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Cold but competent: The paradoxical effects of solitude expression on social reputation at work

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science

When someone says “I enjoy working alone”, what would you think about this person? A recent study showed that university students judge a peer who expresses a preference for solitude – the experience of being alone without in-person or virtual interactions (Long et al., 2003), would be rated as more competent or agentic, but less warm or communal (Ren & Evans, 2021).

With increasing remote work arrangements, it is important to test if the above finding applies in employee contexts for three reasons. First, remote work may trigger a sense of disconnection and ironically lead to a stronger preference for solitude (Ren et al., 2021). Second, the effect of solitude expression on social reputation may be more salient in virtual interactions (Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018), due to limited social cues in online settings. Third, employee reputation is consequential. The social evaluation of employee agency and communality has implications for how employees are perceived, for instance in terms of their leadership capability and productivity (Koenig et al., 2011).

Drawing on signalling theory (Connelly et al., 2011), we argue that the expression of a preference for solitude (high vs. low), would result in social evaluations of low communality, but high agency (Fiske et al., 2007). In remote work contexts, employees would use the expression of enjoying working alone as signals to infer behaviour and competence that are difficult to observe. We also explore if gender moderates the main effects, as previous results on social evaluations across gender are often inconsistent (Bowker et al., 2020; Coplan et al., 2019). Moreover, we test if solitude expression affects perceived productivity and leadership potential, as mediated by social evaluations.

Method

To test our hypotheses, we conducted three online experiments. We manipulated solitude expression by asking participants to read and form an impression of a fictional employee response to a survey about their solitude preference in remote work contexts (Ren & Evans, 2021). In Study 1 (pre-registered), we tested the main effects of (high vs. low) solitude expression on social evaluations. A total of 269 working employees were recruited via Bachelor students in a Dutch university. In Studies 2 and 3, we manipulated profile gender by specifying the name of the employees (Study 2: Greg/Emily; Study 3 [pre-registered]: George/Emily). Employees in the United Kingdom were recruited via Prolific for both studies, giving us final samples of 201 and 550 employees, respectively.

After reading the profiles, participants filled in questions about social evaluation (agency and communality) (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007), perceived productivity (Lerner et al., 2001) and leadership potential (Sczesny & Kühnen, 2004).

Results

Across three studies, we found support for the main effects of solitude expression: participants rated profiles expressing high solitude as more agentic (mean $d = 0.50$) and less communal (mean $d = -0.85$) than those expressing low solitude. We also found an interaction effect of gender on communality (mean $\eta^2 = .19$) and agency (mean $\eta^2 = .06$). Only in the condition of high solitude expression, female profiles are rated as more competent, and male profiles are rated as colder.

Moreover, high solitude expression led to higher productivity ($d = 0.68$), but lower leadership potential ($d = -0.20$), and these effects are mediated by agency and communality evaluations.

Limitations

First, there may be concerns about the realism and external validity of our profile manipulation of solitude expression. Future research may consider manipulating with simulated audio conversations. Second, we have yet to establish the causality between social evaluations and work reputations. Nevertheless, prior studies revealed that social evaluations would lead to individual reactions in societal contexts (Fiske et al., 2007).

Implications

Our study contributes to the literature in two ways. First, we contribute to signalling theory by showing that employees who prefer solitude are subject to evaluation biases in performance appraisals and (leadership) selection in organisations. Second, this study introduces solitude as a double-edged sword to the emerging literature of disconnectedness at work, including topics of loneliness, isolation, and ostracism. In particular, we shift the lens from an intrapsychic experience to the other reactions upon expressing disconnectedness.

Research Relevance

In our research, we found that the expression of solitude in remote work may be a double-edged sword at work. We believe our findings invite EAWOP participants to reflect on how remote work experience affects employees' social reputations, as more organisations are implementing remote work arrangements.

This research primarily addresses UN SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth and SDG3: Good health and well-being.

Keywords: Solitude, social evaluation, remote work