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Managing perceptions of distress at work: Reframing emotion as passion

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ABSTRACT

Expressing distress at work can have negative consequences for employees: observers perceive employees who express distress as less competent than employees who do not. Across five experiments, we explore how reframing a socially inappropriate emotional expression (distress) by publicly attributing it to an appropriate source (passion) can shape perceptions of, and decisions about, the person who expressed emotion. In Studies 1a-c, participants viewed individuals who reframed distress as passion as more competent than those who attributed distress to emotionality or made no attribution. In Studies 2a-b, reframing emotion as passion shifted interpersonal decision-making: participants were more likely to hire job candidates and choose collaborators who reframed their distress as passion compared to those who did not. Expresser gender did not moderate these effects. Results suggest that in cases when distress expressions cannot or should not be suppressed, reframing distress as passion can improve observers' impressions of the expresser.

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1. Introduction

Imagine you are working on a high-profile project with two senior colleagues whom you want to impress. In addition to a looming deadline to present the project to your clients, you also feel pressure to complete the project successfully before an upcoming performance review. In a meeting with your colleagues, you are discussing several major changes to the presentation when your computer suddenly crashes, deleting all of your recent work. You feel frustrated, disappointed, defeated, upset. You worry that expressing your distress openly will cause your colleagues to view you as incompetent, but you are unable to hide how you feel. After you express your distress, you wish you could take it back, but it is too late.

In the current work, we propose a novel strategy that individuals may use to alter observers' impressions after an expression of emotion has occurred: reframing the emotional expression. We define *emotion reframing* as the process of publicly attributing a socially inappropriate emotional expression to a socially appropriate source. In this paper, we test whether individuals can improve observers' perceptions of their competence following a display of distress by reframing their emotion as passion. In addition to

suggesting a practical strategy to help individuals in organizations, this research makes important theoretical contributions to the literatures on emotion regulation and impression management.

2. Expressions of distress

In this paper, we study distress (a construct that subsumes several negative discrete emotions), rather than studying a specific discrete negative emotion such as anxiety or sadness. We focus on distress because we are interested in observers' perceptions of emotional expressions, not individuals' experiences of their own emotions. Although individuals may be aware of the specific discrete emotions they are experiencing, expressions of these emotions often appear similar to observers. For example, an employee may cry because he feels sad, disappointed, anxious, or frustrated. All of these emotions are what we would term distress. They are characterized by negative valence, lack of control, and a need for assistance (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985; Van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2010). Importantly, however, distress is distinct from other-directed anger. Although both anger and distress are negatively-valenced emotions, displays of anger are associated with competence and power, whereas distress is associated with incompetence and dependence (e.g., Barrett & Bliss-Moreau, 2009; Fischer, Eagly, & Oosterwijk, 2013; Tiedens, 2000, 2001; Van Kleef et al., 2010).

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People often feel distressed at work, triggered both by negative events at work and by non-work situations that carry over into the workplace (e.g., Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Working individuals tend to feel significantly more distress during the workweek than on weekends (e.g., Stone, Schneider, & Harter, 2012), caused by events such as being assigned undesirable work, experiencing interpersonal conflict with supervisors, co-workers, or customers, being subjected to discrimination, negotiating for compensation, or receiving or delivering negative feedback (Brief & Weiss, 2002; Brooks & Schweitzer, 2011; Elfenbein, 2007; Mignonac & Herrbach, 2004; Vingerhoets, Cornelius, Van Heck, & Becht, 2000). As evidence of the pervasiveness of distress in the workplace, we asked 202 people who work full-time¹ to indicate whether they had experienced distress at work. Ninety nine percent of participants said that they had experienced distress at least once, and 54.7% indicated that they experience the emotion at least once a week. Experiencing distress predicts important work outcomes such as lower job satisfaction, decreased feelings of personal accomplishment, and increased emotional exhaustion, absenteeism, and turnover intentions (see Thoresen, Kaplan, Barsky, Warren, & de Chermont, 2003 for a meta-analysis and review).

Although people experience distress often at work, they may or may not wish to express how they feel to others. People often avoid expressing distress in professional contexts because doing so would violate workplace display rules (i.e., norms about the appropriateness of emotional expressions; Diefendorff & Greguras, 2009; Ekman & Friesen, 1969). Workplace display rules often encourage employees to express or even exaggerate positive feelings such as happiness, and to avoid expressions of distress (e.g., crying, getting choked up, appearing visibly sad, anxious, or frustrated), to please customers and maintain harmony with co-workers (e.g., Diefendorff & Richard, 2008; Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987). However, although individuals may not wish to express their distress, suppressing distress is difficult, is often ineffective, and may limit effective communication about problems or conflicts (e.g., Geddes & Callister, 2007; Hofmann, Heering, Sawyer, & Asnaani, 2009).

Expressions of distress in the workplace often lead the expresser to feel embarrassed and observers to feel uncomfortable and unsure how to respond (Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 2001; Plas & Hoover-Dempsey, 1988). Observers may also draw negative conclusions about the expresser's disposition and ability to perform well at work, often inferring that the expresser is less independent and competent than before the expression (e.g., Cornelius & Labott, 2001; Frijda, 1986; Tiedens, 2000, 2001; Tiedens, Ellsworth, & Mesquita, 2000; Van Kleef et al., 2010).

3. Cognitive reappraisal

People use a variety of strategies to regulate their emotions. One pervasive and much-studied emotion regulation strategy is *cognitive reappraisal* (Gross, 1998; Gross & John, 2003). Cognitive reappraisal involves changing how one thinks about a situation to change its emotional impact (Gross, 2002). For example, an individual may reappraise a failure as a learning opportunity, leading him to feel hope instead of disappointment. One way to cognitively reappraise a negative emotion is to reappraise the arousal associated with it as a different, positive emotion (e.g., Blascovich, 2008; Crum, Salovey, & Achor, 2013; Schachter & Singer, 1962). For example, Brooks (2014) found that individuals can easily reappraise the arousal associated with pre-performance anxiety as the closely-related positive emotion, excitement. In this paper, we

investigate how the process of reappraising negative emotions as positive could operate interpersonally.

Though a large body of literature has examined how cognitive reappraisal affects the intrapsychic experience of emotions, most of these studies focus on how individuals regulate their own emotions in solitude (e.g., Zaki & Williams, 2013). Extant work that has explored the interpersonal dynamics of emotion regulation has focused on how the individual who experiences the emotion may rely on the presence of others to regulate his or her own internal feelings (e.g., by “venting;” Rimé, 2007; Zaki & Williams, 2013).

Other work has explored how observers evaluate individuals who use cognitive reappraisal to alter their own emotional experiences before an emotion is expressed (e.g., Cote, 2005; Grandey, 2003). For example, Chi, Grandey, Diamond, and Krimmel (2011) found a positive relationship between customer ratings of restaurant servers and the degree to which the servers modified their inner feelings through cognitive reappraisal (i.e., deep acting). Previous research, however, has not explored how individuals may reappraise their emotions after they have been expressed, or how they might publicly reframe their emotions to influence observers' perceptions.

