

All Choked Up: Understanding the Functions of Tears

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Why We Cry

Tears demand attention.

A compelling form of emotional expression, tears fascinate both scientists and lay people alike (Trimble, 2012).

However, surprisingly little is known about the functions of tears.

One theory is that tears are communicative in nature, as tears often win support from those witness to the display (Hendriks, Croon & Vingerhoets, 2008).

It is unknown why tears produce this response and whether any factors moderate the effectiveness of this social signal.

Aims

- To determine whether the context where crying occurs moderates helping responses offered by observers.
- To confirm the latent attitudes behind responses to male and female tears.
- To understand how gender stereotypical assumptions about crying behaviour differ in employment settings.
- To determine whether responses to tears are driven by altruistic or egoistic motives.

Methodology

Design: Randomly assigned to the work ($N = 143$) or home condition ($N = 120$).

Vignettes: Vague vignettes depicted a gender neutral person who discovered they were getting fired or divorced.

Gender Neutral Names: Riley and Casey.

Gender Stereotyping: Rated gender stereotypical adjectives of emotionality, sensitivity, competence, and decisiveness.

Factor Analysed adjectives:

Negative Characteristics

$\alpha = .82$

Strange, bad, stupid,
inadequate, manipulative

Friendly, nice,
good, clever

Positive Characteristics

$\alpha = .86$

Emotional Support

$\alpha = .92$

Comfort, attention,
calm down, help, talk

Ignore, do nothing,
get angry

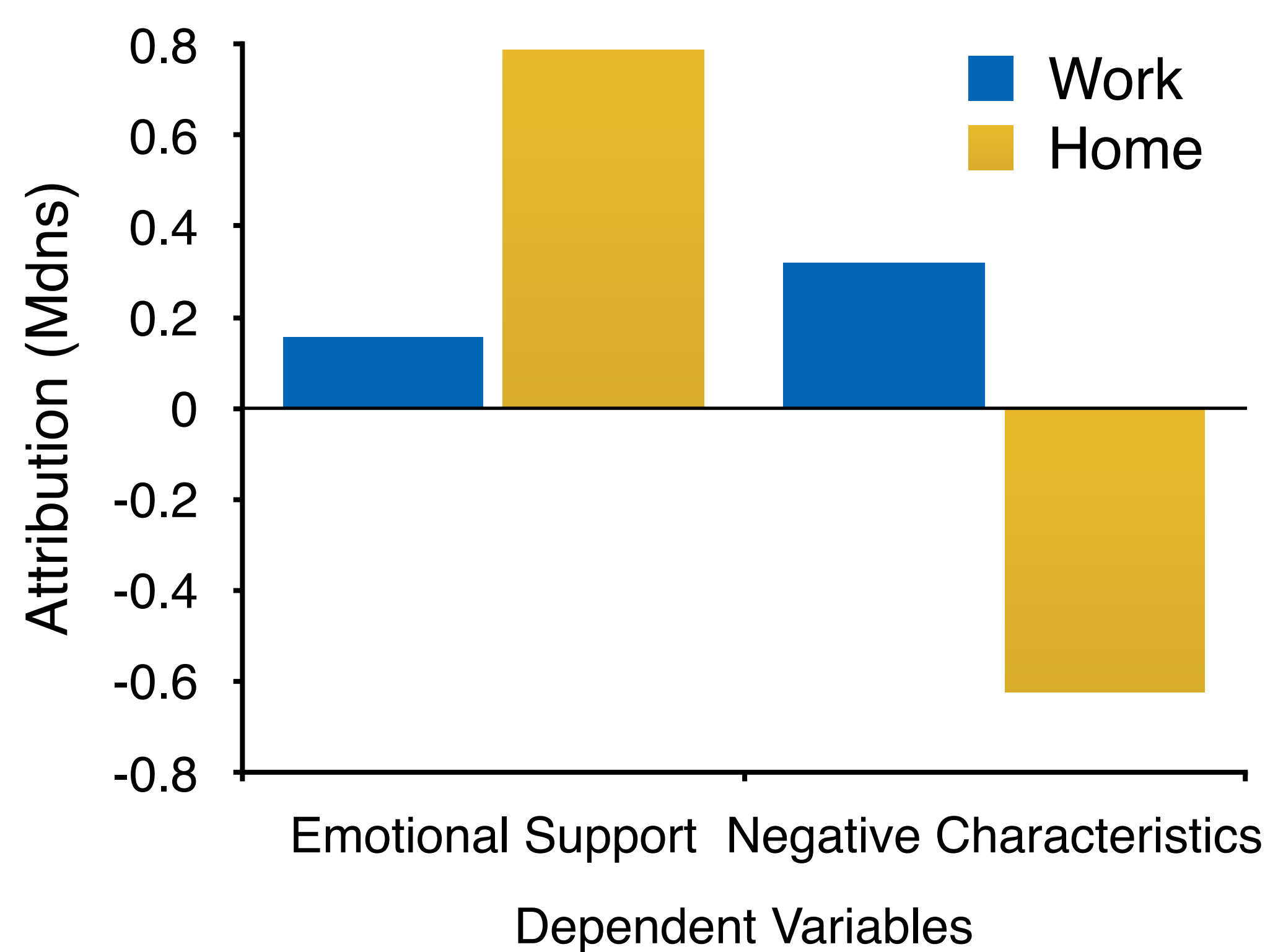
Negative Attention

$\alpha = .82$

Empathy: Interpersonal Reactivity Index.

