Sex, Sex Roles, and Response Styles for Negative Affect: Selectivity in a Free Recall Task

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Study 1 examined how responses to negative affect may be influenced by sex differences in response styles [S. Nolen-Hoeksema (1987), "Sex Differences in Unipolar Depression: Evidence and Theory," Psychological Bulletin, Vol. 101, pp. 259–282] and situational norms. Male and female experimental subjects were led to experience negative affect by reading and rating sad stories, and were then given either nonnormative or normative feedback. Nonnormative subjects were informed that their story ratings were more negative than other participants' ratings. Normative subjects were informed that their ratings were similar to others' ratings. For nonnormative subjects, men recalled less negative material than women, suggesting that response styles are most apparent when negative affect is considered inappropriate. As both sex and sex role orientation are predictive of response styles, Study 2 examined the hypothesis that both sex and sex role orientation are predictive of recall in a manner similar to sex in Study 1. Male and female subjects high and low in masculinity and femininity were assigned to negative-nonnormative and neutral affect conditions. In addition to a marginally significant sex effect consistent with Study 1, results revealed that high-masculinity individuals tended to recall more positive material in the negative-nonnormative condition than in the neutral affect condition. In contrast, low-masculinity individuals recalled less positive material in the negative-nonnormative condition than in the neutral affect condition. The implications of this research for the impact of negative affect on recall are addressed.

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Men and women seem to differ in their responses to their own sadness or distress. According to Nolen-Hoeksema's (1987) response style theory, men distract themselves more than women in response to such feelings; distraction can include, for example, initiating rewarding behaviors (e.g., playing sports). In contrast, women ruminate more than men; rumination can include talking to others about feelings and identifying causes for the sadness. Response style theory is consistent with much previous research, notably with reliable sex differences in coping research based on self-report methodologies (e.g., Kleinke, Staneski, & Mason, 1982) and with recent experimental research (Zillmann, Weaver, Mundorf, & Aust, 1986).

A second major influence on the experience and expression of affect are norms (Hochschild, 1979, 1983; Thoits, 1987). Generally, norms seem to dictate that positive affect is appropriate and that negative affect is inappropriate; research has shown that people more readily express positive than negative affect, and that those who experience and express negative affect are disliked (Dosser, Balswick, & Halverson, 1983; Gurman, 1987; Highlen & Gillis, 1978; Sommers, 1984). Negative affect may be appropriate in only a restricted range of circumstances; these may include facing upsetting news or certain personal difficulties. In general, people expect social disapproval if they do not conform to affect norms (Graham, Gentry, & Green, 1981).

The present experimental research examined how subjects respond to their own negative affect as a function of their response styles and situational norms. In Study 1, predictions derived from response style theory and norm theory were addressed. Response style theory led to the prediction that men will distract themselves from their affect, whereas women will ruminate on their affect. Norm theory led to the prediction that male and female subjects will attempt to distract themselves from or alleviate their negative affect if they consider it inappropriately extreme in a specific situation; in contrast, male and female subjects will express and dwell on their affect if they consider it appropriate.

In Study 1, male and female experimental subjects were led to experience negative affect by reading sad stories while being exposed to sad music. Subjects rated each story's affective impact. These ratings provided, among other things, a basis for the norm manipulations. The (fictitious) social consensus on the story ratings served as the situational norm (Festinger, 1954; Schachter, 1959). In the nonnormative condition, subjects were informed that their ratings were more negative than the negative ratings of most participants. In the normative condition, subjects were informed that their ratings were similar to the negative ratings of most participants.

3Other negative affective states, such as anger, seem to be associated to sex in a manner different than sadness or distress (Hyde, 1986).