4. Reframing emotional expressions

In the current work, we explore *emotion reframing*—how reframing a socially inappropriate emotional expression by publicly attributing it to an appropriate source can shape observers' perceptions. Like cognitive reappraisal, emotion reframing involves a shift from one appraisal of an emotion to another. However, whereas cognitive reappraisal is private and intrapsychic, reframing is public and interpersonal. Similar to the way cognitive reappraisal causes emotional individuals to alter the trajectory of their own emotional responses because they reinterpret the meaning of a situation, reframing causes observers to alter the trajectory of their perceptions because they reinterpret the meaning of the observed emotional expression.

We expect emotion reframing to be effective because the interpretation of emotional expressions (a) is context-dependent and (b) relies on observers' inferences about expressers' invisible emotional states. Although there are unique facial expressions for certain emotions, other emotional states do not have unique expressions (e.g., disappointment and sadness share an expression; Ekman, 1993). Further, the same expression may convey one of several dramatically different emotions, depending on the context or assumptions of the perceiver (Aviezer et al., 2008; Barrett, Mesquita, Gendron, 2011; Carroll & Russell, 1996). For example, the majority of participants believed a disgusted facial expression was anger when the context suggested anger, and pride when the context suggested pride (Aviezer et al., 2008). In addition, even if the emotional state of an expresser seems clear and unambiguous based on their emotional expression, the underlying cause of that emotional state is generally unclear to observers. Because individuals' emotions are subjective experiences that arise in response to their particular subjective appraisals and interpretations (e.g., Frijda, 1988), it is impossible for observers to be certain of the cause of others' emotional expressions. Because observers cannot be certain of the true cause of expressers' emotions, they are likely to be influenced by how the cause of an emotional expression is framed.

We suspect that emotional expressions can be reframed by the expresser, by another observer, or by the observer him- or herself. Importantly, emotion reframing by the expresser does not require internal reappraisal. For example, a man whose voice cracks and hands shake during a presentation may appraise his own emotional state as “anxious” privately, but may still alter observers'

¹ Recruited on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (57 women, $M_{age} = 31.46$).

perceptions by saying publicly that his expression was caused by his “excitement.”

5. Passion versus emotionality

We investigate whether reframing expressions of distress as triggered by passion versus emotionality influences observers' perceptions and interpersonal behavior. Both passion and emotion refer to strong feelings that may elicit intense positive or negative emotional expressions. Both passion and emotion arise in response to events or activities that are important to individuals' goals, motives, or concerns: people only feel passionate or emotional about things that they care about (e.g., Frijda, 1988; Valleraud & Houliort, 2003). Further, both passion and emotion may refer to either a temporary feeling (e.g., “Alan is passionate/emotional about this particular event”) or a steady trait across time (e.g., “Alan is a passionate/emotional person”).

However, people *perceive* passion and emotion differently in important ways. Emotionality has long been considered the enemy of rationality (for a review, see Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995), whereas passion is widely accepted as an important value in organizational contexts (Cardon, Wincent, Singh, & Drnovsek, 2009; Shields, 2005). For example, McKinsey & Company lists “passion, dedication, and energy” as the first criteria they seek in new hires (“What we look for,” n.d., para. 1), Boston Consulting Group lists a commitment to “succeeding together with passion” in their mission statement (“Mission,” n.d., para. 4), and Bain & Company states that “passion about making a measurable impact” is one of its core values (“People and Values,” n.d., para. 1). Similarly, academic scholars identify passion as an important predictor of success, commitment, and work performance because it is linked to greater motivation and sustained effort over time (e.g., Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Valleraud et al., 2003). In general, passion is associated with determination, motivation, and a high degree of self-control, whereas emotionality is associated with instability, ineptitude, and a lack of self-control (Shields, 2007).

Because passion may cause emotional expressions but is widely accepted as valuable and socially appropriate in organizational contexts, we expect that attributing expressions of distress to passion, as opposed to emotionality or not making an attribution, will improve observers' perceptions of the expresser's competence, and increase the likelihood of favorable decision-making by the observer (e.g., hiring decisions, partner selection). We therefore hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 1. Reframing distress as “passion” will increase perceptions of competence compared to attributing distress to emotionality or not making an attribution.

Hypothesis 2. Reframing distress as “passion” will increase the likelihood of observers making favorable interpersonal decisions toward the expresser compared to attributing distress to emotionality or not making an attribution.

6. Gender as a moderator

The tendency to attribute emotional displays to passion versus emotionality is inherently gendered. Historically, psychologists have identified male emotion as “a passionate force evident in the drive to achieve, to create, and to dominate” and female emotion as an “unstable sensitivity of feelings toward oneself and others” (Shields, 2007, p. 97). Although a common stereotype is that women display more emotion than men, actual gender differences in the expression of emotions are far less dramatic than

stereotypes would suggest (e.g., Fischer, 2000; LaFrance & Banaji, 1992). But when men and women show emotion, their expressions are understood within the context of broader gender stereotypes: men are stereotyped as agentic, motivated, and strong, whereas women are communal, gentle, and expressive (e.g., Kite, Deaux, & Haines, 2008). Therefore, when men and women display emotion at work, their emotions are interpreted as stemming from different traits: men's passion is a demonstration of their agency, motivation, and strength, whereas women's emotionality is a demonstration of their communality, gentility, and general expressiveness (Shields, 2007).

Because of the historical association between men's emotion and passion and women's emotion and emotionality, we believe that, with no attribution for the distress, observers will associate men's emotional displays with passion more so than women's emotional displays. We therefore predict that:

Hypothesis 3. There will be an interaction between expressers' gender and the attribution made for their emotional display, such that the effect of reframing distress as passion will be stronger for female expressers than for male expressers.

7. Overview of studies

We test our hypotheses across five experiments. In Studies 1a-c, we test whether emotion reframing influences interpersonal perceptions of competence (Hypothesis 1). In Studies 2a-b, we test whether emotion reframing influences interpersonal decision-making that involves emotionally expressive individuals (Hypothesis 2). Across Studies 1 and 2, we explore how the gender of an expresser influences observers' perceptions of the expresser's competence, and how the gender of the expresser may moderate the effect of emotion reframing on perceptions of competence (Hypothesis 3).

8. Study 1: Emotion reframing and perceptions of competence

In Studies 1a-c, we examine how reframing distress as passion shapes observers' ratings of an expressers' competence in three diverse contexts. In Study 1a, we use vignettes to examine how reframing an emotional expression can shape perceivers' impressions of an expresser's competence. In Study 1b, we examine how reframing shapes perceptions of competence in a face-to-face interaction. In Study 1c, we examine how reframing influences perceptions of participants' current or former colleagues who have expressed distress in the past.

