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Interpersonal Sensitivity

Theory and Measurement

Edited by

Judith A. Hall • Frank J. Bernieri

Interpersonal Sensitivity Theory and Measurement



Edited by

Judith A. Hall
Northeastern University

Frank J. Bernieri
University of Toledo



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Series Foreword

This volume serves as a handbook of how to think about, measure, and study interpersonal sensitivity. It does so by using that most pedagogically proven procedure: showing how it has been done by the best and the brightest thinkers and researchers studying interpersonal sensitivity.

Readers of this book (and their students) will be rewarded with a greater appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of the various methods used by the authors of these chapters. Readers will be rewarded, too, by the liberating effects of theoretical and methodological cross-fertilization. Exposure to the ideas and methods of other workers is liberating from habits of method that build up over time. When we know and really understand other approaches we can exercise more free choice in the methods we use. Our chosen method X is more likely to have been a wise choice when we thoughtfully preferred it over Y and Z than when we used it because it was the only method we knew how to use.

The editors and the authors evoke the spirit of earlier pioneers as they wrestle with some of the same fundamental issues. Among these pioneers are Don Campbell, Don Fiske, Lee Cronbach, Paul Meehl, and Gary Boring.

Campbell and Fiske's thinking about the multitrait, multimethod matrix may help to clarify when different measurement methods reflect truly distinguishable constructs, and when they merely reflect "problems of unique versus common method variance." Cronbach and Meehl's conceptions of construct validity allow us to describe more clearly the nomological nets created by (a) the superordinate construct of interpersonal sensitivity, (b) its nested major subtypes, (c) the more specific constructs within each of the subtypes, and (d) the measures used to assess the specific constructs and the higher-level constructs that subsume them. Until there was the more specific discussion of measures undertaken by this volume, we could hardly begin to describe the nomological net that defines interpersonal sensitivity theory.

Finally, there is the now-seen-as-radical but wisely cautionary message of Boring. Psychology's historian, Boring warned us of the problems we invite when we wander too far from a path of sensible operationism. Constructs should often be richer than any simple method used to measure them. But the prudent practice preached by Boring suggests that this richness, when excessive, can be theoretically troublesome.

Never has it been more clear that the domain of research on interpersonal sensitivity is a remarkable hybrid of personality and social psychology. It is a domain that seems intrinsically to call for the examination of individual differences in performance occurring in a context of a changing person existing

in a changing environment, and an environment that is largely a social one at that.

This volume marks a new level of maturity of the research domain of interpersonal sensitivity. Never have we known as much about this fascinating topic as we do now, thanks to the editors and authors of this book.

—Robert Rosenthal
Riverside, California

Preface

People spend most of their waking hours perceiving and making judgments about others. The natural ecology within which people must survive is primarily social in nature. They necessarily must notice and make judgments about others' emotions, physical states, attitudes, personality, truthfulness, intentions (and much else, too), using many sources of information—verbal, nonverbal, and contextual. Our relative success as a species implies that these judgments must be sufficiently accurate, on average, over the long haul. In short, people possess some capacity to know each other. We call this ability *interpersonal sensitivity*.

But we also know that interpersonal judgments are not always accurate. There are many possible reasons for such inaccuracy. Messages and cues could be misunderstood because they are intrinsically hard to convey, or “encode,” whereas others could be misjudged because they were conveyed in a flawed or confusing manner. These two examples illustrate the operation of “message” and “encoder” (i.e., expressor) factors in interpersonal judgment, respectively. But a message could also be misjudged because the person doing the judging (the “decoder”) is not using the information in an optimal manner. Looking at the accuracy of interpersonal judgment from the perspective of the decoder is the main focus of this book. In other words, we discuss interpersonal sensitivity and its variability across individual decoders and across dyadic contexts.

The use of the terms “accuracy,” “sensitivity,” and “individual differences” naturally implies that the construct in question can be measured. We believe it can, as do the many investigators who have developed measurement techniques for doing so. The chapters of this book reveal the wide range of methods that have been developed as well as a wealth of validation findings for these methods.

You might ask, If interpersonal sensitivity is a single construct, why is there such a wide range of measurement approaches? Embedded within this question lies the fundamental motivation behind the present volume. The different methods that exist are certainly measuring something, but what are they measuring? A close look at different methods indeed reveals that different methods often imply different operational definitions of the interpersonal sensitivity construct. And if operational definitions differ, could not the underlying theoretical constructs also differ? And could there exist other definitions of interpersonal sensitivity that have not yet been captured in a measurement paradigm? Therefore, a main purpose of the present volume is to collect and systematize different theoretical definitions of interpersonal sensitivity, especially as these definitions are differently embodied in the tests and measurements available for empirical use.

