., Department of Psychology, Lebanon Valley College, 101 N. College Avenue 17003, or email at kitchens@lvc.edu