9. Study 1a: Emotion reframing in a workplace vignette

9.1. Method

9.1.1. Participants and procedure

We aimed to recruit 240 participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Two hundred and forty-one (106 women, $M_{age} = 34.10$) American workers participated in exchange for \$0.25. After providing consent, participants read the following description of a distress display:

Samuel [Samantha] works in the advertising department of a large firm. He [She] is currently working with three coworkers on a team. Samuel [Samantha] has become increasingly sad with the team dynamic. One day he [she] breaks down and begins crying in front of his [her] teammates. He [She] buries his [her] face in his [her] hands.

In addition to manipulating the gender of the focal actor, there were four attribution conditions: passion attribution, emotional attribution, and two control conditions: no attribution and apology. In the no attribution condition, participants read the vignette above. In the passion attribution condition, the vignette also read: “and says, ‘I’m sorry, I am just really passionate about this,’” in the emotionality attribution condition, it read: “and says, ‘I’m sorry, I am just really emotional about this,’” and in the apology condition, it read: “and says, ‘I’m sorry.’” This produced a 4 (Attribution: passion, emotionality, apology-only, none) \times 2 (Employee Gender: male, female) between-subjects experimental design.

Participants then evaluated the employee on measures of conferred status (Tiedens, 2001; sample items include: “Sam seems powerful,” “Sam should be put in a leadership position”) and competence (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; “competent,” “capable,” “intelligent,” “confident”) on seven-point scales.² These scales were highly correlated ($r = 0.82$) and loaded onto a single factor. Therefore, we collapsed them into a single scale of perceived competence ($\alpha = 0.93$).

9.2. Results

9.2.1. Manipulation check

To check that participants saw the passionate employee as more passionate than the other conditions, we conducted a one-way ANOVA on the item “Sam seems passionate.” We found a main effect of attribution condition on perceptions of passion, $F(3,235) = 7.39$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.09$. As expected, planned contrasts demonstrated that participants in the passion condition ($M = 6.10$, $SD = 1.09$) rated the employee as significantly more passionate than did participants in the emotionality condition ($M = 5.39$, $SD = 1.46$), $p = 0.002$, the apology condition ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 1.11$), $p < 0.001$, or the no attribution condition ($M = 5.16$, $SD = 1.20$), $p < 0.001$.

9.2.2. Perceived competence

We tested Hypotheses 1 and 3 by conducting a 4 (Attribution: passion, emotionality, apology, no attribution) \times 2 (Target Gender: male, female) factorial ANOVA with planned contrasts comparing the passion attribution with the three other conditions. As hypothesized, we found a significant main effect of attribution condition on perceived competence, $F(3,235) = 4.70$, $p = 0.003$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$. Employees who attributed their distress display to passion ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.07$) were perceived as more competent than were those who attributed their distress display to emotionality ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 0.92$), $p = 0.01$, those who only apologized ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 0.94$), $p = 0.09$, or those who provided no attribution ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 0.81$), $p < 0.001$. The main effect of employee gender was also significant, such that Samantha ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 0.97$) was seen as significantly more competent than Samuel ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 0.93$), $F(1,235) = 6.22$, $p = 0.01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$. However, the interaction effect between attribution and gender was not statistically significant, $p = 0.29$.

9.3. Discussion

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, participants rated an employee who reframed distress as passion as more competent than an employee who framed distress as emotionality. Attributing a display of distress to passion also improved ratings on these variables compared to no attribution or a simple apology. However, we did

not find support for Hypothesis 3; although we predicted that gender would play a moderating role, men and women benefitted similarly from attributing their emotional displays to passion. We did, however, find that women who expressed distress were rated as more competent than men, suggesting that men may be penalized more for expressing high-intensity distress (i.e., crying) than women.

10. Study 1b: Emotion reframing in face-to-face interactions

In Study 1b, we deepen our examination of emotion reframing by measuring perceptions during live interactions. We explore how individuals react to expressers who attribute their distress to passion versus emotionality in face-to-face encounters.

10.1. Method

10.1.1. Participants

We aimed to recruit 100 dyads (200 individuals) and ended our final session with 101 dyads. Two hundred and two (130 women, $M_{\text{age}} = 23.56$) students in the Boston area participated in the study in exchange for \$10 or \$15.³ Of the 101 dyads that participated, 9 dyads knew each other outside of the study and were therefore excluded from the analyses.

10.1.2. Procedure

We recruited participants in even-numbered groups to participate in a study about “Stories about negative experiences with school work.” Upon entering the behavioral laboratory, participants were randomly assigned to either be a “Story-Teller” or a “Listener.” We directed Story-Tellers to begin filling out a survey on a computer, and Listeners to small rooms to wait for their partners.

Participants in the Story-Teller condition were asked to recall a recent time when they became distressed about something related to academic work, and to write a few sentences summarizing what happened. Next, we asked participants to list the emotions they experienced during the incident. After summarizing the distressing incident and describing the emotions they experienced, we randomly assigned individuals to one of two emotion reframing conditions: passionate or emotional. In the passionate condition, participants read:

Research shows that emotions only arise in response to events that are important to people’s goals or motives (Frijda, 1988). People only feel emotions about things that matter to them. Research also shows that talking about how your emotional reactions stem from your passion makes people perceive you in a positive light.

In the emotional condition, participants read:

Research shows that different emotions arise in response to different circumstances (Frijda, 1988). People feel different emotions in different situations. Research also shows that people may feel distressed at work or school for a wide variety of reasons.

Participants in the passionate [emotional] condition then read:

In your chat with your partner, please focus on how your emotional reaction in the situation you described shows how passionate [emotional] you are about goals that are important

² We also measured warmth (Fiske et al., 2002) and perceived appropriateness. We chose to exclude these analyses from the manuscript for the sake of brevity, however, these results are available from the authors.

³ Pay was increased from \$10 to \$15 to recruit additional participants after the first 140 participants completed the study. We did not control for this change in their incentives in our analyses after confirming that there were no significant effects of payment.

to you. We know this may be a bit challenging or uncomfortable, but please do your very best to consider how your reaction shows that you feel passionate [emotional] about your academic work. Please write 3–5 sentences below about how your reaction shows that you feel passionate [emotional] about your academic work.

After writing about their passion or emotionality, participants read that they would be discussing the events they described with their partner. We reproduced their answers to all questions in one paragraph, and we asked them to hand write this paragraph onto a piece of paper to bring with them to their meeting with their partner. We chose to have participants re-write their answers because this would help them remember the information they had written, and because it allowed participants to slightly alter their story if they wished not to discuss certain details with their partners.

We then escorted participants to the small group room to meet with their partner. Story-Tellers read their distressing events to their partners, and discussed them for as long as they wished. Most dyads spoke for between 5 and 15 min. We interrupted 3 dyads because they were still speaking when the scheduled time for the study was nearly over (after roughly 25 min). Participants in the Story-Teller condition were then excused from the study.

