
Gender and Modality Differences in Experiencing and Emotional Expression

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated gender and modality differences in experiencing and emotional expression. The factorial design included two levels of gender, and two levels of expression modality (public and private). All 47 participants watched and responded to questions about an emotionally provocative video. Participant responses were assessed using the Experiencing Scale, and for use of emotional words. Analyses revealed a higher level of experiencing, and more use of emotional words by women than men. Additionally, experiencing judgments of private responses were significantly higher than those of public responses. Implications for facilitation of experiencing are discussed.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude examine les différentes façons dont les hommes et les femmes ressentent et expriment leurs émotions. Le plan factoriel a été conçu avec deux niveaux de genre et de modalités d'expression (publique et privée). Les 47 participants ont, tous, regardé un vidéo émotionnellement chargé au sujet duquel des questions leur ont été posées. Leurs réponses ont été évaluées à l'aide de l'échelle d'expérience [*Experiencing Scale*] et selon leur usage de mots émotionnels. Les analyses révèlent, chez les femmes, des expériences plus intenses ainsi qu'une utilisation plus importante des mots affectifs. De plus, on a pu conclure que l'intensité des réponses privées était plus élevée que celle des réponses publiques. Les implications quant à la facilitation des expériences sont étudiées par les auteurs.

Over the past decade, a host of investigations have explored the construct of experiencing, particularly as a central factor in the counselling process (Greenberg, Ford, Alden, & Johnson, 1993; Stalikas & Fitzpatrick, 1995, 1996; Ulak & Cummings, 1997; Wiser & Goldfried, 1998). Researchers have demonstrated that client experiencing is related to treatment gains across different approaches to counselling. For example, Castonguay, Goldfried, Wiser, Raue, and Hayes (1996) found that client experiencing predicts positive treatment outcome in cognitive counselling; Hill et al. (1988) demonstrated that client experiencing is positively associated with clients' perceptions of counsellors' helpfulness in brief counselling; and Greenberg (1983) showed that deeper levels

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of experiencing punctuate conflict resolution in gestalt counselling. The present study explored relations to experiencing that might inform counsellors' understanding of how to enhance counselling efficacy.

Although emotion appears central to experiencing, few investigations have directly examined the relation between the two variables. Since emotion is a broad construct, several theorists have adopted a componential approach to its study, including components such as physiological arousal, intensity, and expression (Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991). Consistent with a componential approach to emotion, this investigation considered the association of experiencing to verbal emotional expression. If experiencing and emotional expression are associated, they may demonstrate similar patterns of variation across gender and modalities of expression. Therefore, this study also explored the relation of gender and expression modality (public and private) to experiencing and emotional expression.

Experiencing and Emotions

As defined by Klein, Mathieu-Coughlan, and Kiesler (1986), experiencing is "the extent to which inner referents become [a person's] felt data of attention, and the degree to which efforts are made to focus on, expand, and probe those data" (p. 21). Although this definition refers particularly to experiencing within the counselling context, the roots of the construct can be found both within Gendlin's (1962) theoretically-derived notions of experiential processes, and Rogers's (1958) empirically-founded model of client-centred counselling. For both Gendlin and Rogers, experiencing represented a dynamic process, of which feelings and emotions are integral parts. To this end, Rogers (1959) described feeling as "a brief theme of experience, carrying with it the emotional coloring and the perceived meaning to the individual" (p. 198). Similarly, Gendlin (1964) noted that although experiencing and emotions are distinct, "one must 'move into' . . . emotional tones to the direct referent which is the *felt meaning* of it all" (p. 124). By this, Gendlin appeared to be referring to emotions as integral to the process of arriving at experiential awareness. This study adopted Klein and colleagues' conceptualization of experiencing, and defined it as the degree to which inner referents become one's primary focus of attention.

