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THE ROLE OF AFFECT AND AFFECTIVE CONGRUENCE IN

PERCEPTIONS OF LEADERS: AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Based on the idea that emotional exchanges determine symbolic meanings in interpersonal exchanges, we hypothesized that displays of positive and congruent affect determine members' ratings of leaders in a simulated performance appraisal context. To test the hypotheses, 537 participants viewed videotapes of four male and female leaders giving positive and negative feedback, and with facial expressions of affect that were either congruent or incongruent with the verbal message that they were delivering. Results supported hypotheses that positive and message-congruent leader affect results in more positive member ratings of the leader, assessed using a 7-item measure of members' perceptions of the leader's negotiating latitude. The least positive ratings of negotiating latitude were given when positive feedback was delivered with negative facial affect.

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Leader-member Exchange theory (LMX: Dansereau, Graen, and Haga, 1975) is founded

on the premise that leaders do not use the same style or behaviours uniformly to all subordinates.

Instead, leaders tend to form unique relationships with each subordinate (Graen & Cashman,

1975). Liden and Graen (1980) have noted more specifically that the quality of leader-member

exchange, from the perspective of both leader and member, is influenced by perceptions of

warmth and trust (see also Brower, Schoorman, & Tan, 2000). Based on Ekman and Friesen's

(1974) position that feelings are principally reflected in facial expression, we expected to find in

an experimental study that subordinate perceptions of leaders, measured using subordinate

ratings of the leader's negotiating latitude (Graen, Novak, & Somerkamp, 1982), would depend

upon: (1) members' perceptions of the leader's display of affect and)2) the extent to which this

display is congruent with the leader's verbally expressed performance feedback. We controlled

in the study for leader gender, member emotional intelligence, and organizational climate.

A further motivation behind our study was derived from Ashforth and Humphrey's

(1995) argument that emotional exchanges play a central role in the process of symbolic

management (Daft & Weick, 1984). In this perspective, the role of leadership is to create and to

maintain a system of shared meanings among followers (see also Smircich & Stubbart, 1985).

Drawing on Ortner's (1975) anthropological research, Ashforth and Humphrey asserted that the

essence of symbolic management is to "evoke emotion which can be used to organizational

ends" (p.111). Thus, leaders engage in communication of symbols designed to make followers

feel better about themselves and to strengthen their resolve to the organization. Brief and

Motowidlo (1986) have noted similarly that "social interaction cannot be sustained without this trust and affective commitment" (p. 111).

For the purpose of the present study, we operationalized organizationally relevant emotional cues in terms of members' perceptions of non-verbal (facial) emotional cues in a performance appraisal feedback context. We focused on the effect these perceptions have on members' ratings of quality of their relationship with their leader. Although our study is not a test of LMX theory *per se*, the LMX model provides an appropriate and useful reference for our study. In particular, LMX researchers view the relationship between leader and member as a dyadic process (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), which can, in turn, be viewed as a series of social exchanges, where emotional perception plays an important role (Liden & Graen, 1980). Liden and his colleagues (see Dinesch & Liden, 1986; Liden, Wayne, & Sparrowe, 2000; Liden, Wayne, & Stilwell, 1993; Wayne & Liden, 1995) have subsequently shown that liking and impression management are the key determinants of LMX quality development.

According to Dansereau et al. (1975), high quality leader-member exchanges are characterized by greater attention, support, and sensitivity directed to members by their superior. Similarly, members in high quality exchanges are given better job assignments, more freedom and greater opportunities (Liden & Graen, 1980). Alternatively, when the quality of the exchange is low, members often are asked to perform more routine, mundane tasks and experience more formal exchange (Liden & Graen).

Liden and Graen (1980) proposed three factors that influence the quality of the exchange for members: (1) competence and skill, (2) extent to which members can be trusted, and (3) motivation to assume greater responsibility within the work group. More recently Murphy and Eshner (1999) have identified self-efficacy as an influence on the quality of exchange.

Dinesch and Liden (1986) have listed determinants of quality that include "unique physical attractiveness, attitudes, appearance, abilities, personality, experience, age, and background" (p. 626). Ashkanasy and O'Connor (1996) found also that value congruence between members and leaders is also important. Put simply, quality of exchange depends at on how followers perceive and relate to their leaders.

