

The loving touch

Whether it's a raised eyebrow or curl of the lip, we usually think of emotions as conveyed through facial expressions and body language. Science too has focused on these forms of emotional communication, finding that there's a high degree of consistency across cultures. It's only in the last few years that psychologists have looked at whether and how the emotions can be communicated purely through touch.

A 2006 study by Matthew Hertenstein demonstrated that strangers could accurately communicate the 'universal' emotions of anger, fear, disgust, love, gratitude and sympathy, purely through touches to the forearm, but not the 'prosocial' emotions of surprise, happiness and sadness, nor the 'self-focused' emotions of embarrassment, envy and pride. Now Erin Thompson and James Hampton have added to this nascent literature by comparing the accuracy of touch-based emotional communication between strangers and between those who are romantically involved.

Thirty romantic couples (the vast majority were heterosexual) based in London took part. One partner in each romantic pair attempted to communicate 12 different emotions, one at a time, to their partner. They sat at opposite sides of a table divided by a curtained screen. The emotional 'decoder' slid their forearm through the curtain for the 'encoder' to touch, after which the 'decoder' attempted to identify which of the 12 emotions had been communicated. The participants were filmed throughout.



In the February issue of *Cognition and Emotion*

After this, the romantic couples were split up and participants paired up with a stranger to repeat the exercise (encoders and decoders kept whichever role they'd had first time around). Strangers were usually formed into same-sex pairs, to avoid the social awkwardness of touching an opposite-sex partner. This created an unfortunate confound, acknowledged by the researchers, which is that most romantic couples were opposite-sex whereas most stranger pairs were same-sex. However, focusing only on results from same-sex pairs versus opposite-sex pairs suggested gender was not an important factor.

The key finding is that although strangers performed well for most emotions, romantic couples tended to be superior, especially for the self-focused emotions of embarrassment, envy and pride. Thompson and Hampton calculated that chance performance (i.e. merely guessing) would produce an accuracy rate of 25 per cent. Although there were 12 emotions to select from, the rationale here is that some are far more similar to each other than others, so even a guesser would perform better than 1/12 accuracy. Romantic partners communicated universal emotions, prosocial and self-focused emotions with an

accuracy of 53 per cent, 60 per cent and 39 per cent, respectively – in each case, far better than chance performance. In contrast, strangers achieved accuracy rates of 39 per cent, 56 per cent and 17 per cent, for universal, prosocial, and self-focused emotions respectively, with the last considered as no better than chance performance.

How did the romantic couples achieve their greater accuracy? They touched for longer, but this wasn't correlated with accuracy. Using footage of the experiment, the researchers coded the types of touch used (a wide range of discrete touch types were identified, from trembling and scratching to slapping and squeezing), and for each emotion it was clear that strangers were using similar kinds of touch as were romantic couples. This means that there were either subtle differences in the touching used by romantic couples, which the experimenters had failed to detect, or the 'decoders' were interpreting the same touch cues differently when they were delivered by an intimate partner.

This topic is ripe for further investigation – for example, does the touch advantage shown by romantic couples extend to non-emotional communication? Would other long-term, but non-sexual, relationship partners such as siblings, show a similar advantage? And would romantic partners still display an advantage if they didn't know who was doing the touching? 'Our findings extend the literature on the communication of emotion,' the researchers said. 'The nature of particular relationships appears to have the ability to diminish the ambiguity of emotional expression via touch.'



Bribing kids to eat their greens really does work

In the February issue of *Psychological Science*

Some experts have warned that bribing children to eat healthy foods can be counter-productive, undermining their intrinsic motivation and actually increasing disliking. Lucy Cooke and colleagues have found no evidence for this in their new large-scale investigation of the issue. They conclude that rewards could be an effective way for parents to improve their children's diet. '...rewarding children for tasting an initially disliked food produced sustained increases in acceptance, with no negative effects on liking,' they said.