Recently, researchers have empirically examined the link between experiencing and components of emotion. For example, using the Experiencing Scale (EXP; Klein et al., 1986), Mahrer, Stalikas, Boissoneault, Trainor, and Pilloud (1990) demonstrated that experiencing appears distinct from client strength of feeling. By contrast, Schaeffer and Abeles (1977) showed that EXP scores appear positively related to clients' affective distress, particularly when clients are relatively indifferent about being liked or disliked as a consequence of their disclosure. Related to this, Greenberg et al. (1993) revealed that productive moments in emotionally focused counselling are punctuated by higher EXP scores. Consistent with such findings, Stalikas and Fitzpatrick (1995) noted that "emotional arousal could take place without experiencing but the opposite is not true" (p. 171).

In this study, we considered the relation of experiencing to verbal emotional expression. Our rationale for choosing the "expressive" component of emotion was premised upon research suggesting that verbal emotional expression is associated with the broader construct of emotion (Berry & Pennebaker, 1998; Frijda, Markam, Sato, & Wiers, 1995). That is, if experiencing is related to emotion, and emotion is related to emotional expression, then experiencing may be related to emotional expression. Further, if experiencing and emotional expression are associated, it would be worthwhile to explore the association of experiencing to variables with a demonstrated connection to emotional expression, such as gender and modality of expression.

Gender Differences in Emotional Expression

Females and males appear to express emotions differently (Allen & Haccoun, 1976; King & Emmons, 1990; Schenk & Heinisch, 1986). For example, Kring and Gordon (1998) examined participant emotional expressiveness across three categories of film stimuli, judged to be either happy, sad, or frightening. Results indicated that females were significantly more expressive than males of theme-relevant emotion across film stimuli. In a review, Brody (1993) noted that empirical findings suggest that women tend to be both more emotionally elaborate and intense in their verbal expressions of emotions than men. The observed gender differences in emotional expression have most notably been attributed to biological constraints (Ahern, Johnson, Wilson, McClearn, & Vandenberg, 1982; Brooks-Gunn & Warren, 1989; Susman et al., 1987), as well as gender role socialization (Birnbaum & Croll, 1984; Block, 1973; LaFrance & Banaji, 1992). One of the goals of this study was to determine whether the relation between gender and emotional expression generalizes to gender differences in experiencing.

Gender and Experiencing

Previous research involving gender differences in experiencing is limited and reveals cause for further investigation. Gilliland (1968) studied the outcome of small-group counselling upon high school students, in part through assessment with the EXP on audiotaped group counselling protocols. Findings revealed gender differences in EXP scores, with females posting significantly higher than males by (but not before) the 18th session of treatment. However, it is unclear as to what degree these differences represented an effect of the group counselling intervention employed in the investigation. In another study, Kiesler (1969, as cited in Klein et al., 1986) found females to score high on the EXP regardless of personality type, although it is unclear as to precisely what the demographic and diagnostic profile of these participants were. In sum, although there exists some evidence for gender differences in the construct of experiencing, this relation could be clarified.

Emotional Expression and Modality

Emotional expression varies according to whether it is expressed publicly or privately; in most cases, public contexts appear to inhibit the expression of emotions over private ones (Buck, 1984; Izard, 1971; Kleck et al., 1976). For example, Friedman and Miller-Herringer (1991) examined spontaneous expressions of emotion as a consequence of winning a competition. For each participant, there was a condition in which two (confederate) competitors were present in the room (public), and a condition in which participants were alone in the room (private). Consistent with hypotheses, the authors observed that participants were significantly more likely to spontaneously express their emotions in the private over the public context. The authors suggested that the observed differences in emotional expression were attributable to a social inhibition effect, where people are more emotionally inhibited in the presence of others. Another goal of the present study was to determine whether the relation between emotional expression and modality generalizes to modality differences in experiencing.