Participants in the Listener condition filled out their perceptions of their partners' competence and status (using the same items as in Study 1a) and self-control ("This person seems to have control over him/herself," "This co-worker has a lot of self-control," "This person seems to have control over his/her emotions" $\alpha = 0.83$). The items measuring competence, status, and self-control were highly correlated ($r_s > 0.74$, $ps < 0.01$) and loaded onto a single factor, and so were combined to form the perceived competence scale ($\alpha = 0.94$). Listeners also answered items assessing the Story-Teller's passion and emotion (using the same items used in Study 1a) and perceived distress (using two items: "This person seemed distressed" and "This person seemed upset," $\alpha = 0.78$). After reporting their perceptions, Listeners briefly described the story their partner told, indicated whether or not their partner said that he or she was passionate, and indicated whether they were acquainted with their partner before the study.

10.2. Results

10.2.1. Manipulation checks

Listeners in the passionate condition indicated that their partners said they were passionate 71.7% of the time, whereas Listeners in the emotional condition indicated that their partners said they were passionate 29.9% of the time, $\chi^2(1, N = 92) = 15.70$, $p < 0.001$. We also conducted a repeated measures ANOVA on the items "My partner seemed passionate" and "My partner seemed emotional" using condition as a between-subjects factor. We found the expected interaction effect, $F(1,90) = 9.59$, $p = 0.003$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.10$. As expected, Listeners in the passion condition ($M = 5.66$, $SD = 1.17$) rated Story-Tellers as more passionate than those in the emotional condition ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.54$), $p = 0.02$. Participants rated Story-Tellers as marginally more emotional in the emotionality condition ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 1.66$) than in the passionate condition ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.29$), $p = 0.10$.

10.2.2. Perceived competence

To test [Hypotheses 1 and 3](#), we conducted a 2 (Attribution: passionate, emotional) \times 2 (Story-Teller Gender: male, female) factorial ANOVA on ratings of perceived competence. As predicted, Listeners whose partners had reframed their distress as passion indicated that their partner was significantly more competent ($M = 5.59$, $SD = 0.80$) than those in the emotional condition

($M = 5.22$, $SD = 0.95$), $F(1,88) = 3.99$, $p = 0.049$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$. There was also a marginally significant main effect of gender, with Listeners rating female Story-Tellers as more competent ($M = 5.53$, $SD = 0.89$) than male Story-Tellers ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 0.85$), $F(1,88) = 2.89$, $p = 0.09$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$. The interaction between gender and condition was not significant, $p = 0.94$.

10.2.3. Perceived distress

The same 2 (Attribution: passionate, emotional) \times 2 (Story-Teller Gender: male, female) factorial ANOVA on ratings of perceived distress revealed no significant interaction or main effects, $ps > 0.25$.

10.3. Discussion

Consistent with Study 1a, we found support for [Hypothesis 1](#): Listeners perceived Story-Tellers who reframed their distress as "passion" as significantly more competent than Story-Tellers who reframed their distress as "emotion." Again, consistent with Study 1a, we failed to find support for [Hypothesis 3](#): men and women benefitted similarly from reframing their distress experiences as reflecting passion. However, as in Study 1a, Listeners rated women as more competent than men when they discussed distressing experiences.

Listeners in both the passionate and the emotional conditions perceived their partners as similarly distressed, suggesting that individuals did not find their partners less emotionally expressive when they referred to their emotion as passion. This finding suggests that individuals who attribute their distress expressions to passion rather than emotion communicate a similar level of distress to observers, while not incurring the same social costs.

11. Study 1c: Emotion reframing in a field setting

In Study 1c, we test our hypotheses in a field setting. We asked fully-employed adults to recall a recent time when a colleague appeared visibly distressed at work and to think about how their colleague's expression demonstrated passion or emotionality.

This study allowed us to test two potential moderators of the effect of emotion reframing on perceptions of competence. First, we investigate the effect of organizational display rules. Employees in organizations with restrictive display rules (i.e., in which emotional expressions are less appropriate) may benefit more from emotion reframing than employees in organizations with relatively permissive display rules (i.e., in which emotional expressions are more appropriate). Second, we explore the effect of relationship closeness between the expresser and perceiver. Relationship closeness is positively correlated with comfort with expressing negative emotions (e.g., [Diefendorff & Greguras 2009](#); [Diefendorff & Richard, 2008](#); [Gross & John, 2003](#)). Therefore, we expect that the effect of emotion reframing will be particularly beneficial between people who have a less close relationship compared to those who have a closer relationship.

11.1. Method

11.1.1. Participants

We aimed to recruit 500 participants through Clear Voice, a company that recruits panels of employed individuals for researchers (see www.clearvoice.com for more information).⁴ We obtained 437 responses before the completion deadline. We

⁴ We told Clear Voice that our object was "Conduct a 10–15-min online study of 500 participants. They must be employed adults ages 18+."

excluded twenty-two participants who could not write about a recent time when their colleague showed distress. This left 415 responses for analysis (214 women, $M_{\text{age}} = 48.39$).

Participants worked in a variety of industries (e.g., finance, health care, education, government, law enforcement, legal, retail, manufacturing, etc.) and at a variety of levels (e.g., office assistants, vice presidents, chief officers [CEOs or COOs], etc.). Participants wrote about a variety of recent incidents in which their co-workers appeared visibly distressed, including 256 (61.8%) descriptions of incidents about women and 158 (38.2%) descriptions of incidents about men. Seven percent of incidents had happened the day the participant completed the survey, 31.1% had happened within the past week, 63.2% within the past month, and 78.7% within the past two months (the remainder had happened more than 2 months earlier). All events took place in the United States.

11.1.2. Procedure

Participants read the prompt, “Please recall a particular time from the recent past when one of your co-workers became visibly upset at work about something work-related. Try to remember a specific moment from within the past 2–3 months (the more recent, the better) when it was obvious to you that your co-worker felt upset. Please write a few sentences below describing the situation as objectively as possible.” Asking participants to describe the situation before asking them to reframe it ensured that any results would not be the result of participants recalling different types of incidents in the two conditions. Next, participants read the following instructions:

Now, please think about all the ways in which this incident shows how passionate [emotional] this co-worker is. Please write a few sentences below about how this incident demonstrates that this co-worker is a passionate [an emotional] person.

Participants then indicated the extent to which they agreed with various statements (on 1–7 Likert-typed scales), including the same questions about status, competence, and self-control used in Study 1b (we removed 1 item from the self-control scale and 2 items each from the competence and status scales to reduce the time required for the survey). Again, the three scales were highly correlated ($r_s > 0.85$) and loaded onto a single factor, and so were combined into a single scale of perceived competence ($\alpha = 0.96$).

We then asked participants about the display rules of their workplace and the closeness of their relationship with the co-worker. To assess display rules, we modified two items from the Display Rule Assessment Inventory (Matsumoto, Yoo, Hirayama, & Petrova, 2005; “When upset, people at this workplace usually try to hide their true feelings” and “When upset, people at this workplace usually express how they feel with no inhibitions” [reverse-coded]; $\alpha = 0.74$).⁵ To assess relationship closeness, participants indicated, on a seven-point scale ranging from two non-overlapping circles to two almost entirely-overlapping circles, how close they were with this co-worker (i.e., the inclusion of other in the self scale, adapted from Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992).