High quality leader-member relationships are thus a consequence of positive exchanges between leaders and members. It follows therefore that this should be reflected in positive expressions of affect. Indeed, this is exactly what Engle and Lord (1997) found in a field study of supervisors and subordinates. They examined the role of implicit theories, self-schemas, and perceived similarity in LMX, and found that negative affectivity was inversely related to liking and positive ratings for both supervisors and subordinates. Steiner (1997) showed further that leaders' initial liking for members was reflected in higher quality LMX. More recently, Cherulnik, Donley, Wiewel, and Miller, (2001) found that followers imitate their leader's positive facial expressions.

Based on a similar line of reasoning, Pugh (2001) investigated the consequences of displayed emotion in a service setting. Pugh developed a theory that combined Rafaeli and Sutton's (1987) work on emotional labor with Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson's (1994) concept of emotional contagion, suggesting that service worker's displays of emotion can be "caught" by customers. Pugh was able to demonstrate this effect in a field study of bank employees. Based on Pugh's (2001) research, it seems reasonable to conclude that exposure to an individual expressing positive or negative emotions can produce a corresponding change in the emotional state of a materially affected observer. We propose therefore that high quality relationships between leaders

and members are likely to be associated with members' perceptions positive emotion expressed by the leader. Thus:

Hypothesis 1: Members' perception of a leader's positive emotion will lead to higher member ratings of the leaders' negotiating latitude than will a perception of negative leader emotion.

The introduction of an emotional component into the leader-member relationship raises the question of how well members interpret non-verbal emotional cues in their interactions with their leader. For example, a leader who feels negatively towards a member may unconsciously display negative emotion while expressing a positive message as a means of influencing the member through symbolic management. In effect, leaders in these situations are engaging in emotional labor (Hochschild, 1979, 1983; Pugh, 2001). If, however, the member can detect unconscious indicators of negative (felt) emotion, then it is likely that the leader's influence attempt will be ineffective, resulting in a breakdown of trust, an essential ingredient of the leader-member relationship (Liden & Graen, 1980).

Archer and Akert (1977) have demonstrated further that non-verbal cues have the propensity to modify the significance of words and phrases. Mehrabian and Weiner (1967) espouse similarly that nonverbal communication plays a significant role in the interpretation of verbal messages. They showed in particular that incongruence of verbal messages and accompanying non-verbals lead to the message being perceived negatively (see also Mehrabian, 1970). This notion is further supported by the work of Argyle, Alkema, and Gilmar (1971); although these authors did not investigate Mehrabian's (1970) model explicitly, they concluded that the verbal part of a spoken message has considerably less effect on a listener's feelings of being liked or disliked than the speaker's facial expression. Indeed, it appears plausible that a

leader engaging in emotional labour can 'leak' non-verbal cues that might alter a member's perception of the quality of the relationship.

In this study, we focus on perceptions of facial expression, on the basis of Ekman and Friesen's (1974) postulation that observers focus on the face rather then the remainder of the body to detect actual feelings. Thus, a leader's influence attempts may be ineffective if the member can detect unconscious markers of negative felt emotion in a leader's face. Also, in view of Ashforth and Humphrey's (1995) position that leadership involves management of emotionally charged symbolism, it follows that members' interpretation of leadership influence attempts as insincere (because of detection of inappropriate facial expression) is likely to lead to a breakdown in the leadership relationship, and to cause distrust and cynicism (cf. Kanter & Mirvis, 1989). The hypothesis that emerges from this line of reasoning is:

Hypothesis 2: *Members' perceptions of an incongruous display of positive feedback accompanied by negative affect will lead to lower member ratings of the leade'sr negotiating latitude than would perceptions of congruous positive facial display.*

Finally, Wiess and Cropanzano (1996) assert that work attitudes are likely to be affected by dispositional traits of members and the organizational context in which the interaction takes place. It follows that therefore that a leader's influence attempts are also likely to be influenced by an individual's disposition and the organizational context (see also Turban, Jones, & Rozelle, 1990). In the present study, we operationalized personal disposition in terms of emotional intelligence. This construct was chosen on the basis of Mayer and Salovey's (1997) contention that emotionally intelligent people are more adept at reading and interpreting emotional expression in others. Finally, we operationalized environmental context as "Climate of Fear" (Nicholson and Ashkanasy, 1999). This variable was included on the presumption that members

in a 'fearful' environment may be inclined to expect less sincere influence attempts. We expected therefore to find a relationship between Climate of Fear and ratings of leaders, such that leaders in a more fearful environment would rate leaders more negatively.