The Present Investigation

The purpose of the present investigation was to explore the relation between experiencing and emotional expression, and their variation across gender and two different modes of expression. It was hypothesized that: (a) females would evidence greater EXP scores, and use more emotional words than males, regardless of modality of expression; (b) those expressing themselves in a private modality would evidence greater EXP scores, and use more emotional words, than those expressing themselves in a public modality; and (c) emotional expression (i.e., number of emotional words) would be significantly related to EXP scores. These hypotheses were investigated according to a 2×2 factorial design, with 2 levels of participant gender (female and male), and 2 levels of expression modality (public and private).

METHOD

Participants

Participants were undergraduate psychology students, drawn from a departmental experiment pool at a large North American university. Students could gain extra course credit through their participation in experimental research. Data were collected in two stages on a total of 47 participants. The 20 participants assigned to a videotaped interview (public) modality included 10 women and 10 men. The 27 participants assigned to a private modality included 15 women and 12 men. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 31 years old, with a mean of 18.85. Ethnicity varied minimally with 30 Caucasians, 10 African-Americans, 4 Asian-Americans, 2 Hispanics, and 1 Indian participant (from India).

Procedure

The procedures used in this investigation depended upon one of two modality conditions; in both, individual participants first watched an emotionally provocative video, and then indicated their reactions to it. In the public modality, participants were interviewed following the video by an experimenter, in front of a video camera. All verbal information from this interview was then carefully transcribed from videotape, and transcripts were later scored for use of emotional words and EXP level. In the private modality, an experimenter escorted individual participants into a room where they found a packet of information describing what to do next. The packet instructed participants to watch a video on a TV monitor in the room, and afterwards, complete an open-ended questionnaire on which they could record their reactions. Questionnaires were later scored for use of emotional words and EXP level.

Emotional Video

A commercial video was used as the stimulus in the investigation. The video was an 18-minute feature story from the television newsmagazine "20/20," that aired on ABC in 1989 (Saunders & Spiro, 1989). The story chronicled a Vietnam veteran's quest for solace after losing a close friend in the war. Previous research using this video has found it to be highly provocative of both negative and positive emotions for both females and males (Martin, 1998).

Structured Interview: Public Modality

A structured interview was individually administered to participants in the public modality, and participants were aware that they were being videotaped during the interview. The goal of the interview was to dispose participants to express as much as possible their feelings regarding the video that they had just watched. The interview was administered to participants immediately following the viewing of the video, in a standardized format of eight questions that pertained to both the content of the story and participants' reactions to it. For each question, two additional standardized (and increasingly specific) probes were also available. An example of an interview question was: "Did Ed [the Vietnam veteran] ever forget about his war experiences after he returned home?"; accompanied by the optional two follow-up probes: "Do you believe that Ed just forgot about Bill Bowman [close friend who was killed in battle] after he returned home?", and "Do you believe that Ed simply forgot about his friendship with Bill Bowman after Bill was killed and Ed returned home?" A probe was employed only once across all 20 interviews. All interviews were conducted individually by two different people: (a) the first author, who at the time was a second-year graduate student in clinical psychology with one hundred plus hours of supervised clinical training, and (b) an undergraduate researcher trained by the first author to conduct the experimental interview.

Open-Ended Questionnaire: Private Modality

The questionnaire used in the private modality included the identical questions from the interview in the public modality. Before being presented the questions, participants were asked (in writing) to answer each as openly and honestly as possible, keeping in mind that their responses were anonymous and confidential. Participants were further encouraged to share their feelings and associations in depth. On each of the subsequent eight pages, there was a question at the top, corresponding to the eight questions asked in the interview. Participants were provided a full page on which to record each of their responses, and were encouraged to use the back of each page if they wished. All direct interaction with participants in the private modality was kept to a minimum. Therefore, after the experimenter escorted the individual participant into the laboratory room at the very beginning of the procedure, there was no more contact between participant and experimenter until the procedure was completed.