Thus, our focus is on both theory and method. It is our hope that this volume will provide an integrated treatment of the interpersonal sensitivity construct, as

well as detailed descriptions of measurement methodologies and instruments. Many of the authors will be well recognized as those most prominently associated with their respective approaches to measuring interpersonal sensitivity. We believe that these authors' insights, critiques, and proposals for new approaches will be a lasting resource for students and professionals working in almost any basic or applied area of study involving interpersonal judgments. The domain of relevance is relationships of all kinds, including personal, clinical, and functional, as well as the many settings in which the accuracy of interpersonal judgments may have significant consequences (including home, school, clinical, legal, and employment settings).

In suggesting that the present volume is a useful and thought-provoking resource, we are not claiming that it is the first in-depth treatment of interpersonal sensitivity. Over 20 years ago, Robert Rosenthal and his colleagues described the development and validation of the Profile of Nonverbal Sensitivity (PONS test) in a book that also discussed previous research on measuring interpersonal sensitivity (Rosenthal, R., Hall, J. A., DiMatteo, M. R., Rogers, P. L., & Archer, D., 1979. *Sensitivity to Nonverbal Communication: The PONS Test*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press). In the same year, Rosenthal edited a small but influential volume titled *Skill in Nonverbal Communication: Individual Differences* (Cambridge, MA: Oelgeschlager, Gunn & Hain, 1979). A number of the authors of the present volume are represented in both of these earlier works. Two decades have seen marvelous advances in the range of approaches that are available to measure interpersonal sensitivity. Nevertheless, the earlier volumes are still surprisingly timely; few chapters have been made obsolete with the accumulation of new methods and findings. We are proud to follow in the tradition established by this earlier work, and we believe that our emphasis on the description and evaluation of methodology serves to complement rather than supersede it.

This project has been helped along by two very important people. First is Susan Milmo of Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, who suggested a book on interpersonal sensitivity and was willing to wait several years before we could commit to it. Everyone should hope for an editor as gentle and wise as Susan. Second is Steven Breckler, Program Director for Social Psychology at the National Science Foundation, who funded a chapter authors' workshop in June 1998. This 2-day opportunity for the contributors to discuss their work and their ideas, face to face, helped the authors to see commonalities and differences among their approaches and provided a sense of coherence and excitement for the project.

—Judith A. Hall
Boston, MA

—Frank J. Bernieri
Toledo, OH

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I

Theoretical Issues



Toward a Taxonomy of Interpersonal Sensitivity

Frank J. Bernieri
University of Toledo

Fundamentally, the contributors to this volume are interested in both the aptitude and achievement related to an individual knowing and understanding others. A person is considered sensitive if he or she can perceive or otherwise respond appropriately to the internal states (e.g., cognitive, affective, motivational) of another, understand the antecedents of those states, and predict the subsequent affective, cognitive, and behavioral events that will result. The presumption is that similar to other intellectual, physical, and emotional competencies, this ability should enable an individual to function more effectively in day-to-day life by facilitating interaction with others. *Interpersonal sensitivity*, then, can be defined most generally as the ability to sense, perceive accurately, and respond appropriately to one's personal, interpersonal, and social environment.

FROM SENSATION TO BEHAVIOR

This definition clearly spans a number of distinct perceptual, cognitive, and motivational processes. An individual who is sensitive must first sense and perceptually *discriminate* various stimuli in his or her surroundings. If John's wife rolls her eyes in disgust at the breakfast table, but John doesn't notice it because he happened to be looking down at the newspaper when it occurred, his understanding of his immediate social environment will be compromised. Interpersonal sensitivity starts with sensation and perception. Thus, interpersonal sensitivity is a function of (a) one's opportunities to experience and interact with the environment, (b) attention, and (c) any constraints on the perceptual

system with respect to the range of stimuli one can detect and process. Any process that influences these three aspects of interpersonal sensation and perception will necessarily affect interpersonal sensitivity.

Information sensed and discriminated is also identified and interpreted (Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Trope, 1986). Here an individual labels a stimulus (e.g., a look of disgust, anger, contempt, or frustration) and perhaps the interpersonal context (e.g., the breakfast partner could have been surveying an attitude, failing a persuasion attempt, baiting a conflict, or getting a justifiable request rejected). The labeling of an event influences and is in turn influenced by any effortful or motivated analysis and interpretation. A correct perception of an interpersonal event is a function of not only the stimuli perceived but also any preexisting expectations regarding the stimulus person, the nature of the event itself, and the context within which the event occurred (Jones, 1990; Trope, 1986).