Over 400 four- to six-year-olds tasted six vegetables, rated them for taste and then ranked them in order of liking. Whichever was their fourth-ranked choice became their target vegetable. Twelve times over the next two weeks, most of these children were presented with a small sample of their target vegetable and encouraged to eat it. Some of them were encouraged with the reward of a sticker, others with the reward of verbal praise, while the remainder received no reward (a mere exposure condition). A minority of the children formed a control group and didn't go through an intervention of any kind.

After the two-week period, all the intervention children showed equal increases in their liking of their target vegetable compared with the control children. However, when given the chance to eat as much of it



as they wanted (knowing there was no chance of reward), the kids who had previously earned stickers chose to eat more than the kids who'd just been repeatedly exposed to the vegetable without reward.

At one- and three-month follow-up, the intervention children's increased liking of their target vegetable was sustained regardless of the specific condition they'd been in. However, in terms of increased consumption (when given the opportunity to eat their target vegetable, knowing no reward would be forthcoming), only the sticker and verbal praise children showed sustained increases.

So, how come previous studies have claimed that bribery can undermine children's intrinsic motivation, actually leading to increases in disliking of foods? Cooke and her colleagues think this may be because past lab studies have often targeted foods that children already rather liked. Consistent with this explanation, it's notable that past community studies that reported the successful use of rewards targeted unpopular vegetables just as this study did.

An important detail of the study is that verbal praise was almost as effective as tangible reward. 'Social reward might be particularly valuable in the home,' the researchers said, 'because it may help parents avoid being accused of unfairness in offering incentives to a fussy child but not to the child's siblings.'

One programme from psychologists is Food Dudes: see www.fooddudes.co.uk and www.bps.org.uk/fooddude



'I've got something to tell you...'

In the September 2010 Issue of *Ethics and Behaviour*

Client confidentiality in psychotherapy only goes so far. If a client threatens the therapist, another person or themselves, and the threat is perceived as serious, then most jurisdictions (including the BPS ethics code) recognise this as a valid reason to breach the client's privacy and go to the authorities. But what if the client confesses to a past violent act for which they were never prosecuted? What if they tell their therapist that they've previously murdered someone?

Steven Walfish and his colleagues have investigated this issue in a survey of 162 US psychological psychotherapists recruited randomly via the National Register of Health Service Providers. Astoundingly, 21 of the psychologists said that on at least one occasion they'd had a client disclose in therapy that they'd murdered someone, but never been found out (one unlucky psychologist said they'd encountered this scenario six times!).

Around two thirds of the psychologists said they'd had a client disclose having committed an act of previously unreported sexual assault, and the same proportion had had a client disclose a previously unreported act of physical assault. The majority said disclosure of past physical assault had happened on three or more occasions; one of them said it had happened more than 200 times.

From an ethical point of view these disclosures of past violent acts are trickier to resolve than threats of future violence, especially if there's no other

reason to believe that the client remains a threat. Among the psychologists surveyed in the current research, the majority (63.2 per cent) said such disclosures had had a neutral effect on therapy, 18.8 per cent said it was harmful to therapy and a similar proportion (17.9 per cent) viewed it as beneficial.

From a therapeutic perspective, the researchers pointed out that those therapists who viewed the disclosure negatively were at obvious risk of 'negative counter-transference'. This is a fancy way of saying that the disclosure could negatively affect the way the therapist relates to their client, especially if the therapist has themselves previously been a victim of violence. Psychotherapists could be trained to guard against this, but Walfish and his colleagues point out that it's not unusual for therapists to be attacked or threatened by clients and so: 'fears of potential client violence

may not always represent an unresolved conflict on the part of the therapist.'

Somewhat worryingly, nearly one fifth of the current sample did not feel fully informed about what to do when a client makes a disclosure about past acts of violence, and nearly two thirds felt inadequately prepared for the situation by their graduate training.

Walfish and his colleagues concluded that therapists need to be prepared to hear any material in their consulting rooms, 'regardless of how unusual or unpleasant'. They also need to be aware of their own emotional reactions to disclosures of past violence, as well as their legal and ethical obligations. 'Graduate training programmes, internship and postdoctoral training settings, and continuing education courses should be encouraged to explore this often difficult topic area in greater depth.'



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