⁵ Individuals in organizations with stricter display rules should theoretically express distress less often than individuals in organizations with more permissive display rules. Therefore, if our scale of display rules is valid, participants reporting stricter display rules should have observed displays less recently than participants reporting more permissive display rules. To test this, we correlated the variable assessing time passed since the display and the display rule scale. Because the variable assessing length of time since the display was ordinal, not interval, we ran a Spearman correlation. As expected, there was a significant positive correlation between the reported time passed since the display and the reported restrictiveness of organizational display rules, $r_s(406) = 0.15$, $p = 0.003$.

11.2. Results

11.2.1. Perceived competence

To test [Hypotheses 1 and 3](#), we conducted a 2 (Attribution: passionate, emotional) \times 2 (Co-worker Gender: male, female) factorial ANOVA. As hypothesized, when participants wrote about how passionate their co-workers were ($M = 5.07$, $SD = 1.52$), they rated them as significantly more competent than when they wrote about how emotional they were ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 1.65$), $F(1, 410) = 6.32$, $p = 0.01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$. We found no main effect of co-worker gender, $p = 0.23$, or interaction between co-worker gender and attribution, $p = 0.17$.

11.2.2. Display rules as moderator

To test if workplace display rules moderated the effect of emotion reframing condition on ratings of competence, we conducted a multiple regression analysis. We included emotion reframing condition, ratings of display rules, and the interaction term as predictor variables, and our index of perceived competence as the dependent variable. We found a main effect of emotion reframing condition on perceptions of competence ($\beta = 0.12$, $p = 0.02$), and a marginal interaction effect between display rules and emotion reframing condition ($\beta = 0.12$, $p = 0.095$). The main effect of display rules ($\beta = -0.09$, $p = 0.23$) was not significant.

When display rules were relatively more permissive of showing emotion (i.e., were one standard deviation below the mean), passion and emotionality attributions did not elicit different perceptions of competence $p = 0.63$, but when display rules were average (i.e., at the mean) or restrictive (i.e., one standard above the means), reframing distress as passion significantly improved perceptions of competence ($p = 0.02$ and $p = 0.005$ respectively). We depict these results in [Fig. 1](#).

11.2.3. Relationship closeness as moderator

In a similar regression analysis, we examined the impact of relationship closeness on perceived competence. We found a main effect of closeness ($\beta = 0.53$, $p < 0.001$), a marginal main effect of emotion reframing condition ($\beta = 0.08$, $p = 0.07$), but no significant interaction ($\beta = 0.004$, $p = 0.94$).

11.3. Discussion

In Study 1c, we found support for [Hypothesis 1](#) that prompting individuals to attribute their co-workers' distress expressions to

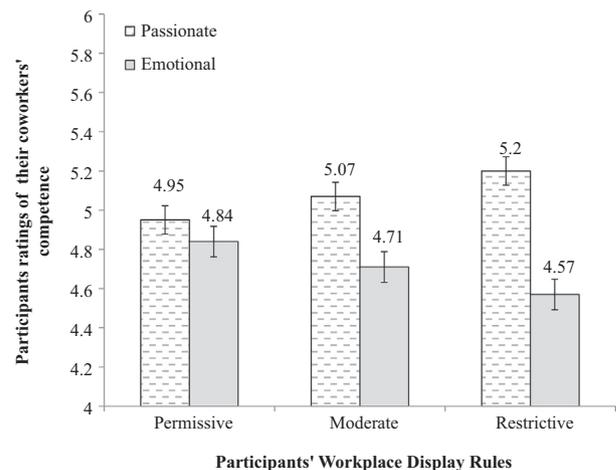


Fig. 1. Participants' ratings of their co-workers' competence in Study 1c. Mean ratings reported by experimental condition (Passion attribution vs. Emotionality attribution), and divided across differing levels of organizational display rules: permissive (one standard deviation below the mean; $M = 2.28$), moderate (at the mean; $M = 3.76$), and restrictive (one standard deviation above the mean; $M = 5.24$).

“passion” versus “emotionality” altered perceptions of their co-workers' competence. Notably, in this study, the observer reframed the expresser's distress expression, suggesting that emotion reframing can be initiated by the emotional actor or by the observer.

We also found evidence that organizational display rules moderate the effect of reframing: reframing emotion as passion was especially helpful for participants who worked in environments that discourage the open expression of emotion. Relationship closeness between the expresser and the observer did not moderate the effect of emotion reframing on perceptions of competence.

Consistent with the prior studies, we did not find support for [Hypothesis 3](#). The gender of the co-worker did not interact with emotion reframing on perceptions of competence. In all three studies, making a passion attribution was equally beneficial for both men and women following a distress expression. Unlike in Studies 1a-b, we did not find that the gender of the expresser influenced ratings of competence.

12. Study 2: Emotion reframing and interpersonal decisions

In Studies 1a-c, we examined how reframing an expression of distress as passion influenced perceptions of competence in the workplace, but we did not evaluate how these perceptions might influence interpersonal decision-making. In Studies 2a-b, we test [Hypothesis 2](#) – how emotion reframing influences choice in two consequential behavioral domains: hiring and work partner selection. In Study 2a, we explore how reframing shapes hiring decisions. In Study 2b, we explore how making a passion attribution compares to suppressing an emotional expression, and explore the impact of both suppression and reframing on decisions about whom to work with on a collaborative task.

13. Study 2a: Hiring decision about an interviewee who reframes distress

In Study 2a, we asked individuals to read a transcript of an employment interview and make a hiring decision based on their impressions. Further, we test whether perceptions of competence mediate the relationship between emotional frame and hiring decisions.

13.1. Method

13.1.1. Participants

We recruited 400 (164 women, $M_{\text{age}} = 34.46$) American respondents from Amazon's Mechanical Turk who participated in exchange for \$0.75. We aimed to recruit 400 participants based on a pre-determined rule to exclude participants who did not spend sufficient time reading the interview transcript.⁶ After excluding participants who did not spend sufficient time reading the transcript, our sample included 281 (126 female, $M_{\text{age}} = 36.56$) participants. We report the results including all participants in footnotes throughout the study.

⁶ Our experimental manipulation was embedded in a transcript that consisted of 411 words. Therefore, we wanted to ensure that participants read the study materials thoroughly. The average American adult can read between 250 and 300 words per minute, and almost all Americans read less than 400 words per minute (Carver, 1985). The passage was 411 words long, so we excluded any participant who would have been reading at a rate greater than 400 words per minute by spending less than 61.65 s on the page with the transcript. Note that we had anticipated that many participants would be dropped from the analyses (based on a separate pilot test), and therefore recruited enough participants to power our study despite anticipated exclusions. The effects were similar, though slightly weaker, when we included all participants in the analyses. We report in footnotes throughout the study the analyses including all participants.