The Experiencing Scale (EXP)

The EXP is a 7-level ordinal scale designed to measure a client's working engagement in the counselling process (Klein et al., 1986). At lower levels such as 1 and 2, a client's engagement is considered remote and shallow, and the content of utterances involve impersonal references to external events. At medium levels such as 3 and 4, a client is thought to be more involved with her/his own felt sensations, as reflected in references to emotions and subjective experiences. Finally, at levels 5 and up, a client's own perceived inner referents become the primary sources of engagement in counselling, which is considered to be immediate and substantial. The content of client utterances at levels 5 and up range from exploration of subjective experiences, to affirmation of self-knowledge resulting from this exploration. The EXP is typically employed by trained judges to assess the counselling process.

The EXP has been shown to have adequate construct validity. Investigations reflecting validity can be classified into two broad areas: (a) associations with other measures, and (b) responsiveness to counselling facilitation efforts and interventions. In terms of associations, the EXP has demonstrated convergent validity with measures of cognitive integration and differentiation (Wexler, 1974, as cited in Klein et al., 1986), verbal response type (Stiles, McDaniel, & McGaughey, 1979), and good moments in counselling (Stalikas & Fitzpatrick, 1995). With regard to the facilitation of experiencing, studies in which experiencing was targeted by specific interventions have revealed significant increases in EXP level across a variety of samples, including community groups (Bierman & Lumly, 1973), university students (Ulak & Cummings, 1997), and persons afflicted with schizophrenia (Hinterkopf & Brunswick, 1981).

Although Klein et al. (1986) suggested applying the EXP to non-counselling experimental interviews, there exists no validated procedure for doing so. Therefore, the client EXP was suitably adapted to score participant data in this inves-

tigation, as has been done successfully in the past (Martin, 1998). In this case, level 3 on the original scale was differentiated into "self" and "other" focus of emotional content, resulting in an 8-level instrument. While the focus of discussions in most counselling includes at least some consideration of the client (i.e., the self), the focus of the experimental interview employed in this investigation was primarily on characters in a video. We differentiated level 3 into other- and self-referenced emotions to credit the use of self-referenced emotions within a context that only minimally demands it. This modification is consistent with the conceptual spirit of the EXP, as it aims to gauge a client's movement in counselling from external to internal referents.

Training. Three judges, including two undergraduate laboratory assistants, and the first author, were furnished six sample interview transcripts, one transcript at a time, and independently scored each sentence for EXP level using Klein et al.'s (1986) criteria. After each sample transcript was scored, results were tabulated and discussed among judges. Reasons and rationales for each score of each sentence were discussed — but only after each score had been tabulated. Over time, consensual guidelines for scoring were established using Klein et al.'s criteria for the EXP. Estimated kappas (r_k) for the three judges scoring the same 206 utterances ranged from .77 to .83 (all $ps < .05$), with an average of .80. The group then progressed to scoring transcripts of actual experimental participants.

Interjudge agreement. Each experimental transcript and questionnaire was scored independently by three trained judges using Klein et al.'s (1986) criteria. The mean interjudge agreement among the judges was $r_k = .95$ for the public modality, and .98 for the private ($p < .05$). Judges scored each utterance in every experimental protocol using Klein et al.'s criteria for EXP. As recommended by Klein et al., for each participant a peak EXP score was determined for each interview question; peak EXP scores were then summed and averaged across the 8 questions for each participant.

Interviewer fidelity. The level of EXP that each participant revealed in an experimental interview would likely be tied to the nature of the questions that were asked of her/him in the interview. This notion hinges on the question of interviewer fidelity, or to what extent the standardized interview protocol was adhered in interviewing participants. To determine this, interviewer adherence to the standardized questions was tracked for each participant interview. Interviewer fidelity was rated at better than 99%, and agreement between two independent judges was 100%. Therefore, it was concluded that differences in EXP levels could neither be attributed to a lack of judge agreement, nor poor interviewer fidelity.

