

to influence the learner. In “affective observation,” on the other hand, the learner simply observes the knower interacting with a person or object, and makes evaluative inferences about the latter on the basis of the knower’s expressive behavior. Both social referencing and affective observation are instances of what Clément and Dukes call “social appraisal.”

The question is whether this distinction between social referencing and affective observation is one that is scientifically useful. In answering this question, it is worth considering the two central panels of Figure 2 in the Clément and Dukes article (2017), because these capture what these authors regard as the key process differences between the two constructs. In one case, social referencing, the learner interacts with a stimulus that gives rise to uncertainty, or even anxiety. The knower monitors this interaction and deliberately modulates it by engaging in ostensive communication. In the case of affective observation, the knower interacts with a stimulus that generates emotionally expressive behavior in the knower without any explicit intention to communicate this to the learner; the learner observes this interaction and draws an inference about the emotional qualities of the stimulus.

This distinction is, we think, conceptually clear and is likely to be important in understanding the role played by emotional expressions in social learning. Take a child who interacts for the first time with another child who belongs to a different ethnic group. The first child may be uncertain and look to his or her caregiver. The latter’s smiles encourage the child to interact with the outgroup child. The adult thereby actively teaches the child a “lesson” about the emotional value of outgroup members. Contrast this with a situation in which a child witnesses his or her caregiver interacting warily with an adult who is a member of a different ethnic group, and making a negative expression behind the other adult’s back when the interaction is over. Here the adult unwittingly teaches the child a lesson about the emotional value of outgroup members. These two sets of circumstances differ in significant respects (not least in terms of the implications for interventions).

However, if we were to focus on the value of this distinction for understanding how emotional experience and behavior are influenced by others, we might arrive at a different conclusion. To understand the way in which social influences operate on the emotion process, it makes little difference whether the learner’s emotional response to a stimulus is shaped by being actively steered by expressive behavior that is deliberately communicated by a knower, or by witnessing the knower interacting with the stimulus and apparently enjoying (or disliking) the experience. Either way, the learner’s emotional response to the stimulus is shaped by inferences made about the knower’s appraisals.

A final point is that we believe that there is another potentially important difference between social referencing and social appraisal that is not explicitly mentioned in either article, namely the circumstances under which these phenomena take place. Social referencing is likely to be used in situations that are novel and the individual is seen to need others’ appraisals to help him or her to disambiguate the situation. In the classic social referencing context, the knower’s appraisal becomes the child’s appraisal. In principle, social appraisal applies to a broader set of circumstances, having the potential to shape both initial appraisals of a stimulus and subsequent reappraisals. Thus passengers who are initially calm during a turbulent flight may become anxious when they hear the screams of a flight attendant, and students who are mildly disappointed with how their essays have been graded may become angry when exposed to fellow students’ appraisals of unfairness. It is not that others’ appraisals of the event are adopted because the passengers or students are *uncertain* about how to appraise it; rather, others’ appraisals serve to modulate an initial appraisal. Thus social referencing is likely to occur early in the emotion process, whereas social appraisal could occur at virtually any stage. This is a subtle but potentially important difference when it comes to identifying the processes that are triggered when we are exposed to others’ emotions.

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Comment: Respecifying Emotional Influence

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Abstract

To what extent does the level of overlap between social appraisal and social referencing depend upon the particular definitions adopted when following different research agendas? I argue that processes of both kinds fall under the more inclusive heading of relation alignment. Relation alignment also covers emotional influence that is not mediated by the communication of appraisal. Similarities, interdependences, and distinctions between these various relation-alignment processes warrant further investigation.

Keywords

emotional influence, relation alignment, social appraisal, social referencing

Are social appraisal and social referencing the same thing? Is there underlying commonality in the kinds of emotional influence implied by both concepts? Or is social referencing just one example of a number of possible social appraisal processes? Answers to these questions obviously depend on our definitions of “social appraisal” and “social referencing” because adopting a more restrictive or inclusive formulation of either construct can tip the balance of argument in one or the other direction. For example, a relatively broad concept of social appraisal is more likely to encompass a relatively narrow concept of social referencing than vice versa. But is there something deeper at stake; something that goes beyond semantics and gets to the bottom of how emotions regulate other people’s behaviour across social development and during real-time interactions between adults?

Three decades back, similar considerations surrounded the affective primacy controversy (Lazarus, 1984; Zajonc, 1984). Whether emotion always depends on cognition is another question whose answer hinges on how inclusively the key concepts are formulated (e.g., Leventhal & Scherer, 1987; Parkinson & Manstead, 1992). Emotion without cognition is clearly possible if “emotion” is defined broadly enough and “cognition” is defined narrowly enough. However, definitional respecification of this kind leaves more fundamental questions about what kinds of “emotion” depend on what kinds of “cognition” unanswered (Leventhal & Scherer, 1987). In the affective primacy controversy, moving beyond definitional disputes involved addressing these more specific questions. Arguably, the burgeoning study of interpersonal emotional influence processes should follow a similar trajectory.

