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Title: On postural reactions: contextual effects on perceptions of and reactions to postures
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5. General discussion

The aim of the current dissertation was to provide more insight in people’s nonverbal reactions and the perceptions of nonverbal behavior in interactions. I argued that not only nonverbal expressions, but also the context of the situation in which the nonverbal expressions are shown influence people’s reactions and perceptions. Nonverbal expressions are particularly useful when shown in social interactions. It is therefore specifically interesting to investigate nonverbal behavior in social contexts, and to assess how social contexts shape nonverbal behaviors. Surprisingly, however, research has tended to ignore the social context when examining reactions to and perceptions of nonverbal expressions. Nonverbal reactions are mainly studied as isolated behaviors. On the one hand, one could argue that the advantage of this approach is that one can make clear predictions of which behavior leads to which response and how these behaviors are perceived. However, by leaving out the social context, one runs the risk that the insights are incomplete and at times even incorrect. If reactions and perceptions of nonverbal expressions are indeed influenced by the social context they are displayed in, it is important to include this context in our theorizing.

In this dissertation, it was therefore examined whether the context in which nonverbal expressions are shown influences the nonverbal reactions to and the perceptions of nonverbal behavior in interactions. More specifically, it was explored whether information of target’s status and status legitimacy influence nonverbal reactions and whether these nonverbal reactions influence the perceptions of dominance, conflict avoidance, and conflict in the interaction. Since I am interested in whether status influences nonverbal displays of dominance and submission, I focused specifically on expanded and constricted postures. In Chapter 2, I examined the effect of status on people’s nonverbal reactions. In Chapter 3, I investigated the
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In Chapter 4, I assessed whether people’s perceptions of dominance and conflict were influenced by the postural reactions that people show. In this final chapter I will summarize the findings described in the empirical chapters and provide implications and directions for future research.

Summary of main findings

Chapter 2 addresses whether status influences postural reactions. We argued that the status role of a target provides contextual information, which moderates the prevalence of mimicking and complementing behavior. In two studies, we manipulated a target’s behavior and relative status position. We assessed whether participants mimicked or complemented the target’s behavior and examined whether these reactions were dependent on target behavior and status role. Results first of all showed that people more often complement dominant behavior, while they more often mimic submissive behaviors. Furthermore, the results also demonstrated that the context in which behavior is displayed indeed influences postural reactions; when the target has high status, complementary reactions towards dominant behavior are even more frequent than when the target has low status. This chapter showed that, instead of mainly reacting with complementary postures as previous research suggested, people take the social context in which nonverbal expressions are shown into account and adjust their nonverbal reactions accordingly. When status information is present, people tend to complement the dominant behavior of the high status target more, while they tend to mimic the submissive behavior of that high status target. Not complementing the submissive posture may be a way to keep the hierarchical positions intact. To be able to fully understand when people mimic and when they complement, it thus seems essential to consider people’s status roles.

In Chapter 3, we examined the effect of status legitimacy on postural reactions. It was argued that not only the status of a target may influence nonverbal reactions, but that the
legitimacy of the status roles provides important contextual information as well. Research suggests that whether social roles are accepted, depends on whether there is a legitimate basis for these roles (e.g., Caddick, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner & Brown, 1978). When people do not accept the social role (e.g. status role) of a target, this may lead them to behave differently towards that target than when they do accept this role. We therefore suggested that legitimacy of status roles influences people's acceptance of those roles and that this would influence the nonverbal reactions that people display. This was explored in two studies, in which a target had either a legitimate or illegitimate high status. Results indicated that people accepted the situation more when the target's status was legitimate and showed that people also mimic a target with legitimate status more than a target with illegitimate status. This chapter hereby demonstrates that legitimacy of a high status person influences people's nonverbal reactions towards this person.

