

Crocodile tears:

A systematic analysis of the conditions under which emotional tears are perceived as insincere

Human emotional tears constitute a strong affiliative signal that triggers the intention to approach and help the crier. This beneficial interpersonal effect of tears can be explained by the fact that tears are considered inherently sincere emotional signals, and tearful individuals are consistently ascribed socially desirable, affiliative characteristics such as warmth, honesty, and trustworthiness.

The positive connotations of tears, however, are quite often challenged by popular media and common wisdom, which frequently portray the criers as manipulative and qualify their tears as insincere. For instance, when Hilary Clinton cried during her presidential campaign, she was accused of shedding crocodile tears (that is, insincere, manipulative tears). Recently, a similar accusation was made against a Polish politician, Beata Kempa who burst into tears during a TV interview when responding to a sharp comment made by an opposing politician. Another good example here is a ban issued in 2008 by state prosecutors in Ohio, which prohibited defense attorneys from crying on cue in death-penalty cases because such crying was considered a form of emotional blackmail.

In the proposed project, we will take a closer look at the paradox between considering tears as inherently sincere social signals and the common belief that tears can serve manipulative purposes. We will try to identify the specific conditions under which tears are perceived as fake. Put differently, we expect that tears will be generally perceived as genuine and will have a positive effect on the perceived honesty of the crier. However, these perceptions seem likely to change when (1) tears are accompanied by intense crying behaviors (e.g., sobbing), (2) the crier's traits are associated with manipulation tendencies, (3) the observer is generally distrustful of others' intentions, (4) situational context suggests that tears may be used for manipulation purposes, and (5) the culture is characterized by low trust levels.

We will test how the interplay between these factors may affect the perceptions of the authenticity of tears in five experimental studies. The studies will rely on a large and diverse set of stimuli, including videos showing actors shedding tears and demonstrating various more intense crying behaviors (e.g., sobbing or wiping tears) as well as pictures of tearful and non-tearful individuals (created by either digitally removing tears from tearful faces or adding tears to non-tearful faces). We will also manipulate contextual factors. For instance, we will present the criers as more or less manipulative by using short descriptions of the situations the criers are in or pictures of faces varying in criminal or remorseful appearance. Moreover, driven by the observation that some contexts are frequently associated with emotional manipulation, we will set our studies in various scenarios such as court or political settings.

We believe that our project is crucial not only for identifying the roots of the "tears are manipulative" belief but also for getting insight into how contextual factors influence the perception of emotional expression. Evidence is accumulating that emotional expression cannot be studied outside of the context in which it appears, because the context significantly modulates the social meaning of this expression (e.g., a smile on the rival's face looks less affiliative than a smile on the friend's face). By focusing on the role of context for the overall perception of the authenticity of tears and evaluation of the crier, the results of the project may help us understand biases people have when judging the authenticity of perceived tears and explain why people tend to hide their tears in the presence of others.