Method

Participants

Participants were 537 undergraduate business students ranging in age from 17 to 49, with an average age of 20.1 years ($\underline{SD}$ = 2.9). Three hundred forty four (64%) were female. The ethnic composition of participants was: 69% Anglo-Australian, 9% Asian-Australian, 17% Asian, and 5% from other groups. Most (76%) had some work experience, ranging up to 31 years, although work experience overall was limited ($\underline{M}$ = 2.6 years, $\underline{SD}$ = 2.9).

Measures

Two questionnaire instruments were employed in the present study. These assessed (1) participants' emotional intelligence, and (2) participants' negotiation latitude ratings of leaders. The extent to which participants felt the experimental manipulations were apparent was also measured.

Leader-member exchange quality. Participants' perceptions of the leader were assessed using the 7-item negotiation latitude measure developed by Graen et al. (1982), scored on 5-point scales. Negotiating latitude here is based on Graen and Cashman's (1975) definition as the extent to which members perceive that the leader allows members to identify their own role development. The scale includes the item, "How would you characterize your working relationship with your leader?", rated from 1= "Extremely ineffective" to 5 = "Extremely effective". A higher score therefore indicates a more positive relationship with the leader. Graen and Scandura (1987) have subsequent demonstrated support for convergent validity of the

7-item measure. In addition, Graen and Uhl-Bein (1995), in a review of the LMX literature, asserted that the 7-item scale is the most recommended measure of negotiating latitude. The scale is scored in the direction of high negotiating latitude, and reported alphas are consistently in the .8 to .9 range.

Emotional Intelligence. The measure of emotional intelligence employed in this study was the 33-item measure developed by Schutte et al. (1998) scored on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = "agree" and 5 = "disagree". The measure is based on Mayer and Salovey's (1997) four components of emotional intelligence, consistent with the model of emotional intelligence used in this study. Shutte et al. (1998) report a reliability coefficient of 0.86 and test retest reliability = 0.78.

Manipulation Checks. Manipulation checks were included to ensure that the expressed emotion, quality of the dyadic relationship, organisational atmosphere, and performance appraisal type were being perceived as intended. These manipulations were measured using semantic differential scales.

Experimental design and stimulus material

The experimental design was a mixed between-and-within factorial ANCOVA with three between-group factors: climate (high fear, neutral, low fear), gender of member (male, female), and leader's feedback valence (positive, negative); two within-person factors: leader gender (male, female) and leader's displayed facial affect (positive, negative); and one covariate: member's (or participants') emotional intelligence. As detailed above, the dependent measure was operationalized as participants' ratings of the leader's negotiating latitude.

The stimulus material consisted of sixteen 60-second video vignettes showing head-and-shoulder of supervisors giving performance appraisal feedback. We chose this scenario as a

typical and credible example of leader influence in an organizational setting (cf. Duarte, Goodson, & Kitch, 1994). The structure of the performance appraisal feedback was developed in accordance with our university's performance appraisal guidelines to ensure that the content and structure of the feedback was realistic. A professional scriptwriter proofread the scripts in order to ensure that the natural spoken language, most commonly used in performance appraisals, was captured.

Our university's media productions unit made the video vignettes, and we employed professional actors recruited through commercial agencies. Four actors were auditioned and hired to make the videos, two male and two female. The videos were viewed by a pilot group of students with work experience, who rated the actors on credibility and accuracy of representation of emotional expression. Each of the four actors made four videos, using one of two scripts, corresponding to positive feedback ("I'm pleased to hear you're reaching your performance goals.") and negative feedback ("It is disappointing to hear that you've not been reaching your performance goals."). Each actor delivered each script twice: Once with positive facial expression, and once with negative facial expression. This resulted in two message-affect congruent and two incongruent video vignettes per actor (sixteen in total). The vignettes were assembled in four sets of four, showing either all positive feedback or all negative feedback, but with counterbalanced order of presentation of congruent and incongruent facial expression. To control for actor order and gender effects, the actors appeared in the same counterbalanced order in each set of four videos. Table 1 sets out the video presentation design.