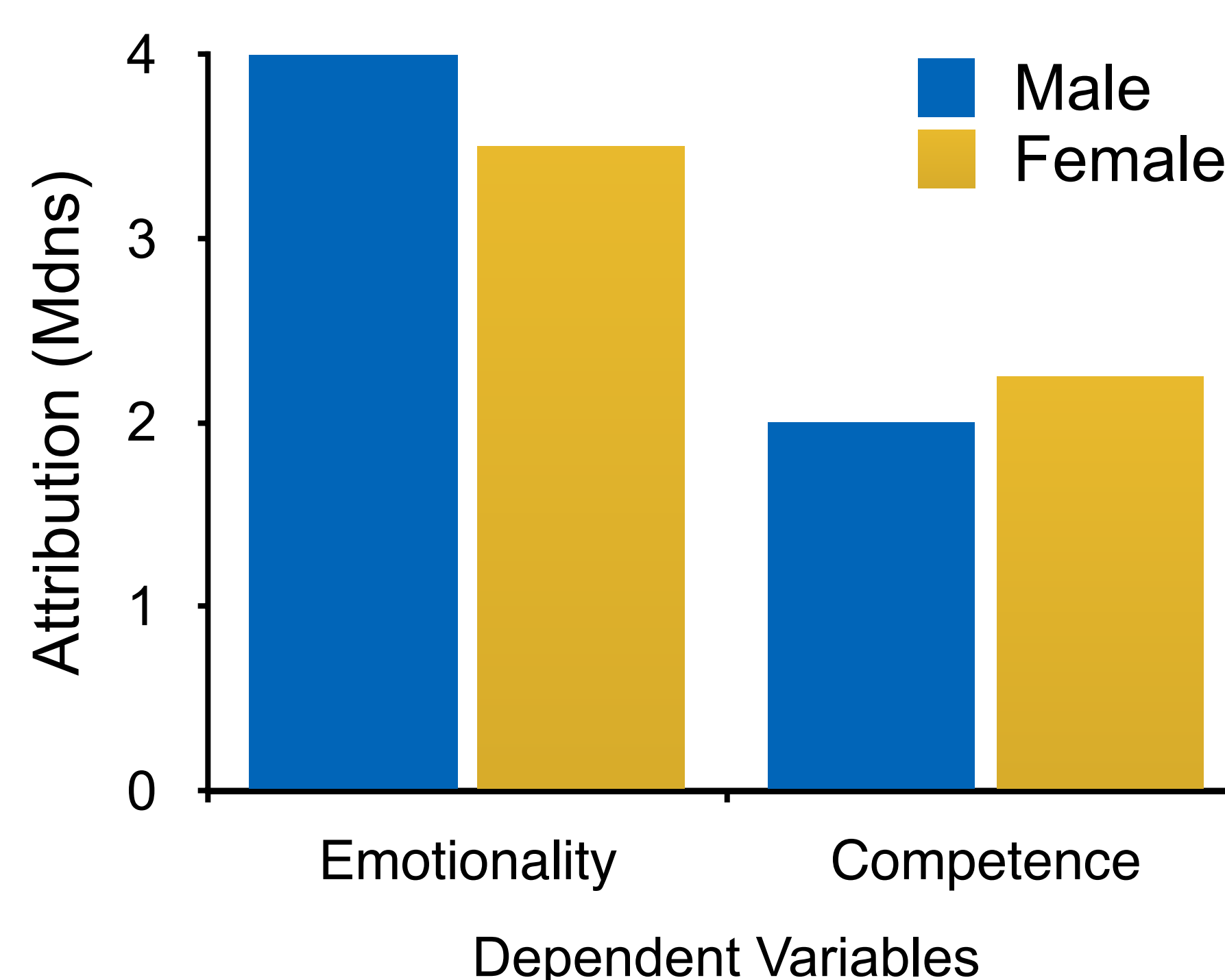
Person Perception: Perception of depicted vignette person as **male or female**.