Given that the context influences people's nonverbal reactions, we wondered whether this context would also influence people's perceptions of the behavior and the interaction. Therefore, in Chapter 4, we investigated people's perceptions of expanded and constricted postures while accompanied by a nonverbal reaction (similar or opposite posture). Previous research has suggested that expanded and constricted postures are indicative of the dominance of the target displaying the posture (Hall, Coats, & LeBeau, 2005; Tiedens & Fragale, 2003). We argue that these inferences of dominance from such postures are influenced by the social context in which the postures are displayed. More specifically, we argued that these postures are usually shown in a social context in which they have a communicative function. In the case of two interaction partners, it is important to take the postures of both interaction partners into account since the combination of both postures may influence the perceptions of these postures and the interaction. In Chapter 4, we investigated whether contrast effects between postures (similar vs. opposite postures) in an interaction influence the perceptions of these postures and the perceptions of the interaction. This was investigated in three experimental studies in which
perceptions of dominance, conflict avoidance, and conflict were measured. Results showed that these perceptions were influenced by the (dis)similarity of postures between interaction partners. When interaction partners displayed contrasting postures, expanded postures were perceived as more dominant and less conflict avoidant, and conflict was perceived to be more intense than when interaction partners displayed similar postures. This chapter demonstrates that the perception of expanded and constricted postures is influenced by the social context.

The contrast between postures of two interaction partners influences whether people perceive expanded and constricted postures as dominant or submissive. Thus, it may not necessarily be the case that expanded postures are perceived as dominant and constricted postures as submissive. When evaluating and responding to postures, people take the context in which these postures are shown into account.

The results that are presented in these chapters provide support for the idea that the social context in which people display and react to nonverbal expressions, influences these reactions and the perceptions of the behavior and the interaction in which the behavior is displayed. Relative status and whether that status was legitimate influenced people's nonverbal reactions. Furthermore, the posture of an interaction partner and the relative status between two targets influenced people's perceptions of the posture and the interaction; dominance, conflict avoidance and conflict perceptions were affected by these contextual cues. Together, the research provided in this dissertation thus demonstrates that it is crucial to take the social setting in which nonverbal expressions are displayed into account if one wants to get a better understanding of people's nonverbal reactions and perceptions of the behavior and situation.

Implications and directions for future research

The current dissertation extends previous research. Previous research showed that people tend to complement expanded and constricted postures rather than mimic them
(Tiedens & Fragale, 2003). The current dissertation demonstrates that when taking into account people's relative status and status legitimacy, it becomes clear that postural reactions are influenced by the context in which the postures are displayed. People not always seem to prefer complementary postures over mimicked postures; they tend to prefer mimicking constricted postures when there are status differences (Chapter 2) and also mimic a target with legitimate status more (Chapter 3).

Furthermore, this dissertation may provide some implications for practical use. The research discussed in this dissertation provides a more detailed insight in how people perceive postures and how people respond to postures of others. In the experimental settings that were used in the research, I specifically aimed to use settings that were close to real-life situations (e.g. job interviews, discussions, scenarios about work settings). While this setup may have allowed more room for variation in target behavior, it has the advantage that the findings can easily be translated to real-life situations. The results reported in this dissertation also show that it is very important to do so; the context in which the behavior is displayed has a large impact on how people perceive the behavior and how they respond to it. It is therefore important for future research to take such contextual effects into account when aiming to provide more insight in how people respond in their daily life. The current research may be useful to a large variety of work settings. For example, gaining more insight in how people respond to and perceive expanded or constricted postures and which contextual factors influence these perceptions may be particularly useful for conflict mediators, intermediary agents or recruiters, or law enforcement professionals. This last group, for example, may be interested in signaling which postural behavior leads to feeling of conflict. Since these unconscious behaviors are probably displayed before a verbal conflict occurs, this may help in early identification of potentially harmful situations. The current dissertation provides ground for such research.

In this dissertation, I have provided insight in the effects that the social context has on nonverbal expressions and the perceptions of those expressions. I focused on the influence that
status and hierarchy related factors have on (expanded and constricted) postures, since postures are clear and overt nonverbal expressions that have often been linked to dominance. This does not mean, however, that postural expressions are the only nonverbal expressions that are influenced by the social context.