Procedure

The study was conducted in four in-class sessions, where each participant viewed one set of four vignettes (see Table 1). Three hundred forty-five participants witnessed the positive

feedback condition while 192 viewed the negative feedback condition. The numbers in each session were governed only by class sizes on the days the study was conducted.

Participants first completed the emotional intelligence measure. They then read one of three descriptions of organizational climate. Two of the descriptions were based on items from Nicholson & Ashkanasy's (1998) Climate of Fear scale. One described a high fear climate, describing the work environment as "co-workers don't exactly tell you the truth and that on occasion you have been left out of the loop", while the other outlined a low fear environment, for example, "you can be fairly relaxed and open with management on all work issues and it is enjoyable working in the company". The third scenario was neutral, and provided only bland descriptions of the organizational environment, for example, "it is a medium sized firm with four main departments". The three descriptions were randomly distributed to participants as a part of an experimental package.

Following completion of the emotional intelligence questionnaire, and a check on climate manipulation, participants watched each of the four video vignettes in the set, with time to complete a manipulation check and the negotiating latitude scale after viewing each vignette. Finally, participants completed a demographic questionnaire, and were thanked for their participation. Feedback on the results of the study was provided to all participants in a following class meeting.

Results

Descriptive statistics. Emotional intelligence scores in the present study ranged from 38 to 121, with a mean of 70.43 ($\underline{SD} = 13.6$), and alpha of .88. Negotiating latitude ranged from 7 to 35, with a mean of 19.53 ($\underline{SD} = 7.44$), and an alpha of .92.

Manipulation checks. Manipulation checks across the three climate scenarios (3-items; alpha = 0.64; 7-point scale scored in the direction of high fear) showed that the different scenarios were significantly ($p < 0.01$) differentially rated in the expected direction. The manipulation checks for differences in positive vs. negative affect (2-items; alpha = 0.58) and positive vs. negative feedback (1-item) were also significant ($p < 0.01$) and in the expected direction. Table 2 displays the means, standard deviations, F-statistics, and effect sizes (η^2) for the manipulation checks. All manipulation checks were scored on a 7-point semantic differential scale anchored by bi-polar adjectives.

Further analysis to determine whether there were any differences between the groups in the perception of the organisational climate ("trusting" versus "fearful") indicated that there was no group effect, $F (1, 536) = 0.470$, ns. That is, the manipulation of organisational climate was perceived equally across all four groups.

Analysis model. A 3x2x2x(2x2) mixed between-within ANCOVA was employed initially, with negotiating latitude score as the dependent variable, and emotional intelligence score as the covariate. Between group independent variables were climate (positive, neutral, negative), feedback valence (positive, negative), and participant gender. Within-person independent variables were leader gender and displayed amotion (positive, negative). Analysis was conducted using a general linear modelling approach that takes account of different group sizes. The relationship between the emotional intelligence and negotiating latitude scores was found not to be significant ($r = -0.02$), however, so that emotional intelligence was not a significant predictor in the ANCOVA, and all results are presented here for the ANOVA only.

Control for gender effects. As we noted earlier, the design of this study was counterbalanced for order effects in respect of facial expression of affect and type of feedback

(see Table 1), with female leaders always viewed before males. As a consequence, any gender effects in this study were likely to be confounded by order. Therefore, while we included gender in the analysis as a control, we do not draw any conclusions in this paper based on significant gender effects.

Several effects involving gender were, in fact, found to be significant. These included a significant leader gender main effect, $\underline{F}$ (1, 536) = 39.52, η^2 = .07, $\underline{p}$ < .01; a significant two-way leader gender interaction with affect, $\underline{F}$ (1, 536) = 7.78, η^2 = .014, $\underline{p}$ < .01; a significant three-way interaction between leader gender, displayed affect, and feedback valence, $\underline{F}$ (1, 536) = 8.82, η^2 = .016, $\underline{p}$ < .01, and a significant three-way interactions between leader gender, participant gender, and feedback valence, $\underline{F}$ (1, 536) = 7.39, η^2 = .014, $\underline{p}$ < .01. With the exception of the gender main-effect, however, effect sizes were very small and, as we explained earlier, gender effects were likely to be confounded by order. Consequently, the above gender effects are not considered further.