Emotional Word Count

The criteria for emotional words were consistent with the working semantic model presented by Russell and Carroll (1999), and judges were instructed simply to count the number of emotional words fitting these criteria. Words considered "emotional" were organized according to valence and activation, including words with a positive valence and low activation ("serene"), a positive valence

and high activation (“excited”), a negative valence and low activation (“sad”), and a negative valence and high activation (“frightened”). The average correlation (r) between three independent judges counting emotional words in the private modality was .99 — thus, the criteria for emotional word usage appeared to be applied correctly. Pursuant to this, it was deemed sufficient to have just one rater conduct an emotional word count for the public modality.

RESULTS

As indicated above, hypothesis a predicted that females would evidence greater EXP scores, and used more emotional words than males, regardless of modality of expression. Hypothesis b predicted that those expressing themselves in a private modality would evidence greater EXP scores, and use more emotional words, than those expressing themselves in a public modality. To assess gender and modality differences in EXP scores, a 2×2 factorial ANOVA was conducted, revealing a significant main effect for participant gender where $F(1, 43) = 30.62, p < .05$, with females scoring higher than males (see Table 1).¹ Eta-squared (η^2), a measure of effect size calculated on the F statistic yielded .42. The ANOVA also revealed a significant main effect for modality of expression, where $F(1, 43) = 5.99, p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .12$, with the private modality showing higher levels of EXP scores than the public. The ANOVA failed to reveal a gender by modality interaction [$F(1, 43) = 1.68, ns, \eta^2 = .04$]. Table 1 represents the means and standard deviations for EXP scores across gender and modalities of expression.

TABLE 1

Means and Standard Deviations for EXP Scores

Gender	Expression Modality		
	Public	Private	Overall
Females			
<i>n</i>	10	15	25
<i>M</i>	2.81	3.09	2.98
<i>SD</i>	.38	.15	.30
Males			
<i>n</i>	10	12	22
<i>M</i>	2.49	2.58	2.54
<i>SD</i>	.24	.23	.23
Overall			
<i>n</i>	20	27	47
<i>M</i>	2.65	2.86	2.77
<i>SD</i>	.35	.32	.34

To assess gender and modality differences in emotional expression, another 2×2 factorial ANOVA was conducted, revealing a significant main effect for participant gender where $F(1, 43) = 22.37, p < .05, \eta^2 = .34$, with females scoring higher than males. The ANOVA failed to reveal a significant main effect for modality of expression [$F(1, 43) = 2.08, ns, \eta^2 = .05$]. The ANOVA also failed to reveal a gender by modality interaction, where $F(1, 43) = 1.88, n, \eta^2 = .04$. Table 2 represents the means and standard deviations for emotional word scores across gender and modalities of expression.

TABLE 2

Means and Standard Deviations for Emotional Word Scores

Gender	Expression Modality		
	Public	Private	Overall
Females			
<i>n</i>	10	15	25
<i>M</i>	10.60	10.53	10.56
<i>SD</i>	2.68	3.54	3.16
Males			
<i>n</i>	10	12	22
<i>M</i>	7.40	4.72	5.94
<i>SD</i>	3.72	2.72	3.42
Overall			
<i>n</i>	20	27	47
<i>M</i>	9.00	7.95	8.40
<i>SD</i>	3.55	4.31	4.00

Hypothesis c predicted that emotional expression (i.e., number of private or public emotional words) would be significantly related to EXP scores. To assess this, a Spearman rank correlation was computed between EXP scores and use of emotional words separately for the public and private modalities. In the public modality, the correlation between EXP scores and emotional words was $r_s = .66$, and in the private, $.92 (p < .05)$.

DISCUSSION

Review of Hypotheses

Results supported hypothesis a, concerning gender differences in experiencing and emotional expression. Females evidenced greater EXP scores and used more emotional words than males, regardless of expression modality. Although based

upon a small sample size, this finding is consistent with literature suggesting that females and males express themselves in qualitatively different ways. In this study, it appeared as if females focused their expressive attention more upon inner referents than did males. Females also appeared more emotionally expressive than males.