One other type of expression that is influenced by the social context is voice pitch. Research has shown that people with a low voice pitch are seen as more dominant and also feel more dominant (Puts, Hodges, Cardenas, & Gaulin, 2007; Stel, Van Dijk, Smith, Van Dijk, & Djalal, 2012). Also, in a correlational study it has been suggested that people tend to adjust their voice pitch to match their interaction partner’s pitch and that this was moderated by status of the interaction partner (Gregory & Webster, 1996). It could therefore be argued that voice pitch will be influenced by the social context in similar fashion as expanded and constricted postures.

Another type of expression that may be influenced by social context is emotional expression. For example, research has shown that the expression of anger is positively associated with dominance while the expression of happiness is associated with less dominance (Hess, Adams, & Kleck, 2005). It may therefore be highly likely that whether people respond with angry or happy emotional expressions is also influenced by the social context in a similar way as postures are. For example, one could imagine that if one person with high status shows an angry expression, people are less likely to mimic that anger but show a complementary emotion instead, while when a person with low status shows an angry expression, people may be less likely to complement this emotional expression but respond with anger as well. In sum, although the focus of this dissertation is mainly on postural expansion and constriction, the effects of the social context may not be limited to these nonverbal expressions. Future research is needed, however, to further investigate the effects of the social context on behaviors such as vocal pitch and emotional expressions.

A wide variety in target material was used in the research reported in this dissertation to assess people’s postural reactions and perceptions, such as scenarios, drawings, videos, and live
interactions with a confederate. Interestingly, the social context seems to moderate reactions more when using live interactions with a confederate than when using videos. For example, when using videos as target material as in Study 2.1, it was shown that people complemented dominant targets more and mimicked submissive targets, regardless of status roles. When participants interacted with a confederate as in Study 2.2, this effect was not only replicated but there was an additional interaction effect for displayed behavior and status role; dominant behavior was only complemented more often when the target was a boss. When a high status target displays dominant behavior, complementary reactions are even more prevalent, while when a high status target displays submissive behavior complementary reactions are as likely as mimicry to occur. This inconsistency could be noted as a limitation to the findings. It could also be argued, however, that this difference in results provides evidence that the social context is more important in interactive settings. When examining people’s nonverbal expressions, we tend to find a stronger effect of the social context in the live interaction studies than in the studies in which we used video recordings. This is probably caused by the fact that nonverbal expressions are used to communicate with others. When there is no active communication people may be less likely to react to these nonverbal expressions. First of all, this provides evidence for the idea that people tend to display these behaviors in a social context and it is therefore also important to take this social context into account when examining the behavioral reactions that people show. Second, one could also argue that this social context thus has a bigger impact on the behavioral reaction when it involves a live interaction.

It would be interesting for future research to examine whether the social context is indeed less influential when people do not interact face-to-face. If this is the case, there could be important implications for current developments in society. Modern communication — especially work (and thus status-related) communication— is switching from face-to-face meetings to Skype or video meetings. Since in these video meetings the effect of the social context may be less influential than in live interactions, the nonverbal communication may also
become less effective. People may be less likely to notice subtle differences in their interaction partner’s nonverbal communication, such as leaning backward or forward, and therefore also do not respond to this behavior (i.e. mimic or complement the behavior). This is important, because nonverbal communication and synchronization are essential in becoming more attuned to an interaction partner (LaFrance, 1979). When it becomes more difficult to do so because subtle movements may not be noticed, this may lead to less effective communication and possibly more misunderstandings between interaction partners. This may have negative effects on the work relation between the interaction partners.