Control for climate. As we anticipated, there was a significant main effect on members' perceptions of leader negotiating latitude associated with the manipulated organisational climate, High Fear $\underline{M}$ = 18.8, Neutral $\underline{M}$ = 19.53, Low Fear $\underline{M}$ = 20.53, $\underline{F}$ (2, 535) = 10.61, η^2 = .04, $\underline{p}$ < .01. The effect was small, however, and climate did not interact with any other variables, and so is therefore not considered further.

Hypothesis tests. Results indicated main effects for leader displayed emotion on participants' ratings of the quality of the leader's negotiating latitude, $\underline{F}$ (1,536) = 1378.52, η^2 = .72, $\underline{p}$ < .01, and a significant two-way interactions of displayed emotion and feedback valence, $\underline{F}$ (1,536) = 208.44, η^2 = .28, $\underline{p}$ < .01, illustrated in Figure 1. There was no main effect for feedback valence, however, $\underline{F}$ (1,536) = 0.02, $\underline{ns}$. These results provide clear support for

Hypothesis 1, in that perception of positive emotion led to higher ratings of the leader's negotiating latitude than perceptions of negative emotion. Hypothesis 2 was also supported in that incongruous display of negative affect accompanied by positive verbal feedback elicited the lowest ratings of negotiating latitude, $\underline{F}$ (1,536) = 26.56, η^2 = .05, $\underline{p}$ < 0.01.

Discussion

The objective of the present study was to assess the importance of the role of affect and affective congruence upon the quality of the leader-member relationship. Our results support the notion that non-verbal emotional cues have a significant impact upon members' perceptions of the quality of leader-member relations. In particular, results showed that the leader's positive expressed emotion led to higher member ratings of the leader's negotiating latitude. Results also provide support for the notion that members' perceptions of leaders are associated with the level of congruency between the leader's verbal message and his or her non-verbally expressed emotion. The empirical support for the first hypothesis, however, suggests that high quality leader-member exchanges are characterized by display of positive emotion, irrespective of the positive or negative nature of the verbally expressed message.

These results demonstrate, as Cherulnik et al. (2001) have also noted, that evocation of positive expressed emotion through facial display has a significant and strong impact on follower affect and, in the instance of the present study, on the quality of the perceived leader-member relationship. It seems indeed true that positive affective leaders engender positive feelings from organizational members. In this respect, and as we predicted, leaders are able to convey symbolically to organizational members a shared perspective based on positive affect (Daft & Weick, 1984; Smircich & Studdart, 1985).

The strength and clarity of the obtained results are also consistent with the notion that high quality exchanges are characterized by feelings of warmth and trust (Liden & Graen, 1980). In the present study, feelings of warmth and trust become salient and interpretable via an individual's expressed emotion, represented in this study by positive affect. The results also substantiate Engle and Lord's (1997) finding that positive leader affect, operationalised through expressed emotion, consistently elicited higher ratings of member-reported LMX quality.

An alternative interpretation, however, is that transfer of emotion occurs through as a process of emotional contagion (Hatfield et al., 1994; Pugh, 2001). Hatfield and her colleagues describe emotional contagion as an automatic, unintentional, and generally unrecognized tendency to mimic or synchronize facial expressions. What could be transpiring is that participants subjected to positive expressed emotion "caught" that emotion and reciprocated it by positively rating leaders who display positive expressed facial expression. Nonetheless, the fact is that our results show clearly that leader positive emotion elicits positive responses from members.

Turning now to the congruency hypothesis, we see that congruency between a leader's verbal message and his or her facial expression of emotion also determines the quality of the member's perception of the leader-member relationship. This finding is consistent with Mehrabian and Wiener's (1967) research into verbal and non-verbal message congruence. This result also aligns with research into perception of emotional cues in facial expression conducted by Ekman and his colleagues. To our knowledge, however, this has not been demonstrated previously in an organizational setting. The implication of this finding is that it is not enough just to use positive language in delivering performance appraisal feedback. Indeed, as we

anticipated, positive feedback delivered with negative affect displayed in facial expression resulted in the lowest ratings of leaders in this study.

