

Putting Social Referencing and Social Appraisal Back Together Again

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Abstract

We are encouraged by the attention paid to fundamental aspects relating to the interpersonal functions of emotion. In continuing this discussion, we consider two arguments used to distinguish social referencing and social appraisal, namely the role of ostension and the absence of prior appraisals of the individual. We contend that neither element is essential to social referencing.

Keywords

functionalist theory, social referencing

“A word . . . means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less”

(Carroll, 1871).

While Humpty Dumpty may be correct in the realm of poetic license, such verbal promiscuity can result in cross-talk in scientific research. The terms *social referencing* and *social appraisal* serve as more than words; they represent psychological processes based on theory and empirical evidence. We are heartened by the collective agreement regarding the importance of studying these interpersonal processes of emotion. However, such research requires clear definitions of the psychological construct of interest. Holodynski (XXXX) and Parkinson (XXXX) each note the ambiguity that may result when constructs have fuzzy boundaries and varying breadth of application. However, creating post hoc distinctions between social referencing and social appraisal in the absence of empirical evidence may hinder the study of emotion in interpersonal contexts.

We maintain that more evidence exists in support of these terms being a single construct. Social referencing occurs when “people seek out and use the emotional reactions of others to help guide their own behavior in that setting” (Klinnert, Campos, Sorce, Emde, & Svejda, 1983, p. 59). It is unwarranted to suggest that social referencing be bound by specific social (Clément & Dukes, XXXX) and temporal (Manstead & Fischer, XXXX) elements absent from the original theoretical and empirical

work on this construct. In considering the views put forth in this issue, we highlight two specific points of differentiation that we argue unnecessarily obscure the similarities of social referencing and social appraisal: ostension and the presence of existing appraisals.

Ostension

What is most fundamental to social referencing is the seeking of information by the individual faced with an ambiguous context (Campos, 1983). However, Clément and Dukes (XXXX) place equal, if not greater, emphasis on the role of the emoter by arguing that social referencing requires ostensive communication by the social partner. We know of no definition of social referencing nor research on the construct that includes criterial the ostensiveness of the emotional communication. In fact, Campos and Stenberg (1981) describe a number of ways in which social referencing may involve a number of different types of *vicarious* learning. Moreover, an emphasis on ostension implies a level of passive engagement by the individual in need of information that is counter to the study of many interpersonal processes. Social learning is rarely unidirectional; individuals, be they infants or adults, seek out and engage in ongoing transactions with the social world (Walle, Dahl, & Campos, 2012). A view that infants require direct instruction disregards research indicating that emotional development is often facilitated through observation in the absence of ostensive communication (e.g., Repacholi, Meltzoff, & Olsen, 2008).

Furthermore, ostension as a requirement for social referencing is empirically impractical. It is likely difficult, if not impossible, to determine whether emotional communication was both directed and perceived as ostensive in real-world social interactions. For example, one may observe another’s emotional communication and perceive that the sender has some purposeful intent to teach the seeker, and yet the sender may in fact have no intent whatsoever. Conversely, the sender could intend to teach the seeker by communicating emotion, and yet the seeker may have no awareness of such intent. Of greatest importance from our perspective is that both instances result in the seeker

perceiving emotional communication from a social partner to better appreciate their own relation with the environment—thus, the underlying psychological process is likely to be similar, if not the same. This is not to say that purposefully communicated affect to an individual (infant or adult) may not necessarily be more effective, as demonstrated by Csibra and Gergley (2009) and Egyed, Király, and Gergley (2013). However, factors influencing the efficacy and efficiency of a psychological process need not dictate its presence; social referencing does not require ostension.

Existing Appraisals

Distinguishing social referencing from social appraisal through ostension also implies that the infant (or adult) is void of appraisal and needing explicitly directed emotional communication. Infants certainly may know less than adults, and thus have less informed appraisals and more frequently encounter ambiguous contexts. However, the absence of any preexisting appraisals is likely rare. One may appraise the environment, and yet still have uncertainties regarding its significance and engage in social referencing. Campos and Stenberg (1981) acknowledge that the infant may have existing appraisals prior to engaging in social referencing, and that the emotion may be exacerbated, attenuated, or reversed as a function of the affective expressions of the social partner. Social referencing can occur at *any* point in the emotion process, regardless of existing appraisals of the individual, and one may engage in social referencing multiple times as the context unfolds.

Additionally, we argue that necessitating that individuals *adopt* the appraisals of the sender (Manstead & Fischer, XXXX) is not essential to the definition of social referencing. An individual may observe another's emotional communication, appreciate its value, and yet not assume that information in their own evaluation of the relational significance of the context. Both infants (e.g., Walle & Campos, 2014) and adults (e.g., Lemay & Clark, 2008) will disregard emotional communication when it contradicts their own appraisals or is deemed unreliable. There are also instances when adopting others' appraisals may be maladaptive. For example, one may observe another's display of sadness, appreciate the relational significance of the context, but not adopt those same appraisals. Rather, one could realize that the other's appraisals are incorrect and respond by highlighting the discrepancy so as to alleviate the sadness in the other. Thus, although emotional communication, ostensive or otherwise, may be available in social referencing contexts, the individual's acceptance of those appraisals is not required.

Sharpening Our Focus

It is understandable that different terminology may be necessary depending on the level of analysis of the investigator, a point

made in each of the commentaries. However, the creation of distinct terminology for functionally similar processes in infants and adults risks further dividing, rather than integrating, the study of emotion. Our review of the theoretical and empirical literature supports the unification of social referencing and social appraisal. If further distinction of these terms is desired, we would argue that it not come as the result of rewriting the defining qualities of social referencing.

In closing, we wish to note that while the discussion of differences in emotion terminology may seem banal in the larger history of emotion research, it is useful in highlighting the growing interest in examining interpersonal processes of emotion. Regardless of the view endorsed by the reader from the present discussion, we are optimistic that the pendulum of research is swinging toward studying the functions of emotion in interpersonal contexts.

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