However, even if an eye-roll is correctly identified and understood by a perceiver as a manifestation of an exasperated state by one's breakfast companion, only an interpersonally sensitive individual will understand the implications of this event and how it will likely affect his or her immediate future and pursuit of subsequent interaction goals. In other words, after figuring out what it is that John has just witnessed he now must deal with the issues of what it means to him and how he should respond. People tend to view interpersonally sensitive individuals as those who know what an effective response would be and in what measure. Perhaps a small concession or acknowledgment of his partner's frustration is all that is needed to prevent a negative spiral of affective tone at this point in the conversation. Of course, simply knowing what the correct response should be does not ensure that it will be executed (e.g., Nowicki & Duke, chap. 10, this volume). Opportunity for interaction, encoding ability, and motivation all can influence the extent to which the effective response is ultimately executed.

In reviewing the various steps through which an interpersonally sensitive individual must successfully negotiate, Nowicki and Duke point out that "there are so many ways to fail interpersonally that it is surprising that children [and adults] succeed as often as they do socially" (chap. 10, this volume). And people do succeed, more or less.

The challenge for theoreticians and researchers is that the construct of interpersonal sensitivity can encompass the entire range of processes, from the detection of stimuli within a sensory field to the actual behaviors enacted toward another. The assessment of prosocial behavior in children (Losoya & Eisenberg, chap. 2, this volume), the study of deception detection (Malone & DePaulo, chap. 6, this volume), the judgment of interpersonal relations from videotaped interactions (Archer, Costanzo, & Akert, chap. 9, this volume), and the perception of nonverbal behaviors from very brief video clips (Ambady, LaPlante, & Johnson, chap. 5, this volume; Hall, chap. 8, this volume) are all very much

related to an overlapping construct. However, it would be a mistake to consider these activities, tasks, and behaviors to be synonymous or generalizeable from one to another. This book makes clear that there is as much disparity between what interpersonal sensitivity researchers study as there is similarity.

The contributors to this volume are interested primarily in an individual's responsiveness to, as well as the accurate perception and judgment of, the social environment. Whereas issues of encoding skill, expressive control, and interpersonal influence are relevant to the broad topics of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995; Salovey & Mayer, 1990) and social skill (e.g., Eisenberg, 1998; Gilbert & Connolly, 1991), their treatment is beyond the psychological construct on which we focus. Therefore, the interpersonal sensitivity construct that is dealt with in these pages relates more to receptive accuracy (i.e., detection, decoding, and comprehension) than to behavior expression, its control, and interpersonal manipulation.

THE FUNDAMENTAL ISSUE

What is interesting to most psychologists and laypersons is not that individuals have interpersonal sensitivity (cf. Ambady, Bernieri, & Richeson, 2000; Funder, 1999, chap. 16, this volume), but that some individuals appear more interpersonally sensitive than others (Colvin & Bundick, chap. 3, this volume; Riggio & Riggio, chap. 7, this volume; Taft, 1955). Essentially, the quest in understanding how people come to know others has been driven all along by curiosity regarding how the "good ones" do it and why the "bad ones" fail.

One way to approach this general issue is to identify the good and not-so-good interpersonal perceivers and then study them to learn how they differ. This is precisely how psychologists went about their business until 1955, a year that is as notorious to contemporary interpersonal perception researchers as the year 1929 is to Wall Street stockbrokers. In 1955, Taft published his seminal review article on the ability to judge people, which adroitly summarized the preceding 40 years of research. In that same year, Cronbach and Gage published methodological papers that effectively undermined the validity of almost all of the relevant knowledge that had accumulated up to that point (Cronbach, 1955; Gage & Cronbach, 1955). It is beyond the scope of this chapter to detail those methodological points. However, the research described in nearly every chapter of this volume has, in some way, been inspired or influenced by those papers published over 45 years ago.

PROBLEMS WITH INTERPERSONAL SENSITIVITY AND ACCURACY RESEARCH

Interpersonal sensitivity has been operationalized and measured in numerous ways, with the result being several distinct measurement paradigms, many of

which are represented in the chapters of this volume. Typically, researchers have worked within one of these paradigms without fully appreciating the implicit assumptions, consequences, and implications of the existing methodological diversity. Unfortunately there has not been a great deal of communication among researchers as to the assumptions implicitly made with the adoption of each design. This has led to impoverished discussions detailing the precise constructs or competencies involved, which prevents a clear understanding of how one set of results relates or applies to those found elsewhere. Without a clear demarcation of interpersonal sensitivity subconstructs and a clear understanding of how specific data relate to each of these constructs, empirical results are subject to overgeneralization or inappropriate application, creating theoretical ambiguity. Unfortunately, this theoretical ambiguity grows with the introduction of each new paradigm no matter how insightfully or elegantly conceived.