Different researchers have certainly used the terms “social appraisal” and “social referencing” in a variety of overlapping senses. Although both concepts consistently refer to interactions in which one person’s emotion influences another person’s evaluative orientation to an object or event, these interactions can involve a range of processes, and these processes can serve a range of functions. The extent to which the processes and functions need to be distinguished depends on

the agenda guiding the research in question. When the theoretical goal is to characterize the spectrum of interpersonal processes whereby people acquire information about the affective significance of events, it makes sense to make corresponding distinctions (e.g., Clément & Dukes, 2017). When the theoretical goal is to uncover unifying principles underlying the development of interpersonal emotional influence, continuities rather than discontinuities start to seem more important (Walle, Reschke, & Knothe, 2017).

My research (e.g., Parkinson, Simons, & Niven, 2016) mainly focuses on real-time interactions in which adult “knowers” and “learners” repeatedly switch roles and where influence operates dynamically and bidirectionally. In these contexts, each person’s attention can shift rapidly from a referential object to the other person, or to the relation between self and other, or between self or other and object. For example, a wife expresses worry about her ability to cope with a current concern, and her husband may orient at different moments to the concern, his wife, her orientation to him, and to the concern (e.g., Parkinson & Simons, 2012). Each partner may strategically regulate some aspects of their emotional orientation, while other (often simultaneous) processes of mutual adjustment operate at less explicit levels (e.g., Parkinson & Simons, 2009).

I use the flexible term “relation alignment” (e.g., Parkinson, 2008) to capture the variety of emotional influence processes operating during these interactions. Relation alignment includes social appraisal along with other forms of interpersonal adjustment that do not depend on explicit communication or transfer of appraisal information. For me, social referencing is an even more specific concept covering a particular form of interaction in which one person actively seeks out clarificatory evaluative information from another person. This evaluative information then affects the second person’s behaviour by a process of social appraisal. In other words, both social appraisal and social referencing imply interpersonal information transfer and communication of emotional meaning, whereas relation alignment can operate prior to, and as part of, the production of emotional meaning.

More basic forms of relation alignment also seem to precede the acquisition of social appraisal and social referencing in developing children. Infants adjust to (e.g., Stern, Hofer, Haft, & Dore, 1985) and actively operate on (e.g., Reddy, 2008) caregivers’ emotions before they begin to represent the relational meaning of those emotions in terms of appraisal (Parkinson, 2007). Indeed, some of the earliest forms of infant–caregiver interaction involve regulation of direct relations between interactants rather than their respective orientations towards any referential object. Social referencing probably depends on subsequent co-ordination of this more directly interpersonal relation alignment with the development of shared attention towards objects.

Despite its potential reducibility to a definitional dispute, the old affective primacy debate at least served to draw attention to

emotion-related phenomena that did not depend on prior generation of explicit meaning. Similarly, I want to argue that whatever forms of “cognition,” “appraisal,” or “social referencing” characterize the earliest and most basic instances of relation alignment, they do not necessarily involve ostension or the active extraction of appraisal information. Mutual orientations can adjust to one another, and their interpersonal consolidation at some point produces emergent emotional meanings (e.g., Fogel, 1993), which need not be registered as such by either party to the exchange.

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Comment: Reframing the Conceptual Diversity of Social Appraisal and Social Referencing

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Abstract

The comment discusses the common ground and differences of the contribution of Walle, Reschke, and Knothe (2017), as well as that of Clément and Dukes (2017) in their efforts to conceptually connect an important concept from infancy research, namely that of social referencing, with an important one from emotion research on adults, that of social appraisal. The distinction between social referencing and affective observation under the generic concept of social appraisal could be worthwhile for differentiating implicit and explicit impacts of a model's behavior on a child's emotional development.

Keywords

development, social appraisal, social referencing

The contribution of Walle et al. (2017), as well as that of Clément and Dukes (2017) are aimed at conceptually connecting an important concept from infancy research, namely that of social referencing (SR), with an important one from emotion research on adults, that of social appraisal (SA). It is worthwhile and indeed necessary to link these currently unrelated research domains, as this makes the results mutually more compelling. In a world of already highly specialized research in psychology, such an integrative task is tackled all too seldom, resulting in a diversity of concepts for very similar phenomena that then stand side by side, without any conceptual links. The concepts of SR and SA are prime cases in point. A second advantage of such an integration of concepts from childhood and adulthood research is that it serves to check and confirm the integrative potential