Effects of Mindfulness on Emotion Recognition in Intergroup Contexts

Premika Perera

Department of Psychology, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba

University of Manitoba

Background

Reading facial expressions is an important part of interpersonal communication. Accurately perceiving emotional signals has advantages to survival and social interactions, including the following:

- Enhances understanding of another person's feelings and behaviours, resulting in better-quality communication (e.g. credibility and empathy)
- Forms and maintains social bonds
- Reduces conflict and misunderstandings that arise through misidentification of facial expressions

Extensive findings demonstrate that people often have difficulty identifying and recognizing facial expressions of out-group members compared to in-group members:

- **In-group familiarity:** Higher accuracy in judging facial expressions with more familiarity and cultural contact, independent of ethnic or biological ties (Elfenbein & Ambady, 2003)
- **In-group advantage:** Judging the emotions of members of one's own social group more accurately than out-group members

This own-group bias has been found in relation to a variety of social categories, including race. It is also referred to as the cross-race effect, contact effect, or in-group bias.

Purpose

Mindfulness is a way to increase emotion recognition (in out-group members) by decreasing automatic biases. A state of mindfulness focuses on present feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations in an open, accepting, and non-judgmental manner.

Mindfulness has been shown to have emotion regulatory benefits in social contexts by enhancing conscious attention to one's own and other's actions and emotions (Quaglia et al., 2015).

Self-reported mindfulness is associated with more emotional awareness and emotional intelligence, including clarity of emotion and the ability to label one's emotion. A state of mindfulness brings sensitivity to emotional cues, which promotes effective emotional regulation (Hill & Updegraff, 2012; Remmers et al., 2016).

Higher dispositional mindfulness was associated with better speed-accuracy in differentiating between facial expressions (Quaglia et al., 2015).

This study examined the effectiveness of mindfulness in an intergroup context to:

- Promote efficient top-down attention to and discrimination of other people's emotions
- Monitor and inhibit automatic response tendencies

Hypothesis

This study investigated the following research questions:

- Q1: Will participants have higher accuracy for in-group than out-group faces (replicating past work)?
  - H1: Participants will have higher accuracy for in-group than out-group faces
- Q2: Will a quick (10 minute) mindfulness intervention increase emotion recognition accuracy?
  - H2: Emotion recognition accuracy will be higher after a mindfulness intervention
- Q3: Will any effects of a mindfulness intervention on emotion accuracy extend to out-group members?
  - H3a: Participants in the mindfulness condition would show an increase in accuracy and/or reaction time in the emotion recognition for both White and Black faces
  - H3b: Higher emotion recognition accuracy in Black faces will reduce the in-group identification bias

Method

Participants (N = 89, 78% female) completed a quick mindfulness exercise (or relaxation control exercise) that focused on emotion awareness.

Instruction for the mindfulness and relaxation exercises was given through headphones and lasted approximately 10 minutes. The study involved two conditions:

- Emotion awareness condition (Mindfulness)
- Relaxation condition (Control)

The mindfulness exercise was an emotion recognition task, which involved judging which expression of a total of six emotional expressions was displayed (Figure 1). Participants judged two groups of target faces:

- In-group White target faces
- Out-group Black target faces

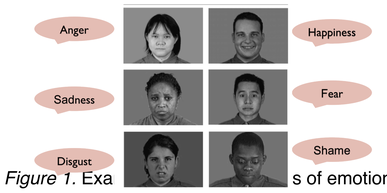

Figure 1. Exa s of emotions.

Accuracy and reaction time were measured on the emotion recognition task.

Findings

As predicted, the results showed a significant main effect of race, indicating an in-group advantage where White participants displayed higher mean accuracy for in-group White faces than out-group Black faces (Figure 2).

However, contrary to initial predictions, the main effect for condition was not significant, suggesting that emotion recognition accuracy was not different between the mindfulness and relaxation conditions (Figure 3).

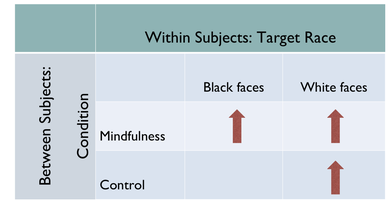

Figure 2. Predicted results.

Figure 3. Yielded results.

Conclusion

A quick mindfulness exercise that focused on inner and outer sensations of emotions was ineffective in improving emotion recognition in both in-group and out-group faces.

Future recommendations include increasing the length and focus of the mindfulness exercise (the shortest training to show positive results was 4 days).

Additionally, having participants be aware of the benefits of mindfulness training may improve motivation and enhance the effectiveness of mindfulness training.

References

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