13.1.2. Design and procedure

We told participants that they would be asked to evaluate a job candidate based on the written transcript of an in-person interview. First, participants read a job description for a pharmacist position. Next, they read an excerpt of an interview for the position with either a male (Samuel) or a female (Samantha) applicant. The interview consisted of three questions and answers. The final interview question asked the interviewee to describe a time when they went above and beyond what was expected of them. The interviewee answered this question by describing an initiative s/he had set up to tutor students to pass their pharmacy technician certification test, but explained that it “ended up not really working out” because the hospital sponsoring the program cancelled it at the last minute. The interviewee then described how s/he expressed distress and attributed the distress expression to passion or to emotionality:

I got really upset about it. When my boss told me about it I even ended up getting choked up in front of him because I was so upset. I was just really passionate [emotional] about it and I – I become really passionate [emotional] about things when I invest that much time in them.

After reading the materials, participants indicated whether or not they would hire the applicant and wrote a brief statement explaining their decision. Participants then rated the applicant's perceived competence on the same scale used in Study 1a ($\alpha = 0.96$).⁷

13.2. Results

13.2.1. Manipulation check

To check that participants saw the passionate candidate as more passionate than the emotional candidate, and the emotional candidate as more emotional than the passionate candidate, we conducted a repeated measures ANOVA on the items “Sam seems passionate” and “Sam seems emotional” using emotion reframing condition as a between-subjects factor. We found the expected interaction effect, $F(1,279) = 31.85$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.10$. As expected, participants in the passion condition ($M = 6.22$, $SD = 1.00$) rated the candidate as more passionate than those in the emotionality condition ($M = 5.87$, $SD = 1.29$), $p < 0.001$, and participants in the emotionality condition ($M = 6.48$, $SD = 0.78$) rated the candidate as more emotional than participants in the passion condition ($M = 5.97$, $SD = 1.12$), $p = 0.01$.

13.2.2. Hiring decision

We conducted a chi-square test on hiring decisions across experimental conditions. Consistent with our predictions, 61.5% of participants who judged the passionate applicant, but only 47.4% of participants who judged the emotional applicant, chose to hire the applicant, $\chi^2(1, N = 281) = 5.64$, $p = 0.02$, see [Fig. 2](#).⁸

13.2.3. Perceived competence

To test [Hypotheses 1 and 3](#), we conducted a 2 (Attribution: passion, emotionality) \times 2 (Candidate Gender: male, female) factorial ANOVA. Supporting [Hypothesis 1](#), participants in the passion condition perceived the candidate as more competent ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.17$) than did participants in the emotionality condition ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 1.30$), $F(1,277) = 7.28$, $p = 0.007$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$.⁹ The

⁷ We also measured warmth and perceived appropriateness. We chose to exclude these analyses from the manuscript for the sake of brevity, however, these results are available from the authors.

⁸ Hiring decision crossed with attribution using the full sample, $\chi^2(1, N = 400) = 4.87$, $p = 0.03$.

⁹ Competence using full sample, $F(1,396) = 6.71$, $p = 0.04$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$.

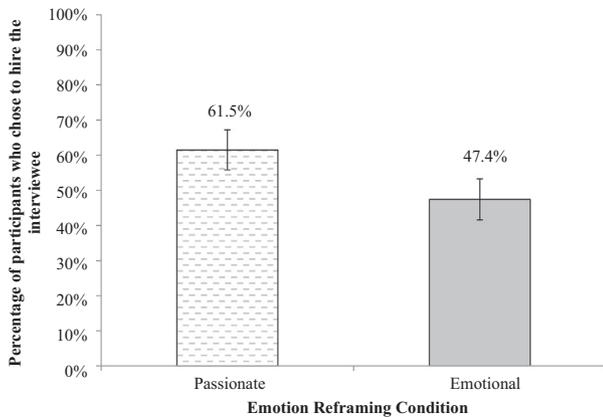


Fig. 2. Percentage of participants who indicated that they would hire an interviewee after s/he reframed a distress expression as passion or emotionality, with 95% confidence intervals (Study 2a).

main effect of candidate gender was also significant such that the male candidate ($M = 4.99$, $SD = 1.23$) was rated as more competent than the female candidate ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 1.25$), $F(1,277) = 3.79$, $p = 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$. Once again, however, **Hypothesis 3** was not supported: the interaction effect between gender and experimental condition was not significant, $p = 0.70$.

13.2.4. Mediation analysis

We then evaluated whether or not perceptions of competence mediated hiring decisions. We conducted a bootstrap analysis of the indirect effect using 20,000 repetitions. We found that the 95% confidence interval of the indirect effect did not contain the value zero, indicating that perceived competence mediated the relationship between attribution and the decision to hire the applicant (estimate = -1.36 , bias-corrected 95% CI = $[-2.57, -0.36]$).

13.3. Discussion

In support of **Hypotheses 1 and 2**, the results of Study 2a replicate and extend the findings of Studies 1a-c by demonstrating that attributing one's distress expression to "passion" versus "emotionality" influences important workplace outcomes: participants were more likely to hire an applicant when the candidate attributed his or her own emotional display at work to passion than to emotionality. Participants in the passionate condition perceived the candidate as more competent than participants in the emotional condition, which in turn influenced their decision of whether to hire the applicant.

We once again did not find support for **Hypothesis 3**: candidate gender did not moderate the effect of reframing on perceptions of competence. However, participants did perceive men's and women's competence differently. Unlike in the previous studies, participants in Study 2a rated men who expressed low-intensity distress (i.e., getting choked up) as significantly more competent than women who expressed low-intensity distress.

14. Study 2b: Partner selection for a collaborative task

In Study 2b, we explore a different behavioral outcome: partner selection for a paid collaborative task. This study extends our investigation in two important ways. First, in contrast to Study 2a, in which we asked participants to make a hypothetical hiring decision, in Study 2b, we ask participants to make a decision with real financial repercussions. Second, we compare emotion reframing with a different emotion regulation strategy: suppression.

People can suppress their emotions when they feel a negative emotion but wish to conceal it from observers. We compare a distress expression attributed to passion or no attribution to the absence of a distress expression (i.e., suppression).

14.1. Method

14.1.1. Participants

Two hundred (84 women, $M_{age} = 33.09$) American respondents from Amazon's Mechanical Turk participated in exchange for \$0.60.

14.1.2. Design and procedure

We used a within-subjects design with three experimental conditions: Suppression, Passion Attribution, or No Attribution. In our recruiting materials, we publicized that this study was the first phase of a two-phase study on collaboration (though in reality participants only participated in a single phase of the study). Upon consenting to participate, participants learned that they would select a partner from among three candidates, and that they would collaborate with this partner on a joint task during the second phase of the study. We gave them specific details about how they would connect with their partner using an external chat platform to make the study more believable.

To incentivize participants to choose the person they thought would be the best partner, we told participants that they would have a chance to earn a bonus for their work with their partner "based on [their] joint performance and the success of [their] collaboration." We then told them that we had asked 300 workers on Amazon's Mechanical Turk to write about times they had experienced distress in a work context, and that they would be shown three examples of these responses and asked to pick a partner from among the three descriptions.

Each participant read three descriptions: one in which the narrator felt distressed but hid the distress from his/her coworkers (Suppression), one in which the narrator openly expressed distress in front of colleagues and attributed the expression to passion (Passion Attribution), and one in which the narrator openly expressed distress in front of colleagues but did not make an attribution for the expression (No Attribution). Across all three descriptions, it was clear that the other person had experienced distress, but expressed their feelings in different ways.