Context Data

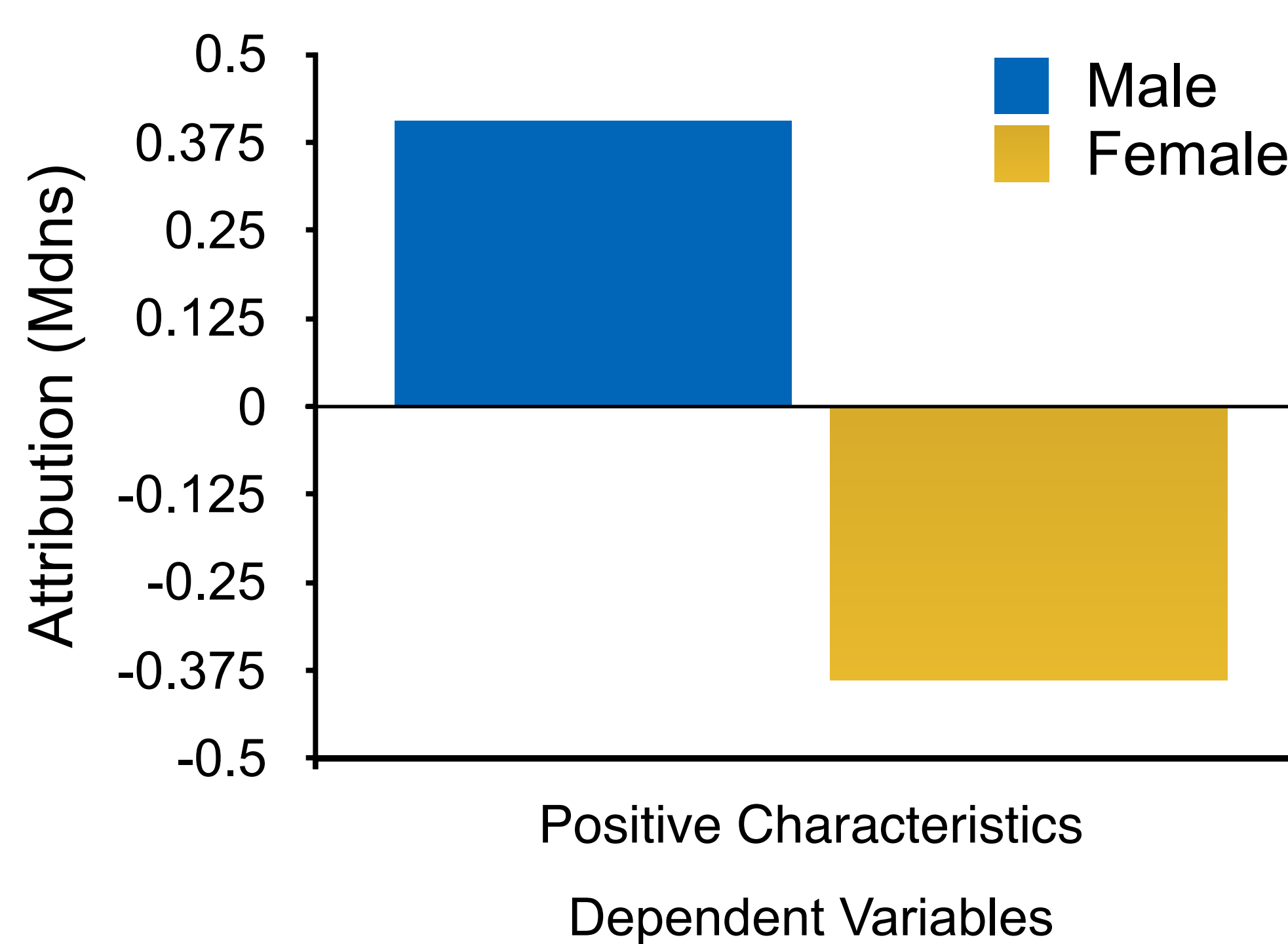


Bartlett factor scores on the dependent variables, with higher scores indicating greater agreement. Greater negative characteristics and lesser emotional support ($p < .001$) was offered to individuals crying in employment contexts.

Gender Stereotyping Data



Participants attributed males with greater emotionality ($p = .022$) in employment contexts, however there was no significant difference between ratings of competence.



In employment contexts, male tears were evaluated more favourably than female tears ($p = .002$).

Empathy Data

Persons responding to emotional tears were motivated by altruism ($r_s = .515$, $p < .001$), and no support was garnered for the egoism hypothesis.

Why Tears Matter

We feel compelled to help tears.

(Fischer, Eagly, & Oosterwijk, 2013).

Examining the reactions to crying in multiple contexts allows for greater understanding of how people respond to tears.

Specifically, crying in the workplace violates **display rule** behaviours.

Role congruity theory suggests that females will be subject to greater workplace prejudice as traditionally feminine stereotypes are incompatible with workplace norms (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Preference for male tears is counterintuitive as backlash theory states that male tears violate multiple social norms (Rudman & Phelan, 2008).

However, male tears are **perceived as a rare event**. This novelty is one proposed explanation for this phenomenon, as perceivers believe that *"if a man is crying, something serious must be the matter."*

Empathy is an important and overlooked factor concerning responses to tears. Understanding the way that altruism is involved with responses to tears could be better understood through biological and neurological studies.

Conclusions

The location where crying occurs moderates responses to crying persons.

Crying in the workplace has different ramifications for males and females as a result of display rules and societal perception.

Tears are a strong social signal that elicit support regardless of social context, which suggests the importance of empathy in understanding cognitive processes.

References:

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More Information

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