Emotion recognition in close personal relationships

Can intimacy predict one’s ability to detect others’ facial expressions? Although it would seem intuitive that individuals would be better at reading the expressions of those who are close to themselves, research has failed to support this. Most research in this area, however, has examined emotion recognition using high-intensity clear posed expressions. However, strong emotions are rarely expressed in everyday interactions, and more subdued expressions are more common in everyday emotional interactions. In a series of studies conducted by Fang Zhang and Maria Parmley, we have examined how intimacy and familiarity impacts the perception of more subtle emotional expressions. In these studies, undergraduates have been paired with a close friend or an acquaintance. In one study recently published in Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, participants were asked to view photographs of their partner’s and a stranger’s angry, sad and happy expressions at various intensities and identify these expressions. As can be seen in the figures below, when comparing acquaintances with close friends, although they differed from one another very little (if at all) in identifying expressions at very low or very high intensities, they did differ in identifying expressions at intermediate intensities. Close friends were more accurate than acquaintances particularly in identifying the negative expressions of anger and sadness when these expressions were more subtle. These findings suggest that intimacy plays an important role in nonverbal communication, particularly for negative emotional expressions and when facial expressions are at subdued levels.

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