In addition to the difference in nonverbal reactions for video and live interactions, nonverbal reactions also differed depending on whether people were part of the interaction versus observed the interaction. For example, in Chapter 3, participants were asked what they thought would be the most likely response in Study 3.1, while their actual behavior was measured in Study 3.2. This led to different reactions to the dominant target; in the first study people indicated that they would respond to the dominant illegitimate target with more similar (dominant) postures, while participants’ actual nonverbal reaction was complementary (submissive). Furthermore, in Chapter 4 participants' perceptions of conflict differed when they were in the interaction (Study 4.1) from when they observed an interaction (Study 4.2); in addition to the finding that expanded postures led to lower perceptions of conflict (Studies 4.1 and 4.2), similar postures also led to lower perceptions of conflict when observing the interaction (Study 4.2). From these findings, one may conclude that people may have difficulty predicting their nonverbal reactions. People’s inability to predict their behavior or perceptions may be influenced by the fact that mimicking and complementing tend to occur outside conscious awareness (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Tiedens & Fragale, 2003), leading them to be unaware of the behavior they show and thus leading to inaccurate predictions of what they would do in specific situations.
Additionally, one could argue that since the current findings show that these unconscious nonverbal reactions are moderated by the social context in which they are shown, our research seems to suggest that these nonverbal reactions may be goal-driven. People may have a goal to be liked, or to confirm the hierarchy, etc. This goal may (unconsciously) lead people to mimic or complement others. As our research shows that people alter their nonverbal reactions according to the situation, this seems to indicate that these reactions are goal-driven.

For example, when a target has high status and shows a dominant posture, people may feel more need to confirm the hierarchy (by complementing the dominant behavior) than when the target has low status. When a target with legitimately obtained status leads to more positive perceptions of the situation, this may also lead to a greater need to be liked by this target. In turn, this goal to be liked may lead to mimicry; research has shown that mimicry occurs more frequently when people like each other than when they do not like each other (Stel, Van Baaren, et al., 2010). The idea that unconscious behaviors may be goal-driven also fits with previous research suggesting that automatic behaviors may be motivated or goal-driven (e.g., Bargh & Ferguson, 2000; Cesario, Plaks, & Higgins, 2006).

This leads to another interesting direction for future research. In the current research, we demonstrated that the context influences people's behavioral reactions. Building on this, future research may focus on the possible goals and motives that may be responsible for the reactions that people show. Since the current research indicates that people take the context in which behavior is displayed into account, one could argue that there may be goals and motives associated with this context that drive people's behavioral reactions. For example, people may have the goal to be liked by their boss. This would lead to other behavior than when people have the goal to show their competence to their boss. Chapter 2 and 3 showed that people alter their behavior when the relative status differs or when a target has illegitimate status. The next step would be to investigate what the main goals are that motivate showing either expanded or constricted postures. From previous research on mimicry we know that the goal to affiliate and
create bonds is proposed to be an important goal to mimic others (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999). While this may be the case in non-hierarchical settings, the question remains whether this is also a goal that people strive for in hierarchical settings. For example, people may have a goal to show their competence, to maintain their (legitimate) hierarchical position, or to get a desired negotiation outcome. While these motives can coincide with the goal to affiliate, most often they do not. Which goal is the most active in a certain setting may therefore influence behavioral reactions and future research should investigate how goals influence behavioral reactions.

Conclusion

To conclude, this dissertation demonstrates that social contexts influence people’s nonverbal reactions. It was shown that people mimic or complement a target’s expanded and constricted posture depending on the relative status position and on whether this status is legitimately obtained. Furthermore, this dissertation shows that social contexts, and more specifically the contrast between the postures of interaction partners, influence the degree to which people perceive postures as dominant and conflict-avoidant. Also, the contrast influences the interaction in terms of the perceptions of conflict.

On a theoretical level, this dissertation adds to the existing knowledge about nonverbal behavior and perceptions of that behavior. We have shown that nonverbal reactions that are usually shown in complex social situations are also influenced by these settings. Furthermore, these reactions influence the perceptions people have about the behavior and situation. By showing this, we hope that future research will pay more attention to the situational settings that may influence their results. On a more practical level, this dissertation provides more insight to how people react to others in complex social settings and how these settings can influence perceptions. This knowledge may be used to obtain a better understanding of perceptions and
nonverbal reactions in everyday life and can be used to signal effectiveness of and possible problems in people’s communication.