After reading the three descriptions, participants selected a collaboration partner for the second phase of the study. This was our main dependent measure. They also answered three questions about each applicant to assess perceived competence: "How much respect do you have for each of these participants?" "How competent do you think each of these participants is?" and "How much self-control do you think each of these participants has?" using 7-point scales ($\alpha = 0.82$). Participants also indicated their perceptions of each narrators' distress ("How upset and distressed do you think each of these participants was in the situation they described?"). To avoid participants answering favorably about the partner they chose because they anticipated working with him or her, after each question we told participants "Note: we will not show your response to this question to your partner."

14.1.3. Stimuli

To create the stimuli, we used responses collected from a separate pilot test in which we asked participants to describe an experience of distress at work. After pretesting a selection of responses (in the No Attribution format), we found three narrators who were evaluated as similarly competent ($F[2,147] = 1.07$, $p = 0.35$), distressed ($F[2,147] = 0.77$, $p = 0.46$), and appealing as partners (within-subjects design: $\chi^2[2, N = 48] = 0.88$, $p = 0.65$; between-subjects design: $F[2,147] = 0.20$, $p = 0.82$) based on their responses.

Table 1
Responses used as stimuli in Study 2b.

Response 1:	Response 2:	Response 3:
I had worked really hard before a big walk through of my department by upper management. All the demonstrations were set up and looked amazing. But when they did the walk through they skipped my department entirely. When I found out I was so upset... my whole department saw how upset I was	I was up for a promotion and had been promised that I would get one as I had the highest evaluation score of anyone in my dept. Later I found out that someone else got it because of their personal connections. I was very disappointed. It was really obvious to everyone that I was very upset about it	I had worked really hard on a big project for a few months. After the project was finished I was told that it was going to be scrapped and never used. I was devastated. My coworkers all saw that I was really upset and kept asking me what was wrong because of how devastated I looked

Note. These are the No Attribution versions of each response. In the Suppression condition, the response replaced the last sentence with “but I hid how I was feeling in front of my co-workers.” In the Passion Attribution condition, the phrase, “I just felt so passionate about it,” was added to the end of this version of the responses. Participants saw three responses, one in the No Attribution condition, one in the Passion Attribution condition, and one in the Suppression condition.

The gender of the narrator was not discernable in any of the three responses. See Table 1 for the stimuli.

To avoid any effects of the specific response on participants' choices, we used stimulus sampling. That is, we varied which story was paired with each condition (Suppression, Passion Attribution, No Attribution), so that every possible pairing of story and condition was represented and randomly assigned. In the Suppression condition, the response ended with “but I hid how I was feeling in front of my co-workers.” In the No Attribution condition, the response ended with a description of how the narrator's co-workers could tell how upset s/he was. In the Passion Attribution condition, the response described how the narrator's co-workers could tell how upset s/he was and included the additional phrase, “I just felt so passionate about it.”

14.2. Results

14.2.1. Partner selection

A chi-square test for goodness of fit showed that partner selection was not equally distributed across condition, $\chi^2(2, N = 200) = 8.23, p = 0.02$. Whereas 25.5% of participants chose the narrator in the No Attribution condition, 32.5% chose the narrator in the Passion Attribution condition, and 42.0% chose the narrator in the Suppression condition.

Inconsistent with our pretests, we also found that response version mattered: more participants chose Response 2 (41.5%) than Response 1 (27.5%) or Response 3 (31.0%), $\chi^2(2, N = 200) = 6.37, p = 0.04$. However, because of the stimulus sampling, the response version did not vary consistently with condition. Therefore, the effect of response version on partner selection should make it less likely, not more likely, that we would find an effect of condition on partner selection. To ensure that there was no association between the specific response and our experimental conditions, we conducted a chi-square test of independence, which, as expected, was not significant, $\chi^2(4, N = 200) = 2.49, p = 0.65$.

14.2.2. Perceived competence

To test the relationship between condition and competence, we conducted a repeated-measure ANOVA on the perceived competence of each narrator, depending on attribution condition.¹⁰ As predicted, we found that participants rated the narrators differently depending on attribution condition, $F(1.72, 342.45) = 72.42, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.27$. Post-hoc tests using a Bonferroni adjustment demonstrated that participants rated narrators in the Suppression condition ($M = 5.90, SD = 0.93$) as more competent than those in the Passion Attribution condition ($M = 5.21, SD = 1.10, p < 0.001$, or those in the No Attribution condition ($M = 5.04, SD = 1.15$),

$p < 0.001$. As expected, participants also believed narrators who attributed their expression to passion were more competent than on those who did not make an attribution, $p = 0.01$.

14.2.3. Perceived distress

There was a main effect of attribution condition on participants' ratings of distress, $F(1.92, 382.02) = 18.50, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.09$. Participants rated the narrator who suppressed ($M = 5.72, SD = 1.14$) as less distressed than the narrator who attributed the distress expression to passion ($M = 6.14, SD = 0.97, p < 0.001$, or made no attribution ($M = 6.07, SD = 1.13, p < 0.001$, but did not rate the narrator who attributed to passion differently than the narrator who made no attribution, $p = 0.82$.

14.3. Discussion

Participants were more likely to choose partners for a future collaboration when the partners suppressed their distress compared to when they expressed distress and attributed the distress to passion. However, supporting Hypothesis 2, participants were more likely to select a partner who expressed distress and attributed it to passion than a partner who expressed distress and did not make an attribution. Supporting Hypothesis 1, participants also perceived potential partners who attributed distress to passion as more competent than those who did not make an attribution.

Participants also believed that the potential partner who suppressed distress was less distressed than either of the employees who expressed distress (whether or not they made a passion attribution). However, as in Study 1b, participants did not differ in how distressed they perceived the narrator who expressed distress and reframed it as passion, and the narrator who expressed distress and did not make an attribution. This again suggests that participants who label their distress as passion can communicate a similar level of distress as those who do not, but without as many social costs.

Taken together, these results suggest that when attempting to convey a competent impression, suppressing the expression is likely to lead to better impressions than expressing distress and making a passion attribution. However, if suppression is not possible, if distress has already been expressed, or if it is important to communicate distress to others, making a passion attribution is superior to making no attribution.

15. General discussion

In his foundational paper *The Laws of Emotion*, Nico Frijda posited the Law of Concern: “Emotions arise in response to events that are important to the individual's goals, motives, or concerns” (1988; p. 351). In other words, individuals feel emotional about things that they feel passionate about. However, in the workplace, particularly workplaces with restrictive display rules, negative

¹⁰ Mauchly's test indicated that the assumption of sphericity was violated. We therefore report the Greenhouse-Geisser estimates and use Bonferroni adjustments for post-hoc tests to correct for the violation, see Field (2009).

emotion is perceived to be an inappropriate distraction, whereas passion is perceived to be critical to individuals' success. In five experiments, we demonstrated that individuals may simply change the narrative they use to describe their distress expressions to fundamentally shift the perceptions and decisions of those around them.

