

WILLINGNESS TO PROVIDE FEEDBACK TO DEPRESSED PERSONS

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It was hypothesized that identifying a recipient of social feedback as depressed would significantly affect the willingness of participants to provide their reactions, and that therefore depressed persons receive different feedback than nondepressed persons displaying the same behavior. Participants listened to recorded descriptions of a male or female person who was described simply as a friend, or additionally, as having been depressed for a few days or a month. The major finding was that participants indicated they were less willing to provide positive reactions to the depressed target stimuli, and this was found to be the case for both solicited and volunteered reactions. Overall, female participants were significantly more willing to provide both positive and negative reactions than were males. It was proposed that depressed persons are highly susceptible to environmental response, and that the withholding of positive reactions to depressed persons is in need of further study.

Keywords: willingness to provide feedback, depression, social feedback, reactions.

Harry Stack Sullivan was one of the earliest modern theorists to argue that the appropriate unit for the study of psychopathology is the interpersonal relationship. Over the past 21 years, Zigler, Phillips, and colleagues (Levine & Zigler, 1973; Zigler & Phillips, 1960, 1961) have documented the association between pathology and impaired interpersonal functioning, and others have developed assessment (Gurland et al., 1972; Weissman & Bothwell, 1976) and treatment (Weinman et al., 1972) strategies to measure and improve the interpersonal functioning of patients.

Recently, social functioning of depressed persons has been given increased attention. Weissman and Paykel (1974) summarized a number of studies examining the social relationships of depressed women, and reported disturbances extending into all roles, whether as mother, wife, worker, or member of the community. Defining social skill as "the complex ability to both emit behaviors that are positively reinforced and not to emit behaviors that are punished by others", Libet and Lewinsohn (1973, p. 304) have emphasized a lack of social skill as an important antecedent to depression.

However, Coyne (1976a) suggested that there is a mutually causative relationship between depression and disturbed social relationships, with observed impairments an effect as well as a cause of the disorder. Coyne (1976b) found that depressed persons induced depression, hostility, and anxiety in others, and were subsequently rejected. It was argued that depressive behavior reduces environmental support, and that special skills may be required of the depressed person to cope with this change.

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Schrader et al. (1978) found that depressed participants did not differ from nondepressed subjects in frequency or timing of reinforcement emitted in response to tape-recorded speeches. Given a previous finding of significant differences in actual interaction (Libet & Lewinsohn, 1973), it was suggested that depressed persons may differ in their performance of social skills rather than in actual ability. Observed behavioral differences might therefore be due to expectations of a negative response from the environment. In general, the possibility that depressive behaviors are concatenated with a depressing response from others has been given little attention in the literature: "The persistent assumption has been that the support and information available to depressed persons is incongruent with their depression and that, therefore, the continued display of symptoms is evidence of their distorted view of the environment" (Coyne, 1976b, p. 186).

In the present study we explored the general hypothesis that identifying a hypothetical recipient of social feedback as depressed would significantly affect the willingness of participants to provide their reactions, and that depressed persons therefore receive different feedback than nondepressed persons displaying the same behavior. Two opposing influences may operate. The negative mood depressed persons induce in others may elicit rejection or indiscriminately negative responses to their behavior. However, the ability of depressed persons to induce guilt with displays of symptoms (Bullock et al., 1973; Jacobson, 1954) may cause others to withhold criticism and to respond with false support. Since the predominance of either influence may be determined by situational variables, a number of factors were manipulated: sex of respondent and recipient; whether the recipient was not depressed, or had been depressed for a moderate or short period of time; and whether the feedback had been solicited or was being volunteered.

In one of the few studies in which the availability of feedback about behavior was examined, Mayer (1957) found that friends generally withheld negative reactions unless asked directly, and he suggested that this could retard behavior change. Therefore, it was hypothesized in the present study that (a) subjects would be less willing to volunteer negative reactions to normals than if asked directly for feedback. Consistent with the assumption that much of what is viewed as cognitive distortion or misperception reflects in some way response from the environment (Coyne, 1976a), it was further hypothesized that (b) participants would be more willing to provide negative reactions to depressed persons than to nondepressed persons when asked directly, and less willing to provide positive reactions to them. Consistent with an avoidance pattern, however, it was hypothesized that (c) participants would be less willing to volunteer any reactions to depressed rather than nondepressed persons.

