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Approaching the Effects of Gender-Based Socialization on the Emotional Expression: an Exploratory Study

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Abstract

In this study the underlying structure of fifteen emotions generated by a social stimulus was analyzed in a sample of 869 individuals. Differentiated patterns by gender were identified in the configuration of the emotional responses, standing out differences between men and women in the symbolization of pity and in fear, a core variable of the “battered woman syndrome” (Walker, 2009, 2013). The figure of reference chosen by the subjects (paternal/maternal) modulated this emotional structure, by reinforcing differentially the emotional responses. The results obtained have been applied to prevention of gender-based violence.

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1. Introduction

The experience of women victims of gender-based violence has been systematized in many investigations, giving room for consolidated theories on the psychological explanation of this phenomenon (Walker, 2009). The cognitive and behavioral aspects have been the ones that have received most attention, relegating the emotions to a role of minor specific weight among different theories. Nevertheless, both in the origin and in the development of gender-based violence in couples, emotions play a central role in the experience, as revealed in the narratives of female victims (Escudero, Polo, López, & Aguilar, 2005), standing out: fear, the emotion with the major weight regarding the

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strategies of the batterer; love, meant as “unconditional devotion” from the ideology of romantic love; blame, mobilized and generated actively by the batterer; shame, linked to the pressure of the woman’s role as homemaker; and loneliness, experienced around mistrust and social isolation. In turn, such emotional responses are inserted within a wider emotional spectrum, linked among others to cultural factors, and therefore subject to change among different social groups (Jenkins, 1996). The idea of "ethos" adopted by this author incorporates social aspects as power and social standards into the organization of the emotions that individuals experience, hence the evaluation of the emotional state could not be carried out properly without the specific cultural understanding of the group which is to be studied (Jenkins, 1996).

Gender anthropology has made clear the culturally differentiated contexts in which both men and women are socialized, contexts that configure differentiated identities (Martín Casares, 2006). Therefore it is likely to expect that these cultural differences affect the way in which emotions are experienced by both genders, and that those emotions experienced by women within an abuse or maltreatment situation differ from those ones experienced by men in similar situations. If fear is the core emotion in gender-based violence (Walker, 2013), it can be assumed that its meaning should differ from the fear as it is experienced by men, which would lead to different behaviors as well. In this line, an androcentric point of view about the role of emotions, that took the masculine experience as reference for their interpretation (Bourdieu, 1998), not only would bias the comprehension of women’s experience in situations of dominance—such as an abusive relationship—, but it would lead to erroneous judgments regarding the interpretation of behaviors caused by such emotions, from the perspective pointed out in the decision-making theory (Kahneman, 2014).

The aim of the following study is to explore comparatively the underlying emotional structure of the responses that men and women express when facing a social stimulus, and to analyze possible effects of the gender of the chosen parental figure of reference as a source of attitudinal comparison.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

In this study 869 students were asked to participate, from which 97,7% were undergraduate and 2,3% were graduate. The subjects were all Spanish students from the University of Salamanca and the Pontifical University of Salamanca, with age between 17 and 48 years ($M= 19,85; SD= 2,68$). An incidental sampling was used, with quotas for sex, resulting in a final sample of 433 women (49,8 %) and 436 men (50,2 %). In a scale of political ideology from 1 (“extreme left”) to 10 (“extreme right”), the sample was positioned in global terms at the center of the continuum ($M= 4,96; SD= 1,72$). Using Student’s t for independent samples, a small but significant difference of age between men and women was identified ($M= 20,1$ and $M= 19,6$, respectively; $p< 0,01$), and it was confirmed the equivalence of both samples in the variable political ideology ($p= 0,826$).