Across five studies, we found support for [Hypothesis 1](#) that reframing expressions of distress as passion can mitigate observers' negative perceptions of competence following an expression of distress. These findings were consistent across judgments of strangers (Studies 1a-b and 2a), current colleagues (Study 1c), and future collaborators (Study 2b). Further, supporting [Hypothesis 2](#), participants were more likely to decide to hire and collaborate with people who attributed past emotional displays to passion compared to those who expressed distress and attributed it to emotionality or made no attribution (Studies 2a-b). Reframing a distress expression as caused by passion (rather than emotionality), by simply saying "I am passionate," was effective in mitigating negative perceptions of competence. Our findings suggest that reframing a distress expression as passionate represents an important and easily-deployed intervention that is likely to have profound effects on work outcomes.

Contrary to [Hypothesis 3](#), reframing expressions of distress as passionate was similarly effective for both men and women across all five experiments. Although we did not find that gender moderated the effect of reframing on perceptions of competence, expresser gender did influence ratings of competence. However, these effects were not consistent across studies. In Studies 1a and 1b, we found evidence that female expressers were judged more positively than male expressers. In Study 2a, we found that male expressers were judged more positively than female expressers. Perhaps this is because the expresser in Study 1a cried (high-intensity distress expression), whereas the expresser in Study 2a simply "got choked up" (low-intensity distress expression). Display rules about expressions of negative emotion are stricter for men than for women, and men cry less often than women do on average ([Fischer et al., 2013](#); [Vingerhoets et al., 2000](#)), so perhaps men are penalized more than women when they express high-intensity distress, but women are penalized more than men when they express low-intensity distress. Future research could further explore the consequences of distress expressions of varying intensities for men versus women at work.

Study 2b showed that individuals who hid their emotions were perceived as even more competent and desirable as partners than individuals who reframed their emotion as passion. However, prior research has documented substantial costs of suppressing distress. Trying to hide negative feelings from others does not help individuals reduce the experience of these feelings, and can paradoxically increase sympathetic activation and the risk of health problems (e.g., [Berry & Pennebaker, 1993](#); [Gross & Levenson, 1993](#)). At work, people who regularly suppress their distress experience dissatisfaction and burnout at higher rates than those who do not ([Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993](#); [Wharton, 1993](#)). Beyond these negative intrapersonal costs, suppression also leads suppressors to feel less satisfied with social interactions and observers and expressers to be less likely to form friendships ([Butler et al., 2003](#)). In the long-term, chronic suppressors have been found to have poor social functioning in general ([Gross & John, 2003](#); [Srivastava, Tamir, McGonigal, John, & Gross, 2009](#)).

In addition, expressing distress can be beneficial. For example, expressing distress at work allows individuals to communicate displeasure with current circumstances and a need for assistance from colleagues (e.g., [Geddes & Callister, 2007](#); [Van Kleef et al., 2010](#)). Emotion reframing allows individuals to communicate the intensity of their distress, but can mitigate some of the social costs associated with expressing distress at work.

16. Theoretical contributions

Our work advances the literature on emotion regulation by suggesting that the benefits of cognitive reappraisal—a much-studied *intrapersonal* emotion regulation tactic—may extend to *interpersonal* encounters. Although previous research has examined how regulating emotional experiences internally before an expression shapes interpersonal interactions and impressions (e.g. [Chi et al., 2011](#); [Grandey, 2003](#); [Gross & John, 2003](#)), we demonstrate that reframing emotional expressions publicly after an expression can shape interpersonal interactions and impressions.

Our research also contributes to the literature on impression management, the process by which individuals attempt to control how other people perceive them ([Leary & Kowalski, 1990](#)). We show that a verbal justification can be used to mitigate the negative consequences of expressing distress at work. Individuals may use "assertive" impression management tactics to promote favorable impressions, whereas they may use "defensive" tactics to repair others' view of them following a negative impression (e.g., [Ellis, West, Ryan, & DeShon, 2002](#)). Defensive tactics can involve strategies such as excuses (e.g., "I was sick at home that day so it wasn't my fault"), justifications (e.g., "but that is only because..."), or apologies (e.g., "I'm sorry, it will never happen again"; [Ellis et al., 2002](#)). In our research, we demonstrate how a defensive verbal statement ("I am passionate") influences impressions after a socially inappropriate emotional expression.

17. Limitations and future directions

Our work is qualified by several limitations that offer avenues for future research. First, our studies were cross-sectional and did not allow us to examine the influence of reframing on long-term outcomes. Future research could employ a longitudinal design to assess how an individual's emotion reframing influences their long-term outcomes such as job performance, salary, promotion, and turnover. This work could also examine how workplace display rules may shift over time as a result of repeated reframing: if individuals frequently label their emotional expressions as passion, it may cause negative emotional expression to seem more appropriate.

Second, we only investigated one form of emotion reframing. We compared how attributing distress to an ambiguous positive source (passion), differs from attributing distress to an ambiguous neutral (or perhaps somewhat negative) source (emotionality) or not making an attribution at all. However, we believe that individuals may also be able to reframe their expressions by attributing them to a different discrete emotion than they are actually experiencing. For example, if a presenter is shaking and flushed because she is experiencing anxiety before an important client meeting, she could publicly attribute her expression to either feeling passionate about doing well in the meeting (as we test here), or to feeling excited. Reframing an emotion in this way would, in essence, be a verbal form of nonverbal *masking* (i.e., substituting an appropriate emotional expression for an inappropriate one, such as smiling to conceal distress; [Ekman & Friesen, 1982](#)). However, publicly reframing distress as a positive emotion (e.g., reframing anxiety as excitement) while privately experiencing distress may seem dishonest to expressers who wish to communicate their true emotional states at work. A passion attribution, in addition to being effective, is also honest.

Finally, future research could explore additional contextual factors that may moderate the effects we report here. For example, display rules and norms about emotion regulation differ across cultures (e.g., [Matsumoto, Yoo, & Nakagawa, 2008](#)). Future research could explore how reframing influences co-workers' perceptions

across cultures. Similarly, the status of the target who displayed emotion may have an important effect. Emotional displays are often perceived differently depending on the status of the person displaying the emotion. For example a similar expression of distress may be perceived as sadness when the target is low-status, but anger when a target is high-status (Tiedens, 2000). Future research could explore how an individual's status or power (relative to the observer's) might influence perceptions of reframed emotional expressions.

18. Conclusion

People often feel the need to express emotions that violate workplace display rules. Because suppressing emotions is often difficult, can be psychologically costly, and prevents the expression of authentic emotional information to co-workers, employees may not always suppress socially inappropriate emotions at work. In this paper, we propose a novel strategy that people may use if they do express emotions that violate workplace display rules: emotion reframing. By publicly attributing socially inappropriate emotional displays (e.g., distress) to a socially appropriate source (e.g., passion), employees can easily and profoundly improve their interpersonal outcomes at work.

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