Within this result, however, it should be noted that the strong effect of positive affect over negative affect overshadowed the congruency effect in the case of negative feedback. Thus, while negative affect associated with negative feedback (congruent) was rated more positively than negative affect associated with positive feedback (incongruent), ratings of leaders associated with positive affect were always higher than ratings associated with negative affect, consistent with Hypothesis 1.

Nonetheless, our results demonstrate that participants were clearly influenced by the incongruence of affective display to the verbal content of the message. In this respect, Mehrabian and Wiener (1967) have demonstrated through their research into message congruence that matching verbal and non-verbal communication is an essential determinant of the genuineness of the information sent. Ekman and his colleagues (see Ekman & Friesen, 1982; Ekman, Friesen, & O'Sullivan, 1988) have also shown that the human face is a key point of reference in decoding and determining the affective content of information being communicated.

Finally, we recognize that our study suffers from two important limitations. The principal limitation is that we employed an experimental design in a laboratory setting, where the leader-member relationship was artificially created. The external validity of the findings presented in this paper is therefore an issue. Nevertheless, Mook (1983) has argued that the results obtained in laboratory settings should not be dismissed lightly. More recently, Fox, Spector, and Miles (2001) reported in a study of behavior and emotions that there was little difference in results obtained using student and non-student participants. Indeed, as Mook has

pointed out, many of the better-known theories in organizational behavior were developed initially from studies conducted in laboratory settings.

A second limitation of this study is that, for administrative reasons, presentation order was held constant across all four groups. This precluded analysis of gender effects. Further, we used only two female and two male actors, so any gender effects would have been further compromised by the small leader sample. Consequently, gender was included as in our analysis only as a control. Nonetheless, and although the gender effects we detected were small (notwithstanding the order confound), Eagly and her colleagues have shown that these effects can be pervasive (see Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Eagly, Karau, & Makhijani, 1995; Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992). We therefore recommend that future research would do well to extend our research to a more complex design that permits investigation of gender effects in leader-member relationships.

From a practical perspective, this research has illustrated the importance of non-verbal emotional cues and the impact that such cues have on leader-member exchanges. This has important implications for the training of managers in both emotional awareness and emotion perception. The ability to present emotionally sensitive cues correctly and clearly has implications for managers in modern organizations. For example, a manager who is sensitive to his or her own emotional states, and to the underlying emotional state of members, is more likely to be able to match their emotional expression to the messages that they deliver to their subordinates. Subordinates, in turn, react more positively to the emotional messages and to the congruency of the leader's accompanying emotional expression.

In conclusion, we have demonstrated in this experimental study that members' perceptions of emotional cues in their leaders' facial expression are important determinants of

feelings towards the leader, as reflected in their ratings of their leader's negotiating latitude, an indicator of leader-member exchange quality. Specifically, we found that positive and congruent affect determines members' rating of negotiation latitude with their leader. These findings have important implications for training of managers in emotional sensitivity. The clarity of the results we obtained in this study suggest that field research to establish the veracity of our findings is an imperative.

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Table 1

Experimental video sequences

		Actor			
Video	**Feedback Valence**	Female 1	Female 2	Male 1	Male 2
1	Positive	PA	NA	PA	NA
2	Positive	NA	PA	NA	PA
3	Negative	NA	PA	NA	PA
4	Negative	PA	NA	PA	NA

PA = Positive affect displayed

NA = Negative affect displayed

Table 2

Manipulation Checks[a]

Manipulation Check	M	SD	F	η^2
Climate – High Fear	4.41	1.34		
Climate – Low Fear	4.01	0.60	4.28[b]**	.01
Climate – Neutral	4.20	0.60		
Positive Affect	2.89	1.34	534.00[c]**	.50
Negative Affect	5.28	1.70		
Positive Feedback	3.66	0.95	216.44[c]**	.29
Negative Feedback	4.54	0.86		

Notes

[a] Manipulation check variables measured using 7-point semantic differential scales
[b] df = 1,256
[c] df = 2,255

** p<0.01

Figure 1

Interaction of Displayed Affect and Appraisal on Ratings of Leader Negotiating Latitude