2.2. Variables and instruments

So as to elicit the subject’s emotional responses, a questionnaire about their attitudes towards different immigrant groups was used (from Maghreb, Sub-Sahara, Latin America and Asia). The immigrant collective was used as stimulus, due to the fact that this is such a currently worrying topic within the Spanish population (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2014). The subjects were asked about the degree in which the immigrant collective make them feel the following emotions (in a Likert scale of five points; from “nothing” to “a lot”), selected from the literature on prejudice towards the immigrants and ethnic minorities in our country (e.g., Gómez-Berrocal & Navas, 2000; Navas, 1998; Rueda & Navas, 1996): hate, attraction, hostility, anger, fear, friendliness, discomfort, disgust, pity, insecurity, suspicion, compassion, indifference, respect and gratitude.

To measure the possible differentiating effects of the parental figure of reference, the Pettigrew and Meertens’ (1995) Scales of Subtle and Blatant Prejudice were included in the questionnaire, in its Spanish version adapted by Rueda and Navas (1996). This instrument, designed to measure the degree of prejudice towards diverse outgroups, consists of 20 items that the participants must value in a Likert scale of five points; 10 of them measure blatant prejudice and the other 10 subtle prejudice. Taking the immigrant collective as outgroup, both scales were applied twice to each participant: first they had to answer the items in first person, from their own point of view; secondly,
they had to answer the same items from their mother or father’s point of view, according to their choice. In other words, in the latter they had to complete the scales of prejudice as if their mother or father were answering.

Following Pettigrew and Meertens’ (1995) model, a typology of the subjects was established according to their scores in the subtle and blatant prejudice scales, based on the logical mid-point of each one (between 30 and 31 for a range from 10 to 50): type 0 -“error”-, type 1-"equalitarians"-, type 2 -"subtle"-, and type 3 -"bigots"-. This typology allowed to classify every participant in the following way: a) when the personal type matched that of the parental figure of reference, the participant was classified within the category attitudinal convergence; when instead b) they did not match, the subject was classified within the category attitudinal divergence.

2.3. Procedure

In the current investigation, thought out from a primarily exploratory approach, information was gathered in an individual format, as part of a broader survey in which each participant voluntarily gave his or her opinion “on issues related to the current socio-economic situation and to the migratory phenomenon in our country”. The relevant items were answered according to the following sequence: 1) Sample’s descriptive variables; 2) prejudice scales, from the own point of view; 3) emotional responses; 4) choice of the parental figure of reference; and lastly 5) prejudice scales, from the parental figure of reference’s point of view.

3. Results

3.1. Attitudinal convergence/divergence with the parental figure of reference

The first phase of analysis based on the scores obtained in the prejudice scales, from both the personal perspective as well as from the parental figure of reference’s perspective. The reliability of the scales from the personal perspective, estimated by Cronbach’s alpha, was 0,789 for the subtle prejudice and 0,847 for the blatant prejudice. In turn, from the parental figure of reference’s perspective the alphas were 0,834 for the subtle prejudice scale and 0,863 for the blatant prejudice scale. Even though such indexes could not be considered excellent, they were acceptable, similar to those obtained in the initial studies of validation and adaptation (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995; Rueda & Navas, 1996).

From both scores, the women and men of the sample were classified according to Pettigrew and Meertens’ (1995) typology, as shown in Table 1. Chi-squared test supported the hypothesis of independence between sex and type of person (p= 0,360 for the personal responses; p= 0,064 for the responses based on the parental figure of reference).

Table 1. Typology based on prejudice scales: absolute and relative frequencies

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<th>Personal perspective</th>
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Because cases with inconsistent scores of prejudice (“error type”) were a minority, according to the model (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995), they were kept out from analysis. Hereafter the sample was classified according to the dichotomy attitudinal convergence vs. divergence with the figure of reference. The result of this classification is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Attitudinal convergence vs. attitudinal divergence: absolute and relative frequencies

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Convergence with mother | Divergence from mother | Convergence with father | Divergence from father
---|---|---|---
Women | 156 (39.8%) | 81 (20.7%) | 81 (20.7%) | 74 (18.9%) |
Men | 103 (27.4%) | 64 (17%) | 120 (31.9%) | 89 (23.7%) |

When comparing the frequencies of association between sex and attitudinal convergence/divergence with the figure of reference, there seemed to be a trend to take as reference the maternal figure as opposed to the paternal one in the women’s sample, who in turn tended to converge rather than diverge. The opposite trend was observed in the men’s sample, who tended to converge with and, in a lesser degree, to diverge from the paternal figure (p< 0.01).