The first step in removing the ambiguity is to make salient the alternatives that are possible. The following is a brief outline of the issues, alternatives, and assumptions that characterize research in interpersonal sensitivity and judgmental accuracy.

Breadth of the Construct

As stated earlier, interpersonal sensitivity can pertain to everything from sensation thresholds (e.g., Hall, Carter, & Horgan, *in press*) to the execution of appropriate and effective behavior (e.g., Losoya & Eisenberg, chap. 2, this volume). Rarely, however, do researchers work with such a generalized construct. More often, as occurs in this volume, researchers constrain interpersonal sensitivity to the correct identification and comprehension of social stimuli. According to the work presented in this volume, the sensitive person can (a) perceive the emotion being experienced by another (Nowicki & Duke, chap. 10, this volume); (b) infer what a partner is thinking (Ickes, chap. 12, this volume); (c) decode what the partner is attempting to communicate (Noller, chap. 13, this volume), be it truth or deception (Malone & DePaulo, chap. 6, this volume); (d) ascertain the true relationship between interactants (Archer, Costanzo, & Akert, chap. 9, this volume) and how they are getting along (Bernieri & Gillis, chap. 4, this volume; Snodgrass, chap. 11, this volume); (e) assess the social context within which a person seems to be communicating (Hall, chap. 8, this volume); (f) know a target's stable dispositions, traits, and behavioral tendencies (Colvin & Bundick, chap. 3, this volume); and (g) do so with an exposure to an extremely thin slice of the target's ongoing behavioral stream (Ambady, LaPlante, & Johnson, chap. 5, this volume) when not afforded the opportunity of an entire series of interactions with multiple partners (Kenny & Winquist, chap. 14, this volume). Interpersonal sensitivity from the standpoint of this volume is mostly, if not exclusively, about knowing another or group of others.

One also can argue that a more global construct of interpersonal sensitivity should include knowing what to do (Nowicki & Duke, chap. 10, this volume). Constructs of social intelligence have emphasized the capacity of individuals to understand how social systems work and how people stereotypically behave within them (e.g., Riggio, 1986; Rosenthal, Hall, DiMatteo, Rogers, & Archer, 1979; Strang, 1930). For example, a young child sitting on a city bus may correctly ascertain and even feel empathically the physical fatigue of a pregnant woman standing and holding a heavy bag of groceries, but simply not realize that the thing to do is to offer up one's seat to this woman in need. One might view this child, then, as less interpersonally sensitive because of naiveté than the woman sitting nearby who immediately gives up her seat reflexively, though not empathically. Of course, even when someone is sensitive enough to perceive the fatigued woman and wise enough to know what the proper response should be, he or she must have the motivation to execute and deliver the appropriate response, in this case to offer up the seat. The interpersonal sensitivity discussed by Losoya and Eisenberg (chap. 2, this volume) illustrates how some researchers include behavior execution (i.e., prosocial behavior) in their construct of interpersonal sensitivity. Furthermore, execution is not always an all-or-nothing response but can sometimes vary in quality, such as when one delivers an obliged apology but does not express it with sufficient sincerity to be believed and accepted. In this case, sensitivity extends past the decoding of information into the realm of encoding: the expression and control of behavior (e.g., Friedman, chap. 18; Riggio & Riggio, chap. 7, both this volume).

In addition to knowing and doing, interpersonal sensitivity can refer to responsivity or reactivity to stimuli. For example, individual differences exist in the extent to which people attend to, notice, and remember nonverbal behaviors and physical appearance. Hall and colleagues have referred to this as *attentional accuracy* (Hall et al., 1998, in press). Interestingly, consciousness is not a prerequisite to responsivity. For example, individuals may differ in the extent to which their judgments are influenced by the presence or absence of certain nonverbal cues (Bernieri & Gillis, 1995b), and these differences may not be acknowledged by the perceiver (Gillis, Bernieri, & Wooten, 1995). Other, more visceral types of reactivity that some may wish to include as part of a general interpersonal sensitivity construct might include emotional contagion (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994) and interactional synchrony, which is the extent to which movements and behaviors become coordinated and matched during interaction (Bernieri, Davis, Rosenthal, & Knee, 1994; Bernieri & Rosenthal, 1991). Knowledge, comprehension, and execution are not issues here. Rather, this aspect of sensitivity refers to the difference in thresholds for response or reactivity that occurs either consciously or beyond awareness.

Thus, interpersonal sensitivity spans the domains of reactivity, knowledge, and behavior expression. The breadth of this construct becomes problematic when researchers working on different aspects that may involve