Hamman and Peters (1977) reported more rejection of depressed males than females. It was therefore hypothesized that (d) participants would be more willing to provide negative reactions to male depressed persons than to females. Finally, it was hypothesized that, overall, (e) female participants would be more willing to provide positive reactions, and males more negative reactions.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were recruited from introductory psychology classes, and received course credit. The final sample comprised 180 male and 180 female students.

PROCEDURE

Participants were told that this study concerned their willingness to disclose their reactions to others. In groups, they listened to a recorded description of a male or female person, who was described simply as a friend whom they had known for about a year, or additionally, as one who had been depressed for a few days, or for over a month. As an example, the description of the male stimulus, depressed for a moderate period of time, is presented below:

Bob is a good friend whom you have known for about a year. You often see him in classes and regularly spend time with him. You can talk about many different things with him and feel you know him well. For about a month and a half now he has been depressed, and you have noticed the following things of late: His appearance has become a bit unkempt, he has a pessimistic outlook which is not typical of him, and he is somewhat withdrawn. Also, he seems to have lost a lot of his energy and often doesn't know what to do with himself. Several times he has appeared on the verge of tears, and has become more sensitive and self-critical. He frequently talks to you about how difficult his problems are.

As a manipulation check, participants were asked to rate the target stimuli on bipolar adjective dimensions. They were then asked to complete an inventory by indicating their willingness to disclose specific positive or negative reactions to the person described on the tape, if they felt the statements were true. Half the participants were instructed to respond as if they were giving their unsolicited reaction, and half as if they had been asked for it directly. This resulted in a 2 x 2 x 3 x 2 design, with levels of participants sex; target sex; normal control, short or moderate time period depressed; solicited versus unsolicited reaction.

DEPENDENT MEASURES

The primary dependent measures were constructed from participants' responses to 26 questionnaire items indicating positive reactions and feelings (e.g., "I am glad to have him as a friend"), and 38 items indicating negative reactions and feelings (e.g., "He often makes me angry with him"). Responses were in terms of 5-point scales, with 1 indicating that the participants was not at all willing to disclose the reaction, and 5 indicating being very willing to disclose the reaction. Separate positive and negative reaction scales were constructed on the basis of principal component analyses.

RESULTS

As a manipulation check, adjective ratings of the target stimuli were examined. Relative to the short-term depressed stimuli, the moderate-term depressed stimuli were rated as significantly sadder, $F(1, 336) = 9.97, p < 0.01$, more unpleasant, $F(1, 336) = 13.21, p < 0.001$, dependent, $F(1, 336) = 49.61, p < 0.001$, cold, $F(1, 336) = 4.98, p < 0.05$, passive, $F(1, 336) = 5.98, p < 0.025$, weak, $F(1, 336) = 10.64, p < 0.01$, uncomfortable, $F(1, 336) = 9.31, p < 0.01$, bad, $F(1, 336) = 5.88, p < 0.025$, but not lower or more honest. Relative to the normal control stimuli, the short-term depressed stimuli were rated as significantly sadder, $F(1, 336) = 31.5, p < 0.001$, more unpleasant, $F(1, 336) = 108.61, p < 0.001$, dependent, $F(1, 336) = 4.81, p < 0.05$, cold, $F(1, 336) = 87.18, p < 0.001$, weak, $F(1, 336) = 67.56, p < 0.001$, uncomfortable,

$F(1, 336) = 179.26, p < 0.001$, dishonest, $F(1, 336) = 23.64, p < 0.001$, bad, $F(1, 336) = 5.78, p < 0.025$, and low, $F(1, 336) = 195.94, p < 0.001$.

Dependent measures relevant to our hypotheses were constructed from separate principal component analyses of positive and negative response items. The unrotated first principal component for positive responses accounted for 43% of the common variance. The 21 items loading 0.50 or higher were combined for the positive scale, and a coefficient alpha of 0.95 was calculated for it. The unrotated first principal component for negative responses accounted for 28% of the common variance. The 25 items loading 0.50 or higher were combined for the final scale, and a coefficient alpha of 0.92 was calculated. Because of the low percentage of variance explained by this first principal component, the second component was examined. It accounted for only 5% of the variance, and because only one item loaded higher than 0.50, no further analyses were conducted. The final positive and negative scales correlated 0.11 ($n = 360$), $p < 0.02$.