3.2. Configuration of the emotional responses

To analyze the underlying structure of the 15 emotions, an ASCAL multidimensional scaling procedure was performed with both samples of men and women. Convergence was reached in six iterations in the women’s sample and in five in the men’s sample, with acceptable fitness in the first one (Stress= 0.091; RSQ= 0.965) and at the limit of acceptability in the second one (Stress= 0.102; RSQ= 0.959). Figure 1 shows both scaling outputs.

![Figure 1. Emotional responses’ structure: women’s sample on the left; men’s sample on the right. Legend: odio15.1= hate; atra15.2= attraction; host15.3= hostility; rab15.4= anger; mied15.5= fear; simp15.6= friendliness; inco15.7= discomfort; asc15.8= disgust; last15.9= pity; ins15.10= insecurity; des15.11= suspicion; com15.12= compassion; ind15.13= indifference; res15.14= respect; agr15.15= gratitude](image)

Taking into account the relative position of the emotions in a two-dimensional space, the main differences emerged related to pity and fear. In the first case, in the women’s sample pity come closer to indifference, whereas for men it was near to gratitude and attraction. On the other hand, fear turned out to be represented in the men’s sample closer to hostility, anger, hate and disgust, whereas for women it was nearer to insecurity, suspicion and discomfort.

3.3. Effects of sex and attitudinal convergence/divergence with the parental figure of reference

To investigate the possible interaction effects between sex and parental figure of reference on the emotional patterns, the attitudinal divergence and attitudinal convergence cases were analyzed separately, from a complete cases standpoint. For that purpose both MANCOVA were performed, with two intersubject factors (sex and parental figure of reference), and controlling the possible influence of the political ideology.
In the cases of attitudinal divergence (n= 308), significant effects of interaction weren’t found on any of the dependent variables. Significant main effects of sex were observed on attraction (p< 0.01), anger (p< 0.05), indifference (p< 0.05) and fear (p< 0.05): the first three ones expressed by men in a greater degree than women; who in turn expressed fear in greater extent than men. The parental figure of reference variable had only significant influence on attraction (p< 0.01), which was stronger in women and men that attitudinally diverge from the father.

On the other hand, in the cases of attitudinal convergence (n= 460), main effects of sex were observed on attraction (stronger in men than in women; p< 0.05), as well as effects of the parental figure of reference on disgust and indifference (stronger when convergence was with the father; p< 0.05), and on friendliness and gratitude (stronger when convergence was with the mother; p< 0.01). At the same time, there were significant interaction effects between sex and parental figure of reference, on the variables hate (p< 0.05), anger (p< 0.05), fear (p= 0.01), discomfort (p< 0.01), insecurity (p< 0.01) and suspicion (p< 0.01). The direction of these interactions is shown in Figure 2.

![Figure 2. Attitudinal convergence with the parental figure of reference: Interaction between sex and figure of reference. Blue lines represent the women’s mean values; Red lines represent the men’s mean values.](image)

As it can be observed, hate, anger and discomfort presented comparable patterns: men tended to experience such emotions in a similar degree when they converged attitudinally with mother or father, whereas women affirmed to feel them to a lesser extent when they converged with mother than when they did so with father. In this line, the interaction effects on fear, insecurity and suspicion kept a similar trend: women experienced these emotions in a greater degree when they converged attitudinally with father than when they did with mother, unlike men, who expressed stronger fear, insecurity and suspicion when they converged with mother.
4. Conclusion