There was only partial support for hypothesis b, which predicted that those expressing themselves in a private modality would evidence greater EXP scores and use of emotional words than those in a public modality. Although the private modality evidenced higher EXP scores than the public, this pattern was not significant for use of emotional words. The finding that EXP is higher in a private modality is consistent with social inhibition theory, suggesting that depth of expression in private contexts is generally greater than in public ones.

Hypothesis c was supported: use of emotional words was significantly related to EXP scores. Although again, this result is based upon a small sample size, it appears to contradict Mahrer and colleagues' (1990) finding that experiencing is unrelated to client strength of feeling. How can this contradiction be understood? Theoretically, emotion can be conceptualized in terms of a collection of subsystems — some of which may be independent of others, but still related to the broader system of emotion (Mesquita, Frijda, & Scherer, 1997). Therefore, it is conceptually plausible that experiencing may be related to the content of one's emotional expression, but not to feeling *strength*, as defined by Mahrer and colleagues. Moreover, while Mahrer and colleagues measured strength of feeling in ways independent of participants' expressed content (e.g., loudness and spontaneity), the measure of emotional expression employed in this study was based solely on content — i.e., whether participants used emotional words. The fact that the EXP is at least partially contingent on the content of a person's verbal emotional expression suggests that some of the variance in the observed relation of emotional expression to experiencing may be attributed to methodological constraints in this investigation.

Implications for Counselling

One of the attractive qualities of experiencing is that it can be assessed informally within the counselling context, through subtle but meaningful nuances of a client's expression characteristics. For example, a client who relays the loss of a significant other by stating "It was a sad time" is demonstrating less experiential involvement in the event than if s/he had stated "I felt sad." Both statements pertain to a sad period in the client's history, but in the former, "sad" proceeds from an external referent, while in the latter, an internal referent. Facilitation of experiencing in counselling generally targets this type of movement — from external to internal, with the goal of further exploration and ultimately, understanding.

While accounts of interventions and efficacy in counselling facilitation of experiencing are documented elsewhere (e.g., Klein et al., 1986), this study suggests three dimensions that may relate to a client's experiential investment in

counselling. First, emotional expression as reflected in use of emotional words is positively associated with experiencing. It is important to note, however, that emotional expression in and of itself does not predict experiencing. Therefore, a counsellor interested in facilitating experiential involvement in the counselling process must be attentive not only to whether a client uses emotional words, but to whether the words are referenced to internal experiences.

Second, gender is related to experiencing, where females demonstrate deeper levels of experiential involvement than males. Therefore, greater facilitation efforts may be required for male than female clients to achieve equivalent levels of experiential depth.

Third, experiencing is related to modality of expression, where persons demonstrate deeper levels of experiencing in private contexts as compared to public ones. Depending on how it is implemented, the private task of journal keeping outside the more public counselling session could be employed as a tool for ultimately facilitating experiential investment within sessions. These implications are tentative; it is up to future research to qualify the results of this investigation, and directly assess their implications within a counselling context.

Limitations of This Investigation

This study was limited in several ways. First, as mentioned earlier, the sample size in this study was small — therefore, the results must be viewed as tentative. Second, the first author in this investigation served as both an interviewer and judge in scoring experiencing and emotional words, presenting a potential bias in such judgments. Third, this investigation did not represent a study of the actual counselling process. Nonetheless, it did examine a matter often targeted in process research — i.e., naturally expressed emotional and experiential responses to socially-based cues. Further, the study yielded robust findings, particularly with respect to gender differences, where effect sizes ranged from .34 to .42. Although it seems likely that the results reported here have bearing for counselling practice, future research employing appropriate samples can more directly link the construct of experiencing to both the counselling process, and client individual differences.

Note

¹ The modality variable was studied across two separate stages of data collection. Therefore, strictly speaking, there was not random assignment to modality conditions. Because of this, we conducted two sets of analyses: (a) *t* tests, and (b) 2×2 factorial ANOVAs. Conclusions were the same regardless of the analysis type. We elected to report the factorial ANOVAs as they allowed for exploration of interaction effects.

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