Responding to the normal control stimuli, participants were not significantly more willing to provide positive reactions when asked directly, $F(1, 336) = 1.33, p > 0.10$. An increase in willingness to provide negative reactions when asked directly approached significance, however, $F(1, 336) = 3.48, p > 0.05$.

When asked directly, participants were significantly less likely to provide positive reactions to the moderate-term depressed stimuli than to the normal control stimuli, $F(1, 336) = 13.36, p < 0.001$, but not significantly more likely to provide negative reactions, $F(1, 336) = 2.33, p > 0.10$.

Differences in willingness to provide positive and negative reactions to short-term depressed versus normal control stimuli were not significant, $F(1, 336) = 2.03, p > 0.10$, and $F(1, 336) = 1.82, > 0.10$, respectively.

Participants were significantly less willing to volunteer positive reactions to moderate-term depressed stimuli than to normal control stimuli, $F(1, 336) = 16.72, p < 0.001$, but there was not a significant difference for negative reactions, $F(1, 336) = 2.33, p > 0.10$. Differences in willingness to provide positive and negative reactions to short-term depressed stimuli versus normal control were not significant, $F(1, 336) = 2.84, p > 0.10$, and $F(1, 336) = 1.82, p > 0.10$, respectively.

Participants were significantly more willing to provide negative reactions to the short-term depressed male than the short-term depressed female, $F(1, 336) = 4.85, p < .05$, but the sex difference was not significant for moderate-term depression, $F(1, 336) = 2.55, p > .10$.

As sources of feedback, female participants were overall significantly more willing than males to provide positive, $F(1, 336) = 8.11, p < 0.005$, and negative reactions, $F(1, 336) = 10.16, p < 0.002$.

DISCUSSION

The major finding in the present study was that participants were less willing to provide positive reactions to a depressed target stimulus, and that this was found to be the case for both solicited and volunteered reactions. Also, participants indicated more willingness to give negative reactions to males rather than females depressed for a short period of time. As sources of feedback, females were significantly more willing

to provide both positive and negative reactions than were males.

In terms of a long-range goal of describing the interactional context of depression, questionnaire studies such as the present one may provide a means of selecting a limited range of hypotheses for more rigorous observational study. However, some important qualifications should be recognized in any interpretation of questionnaire data. First, participants may be unable to report accurately how they would respond to a depressed friend. Secondly, a sincere and accurately reported willingness to respond in a particular manner may not be predictive of how a participant would respond to a depressed person s/he is interacting with on a regular basis. Willingness to respond may change as the participant becomes frustrated or depressed by the depressed friend. Our findings must therefore be viewed as tentative and in need of further testing with examination of actual interactions. Because willingness to provide feedback to others may be mediated by the nature of the relationship between source and recipient, it is important that studies involve persons having enduring relationships, and not just a fleeting contact.

Two reasons can be suggested as to why participants might be reluctant to share positive reactions with depressed persons even when they believe their reactions are veridical. First, the reluctance may be the result of the common belief that depressive behavior is an effort to extract reassurance and sympathy from others. Participant responses are counterefforts to resist such perceived manipulation. Alternatively or additionally, it may reflect the fact that the willingness of one person to provide behavioral feedback to another may be determined by the target person's overall impact as well as specific behaviors. A participant may be responding to the fact that a depressed person is depressing to be with and is generally behaving dysfunctionally, rather than to the specific instances of positive behavior. In general, we know little about the determinants of behavioral feedback although there is ample clinical evidence that significant others often do not provide appropriate feedback when patients show positive changes in behavior.

Conditions affecting feedback from the environment are relevant to cognitive as well as interactional conceptions of depression. While cognitive distortions (Beck, 1967) may play an important role in the etiology and maintenance of depression, such an explanation is incomplete without a comprehensive view of the environmental context of such processes. In the absence of such data we are likely to misattribute to internal processes what are in fact features of involvement with the environment. Depressed persons are highly susceptible to environmental response (Vaughn & Leff, 1970), and they face depressing interactions with others (Coyne, 1976b; Weissman & Paykel, 1974). Results gained in the present study suggest that the withholding of positive reactions to depressed persons is in need of further study.

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