Given these results the first relevant conclusion for the purpose of this work has to do with the identification of divergent elements in the configuration of the emotional framework of women and men when facing a social stimulus (immigrants). Two critical emotions emerged for the understanding of the process of gender-based violence: pity and fear. Fear occupies the central explanatory place in the emotional experience of battered women, constituting the main diagnostic element regarding the “battered woman syndrome” (Walker, 2009). The difficulty of the legal system to understand and properly value the behavior of women affected by this syndrome (Walker, 2013) is one of the unresolved issues for the adequate treatment of victims by the social system. If men and women experience fear in different ways, as the results suggest, warning about these differences may contribute to a better understanding of the behavior of the women who are victims of abuse. In men’s case, punitive emotions emerge (hostility, anger, hate and disgust). Such emotions are legitimated and reinforced by the gender commandments of the traditional masculinity, whose relation with the violence has been widely documented (Lorente, 2004). For women, however, the context of emotional proximity of fear is positioned in a frame of vulnerability: insecurity, suspicion and discomfort. The intense fear or psychological terror described in the “syndrome of the battered woman” might then be understood in the context of vulnerability caused by the maltreatment, which would explain the paralyzing and inconsistent behavior of victims. Withdrawal of denunciations, inconsistency in the testimony, or responses of intense panic, are all coherent behaviors if fear is experienced within an emotional context of vulnerability; however they turn out to be hardly understandable if fear is experienced within a context of punishment, as it is the case for men. If the prototypical representations of the expected behaviors in situations of intense fear that are activated in the social imaginary were placed in the androcentric, “masculine” point of view (Bourdieu, 1998), this cognitive bias might explain the errors of judgment (Kahneman, 2014) on the behavior of the (women) victims of maltreatment.

On the other hand, the different emotional configuration of pity in the experience of men and women suggests as well important implications for the understanding of the phenomenon of gender-based violence. The proximity to emotions of positive affect (gratitude and attraction), as it emerges in the representation of men, contrasts with the context of absence of affective tonality (indifference) in which it emerges in women. Pity experienced as “sorrow” is one of the explanatory emotions related to the permanence of women within abusive relationships (Escudero, Polo, López, & Aguilar, 2005), working like a powerful inhibitor for the escape of the violent situation. The pity that batterers provoke in their victims has a connotation in the social representation as an emotion of positive affect, that lead to interpret it as a sign of “emotional dependency ” in women. The emotional map that emerges in the multidimensional scaling reveals, however, a different interpretative context for the emotional experience of women. The differentiated socialization on the ethics of care (Gilligan, 1985) might explain the autonomy and survival of this emotion in negative emotional contexts for women, such as the situation of abuse. Their behavior under this interpretative key acquires therefore a meaning detached from the “loving feeling”, contributing a wider understanding of the role of pity in the maintenance of abusing relationships, and explaining coherently behaviors that do not require the ”loving” hypothesis.

Finally, the interaction effects between sex and attitudinal convergence with the chosen figure of reference (mother/father), sheds light on the socializing effect of gender on emotions. The emotions affected by this interaction effect show similarity with those that emerge differently in the emotional configuration of men and women, and those that constitute a context of proximity in the multidimensional scaling: hate, anger, discomfort, fear, insecurity and suspicion. In the case of women, these emotions are intensified when the figure of reference is the father. In the case of men, the chosen parent makes an effect in the trend of the emotion: hate, anger and discomfort do not change; insecurity, suspicion and fear increase in intensity if the figure of reference is the mother. These results suggest the need to investigate on the effects of the gender-based socialization on the elicitation of emotional responses. The emotion of fear, whose importance has been already pointed out, presents the more singular interactive pattern: men and women do not differ in the expression of this emotion when the chosen figure of reference is the mother; but they reach the maximum difference when the figure of reference is the father. Both the reference of the father and the attitudinal convergence with him intensify fear in women and inhibit it in men. Even though new studies are required, that would explain the way in which this association works, this result suggests an important element for the understanding of the emotional processes involved in gender-based violence. Furthermore, its potential application to the psychology of cognitive judgments (Kahneman, 2014), both in the decision-making involved in legal processes.
and in the social representation of this serious problem, suggests the need for further studies that go in depth about this issue.

References


