Published in final edited form as:

Pers Individ Dif. 2012 September 1; 53(4): 426–430. doi:10.1016/j.paid.2012.04.010.

Facets of Emotional Clarity and Suspiciousness

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Abstract

In a college student sample, we explored the relations between individual differences in facets of emotional clarity and suspiciousness. Previous theory and research has treated emotional clarity as a one-dimensional construct. Boden and Berenbaum (2011) proposed that a second facet of emotional clarity, *source awareness* (a general understanding of the cause of their emotions), could be distinguished from *type awareness* (a general understanding of the type of emotions [anger, fear] experienced). We found that source and type awareness were incrementally, inversely associated with suspiciousness when statistically accounting for the extent to which emotions are attended to, and gender. Additionally, source awareness significantly predicted suspiciousness after accounting for anger, anxious arousal, and social anxiety, whereas type awareness did not. Findings are consistent with the hypothesis that, among individuals with low source and type awareness, suspicious beliefs are formed to make sense of and explain emotional arousal.

Keywords

source awareness; type awareness emotional clarity; emotional awareness; suspiciousness; odd/peculiar beliefs

1. Facets of Emotional Clarity and Suspiciousness

As described by affective forecasting theories (see Wilson & Gilbert, 2005), and affect-as-information theory (Schwarz, 1990), emotions serve as information and heuristics that people evaluate when making decisions, judgments, and attributions. One factor that influences how useful and adaptive emotions are in this regard is individual's understanding of their emotions, or emotional clarity. High emotional clarity is adaptive because it helps an individual to identify and respond in an appropriate and efficient manner to internal and environmental contingencies that elicit emotions (e.g., Lazarus, 1991; Barrett & Gross, 2001). Alternatively, a variety of maladaptive consequences may result from uncertainty regarding emotions (Barrett & Gross, 2001). In this study, we investigated whether a particular maladaptive consequence, suspiciousness, is associated with distinct facets of emotional clarity.

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1.1. Emotional Clarity

Emotional clarity is an individual differences construct defined as the extent to which individuals can identify, discriminate between, and understand their feelings (Coffey, Berenbaum, & Kerns, 2003; Gohm & Clore, 2002; 2000). Emotional clarity and the conceptually-related dimension of attention to emotions (i.e., the extent to which emotions are attended to) together comprise the construct of emotional awareness, and underlie related constructs such as alexithymia and self-reported emotional intelligence (Coffey et al., 2003; Gohm & Clore, 2002; 2000). Emotional clarity is distinct from valence and intensity of emotional experiences (Gohm & Clore, 2002; 2000).

Previous theory and research has typically treated emotional clarity as a one-dimensional construct (see Coffey et al., 2003; Gohm & Clore, 2000; 2002; Salovey, Mayer, Goldman, Turvey, & Palfai, 1995). Boden and Berenbaum (2011) proposed that emotional clarity could be split into two, related facets: type awareness and source awareness. *Type awareness* represents the extent to which individuals can identify and discriminate between their emotions (e.g., anger versus fear). Existing measures of individual differences in emotional clarity (e.g., Trait Meta Mood Scale; Salovey et al., 1995) measure type awareness (Boden & Berenbaum, 2011). Thus, research finding links between individual differences in emotional clarity and psychological outcomes (e.g., well-being, adaptive coping; Gohm & Clore, 2002) have focused their investigations on type awareness.

Boden and Berenbaum (2011) proposed that a second facet of emotional clarity, *source awareness*, could be theoretically and empirically distinguished from *type awareness*. Source awareness represents the extent to which individuals understand the source of their emotions. This proposal was based on appraisal theories of emotions (e.g., Lazarus, 1991), which have specified that appraisal of the source of one's emotions is an important determinant of emotion reactivity, and on research demonstrating that the manipulation of source awareness has large effects on judgments and attributions (Gasper & Clore, 1998, 2000; Keltner, Locke, & Audrain, 1993; Schwarz & Clore, 1983). Boden and Berenbaum (2011) psychometrically distinguished self-report items of source and type awareness. Items measuring type awareness were obtained from traditional measures of emotional clarity, and items measuring source awareness were developed for this purpose.

1.2. Emotional Clarity & Suspiciousness

Paranoia commonly refers to beliefs regarding other people deliberately trying to cause physical, social or psychological harm to oneself, and at its extreme can be of delusional intensity and indicative of a psychotic mental disorder (e.g., paranoid schizophrenia; American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Freeman & Garety, 2000). We conceptualize sub-clinical paranoia, or suspiciousness, as a type of odd/peculiar belief (henceforth labeled "peculiar belief"). Peculiar beliefs are affect-laden beliefs that are typically unfalsifiable (as opposed to patently false), deviate from the ordinary, and have less evidence and/or less convincing evidence to support their existence (Berenbaum, Kerns, & Raghavan, 2000). There are clear theoretical links between emotional clarity and peculiar beliefs. Emotions directly influence belief formation and change (Boden & Berenbaum, 2010). Like heuristics (see Gilovich, Griffin, & Kahneman, 2002), emotions provide information that, when useful, contribute to adaptive and accurate beliefs. However, when emotions do not provide useful information they might lead to inaccurate beliefs, including peculiar beliefs (Berenbaum, Boden & Baker, 2009), which help to make sense of emotional arousal that is difficult to understand because source and type awareness are diminished. Here, attributions of source of emotions may serve as a belief object (e.g., I may attribute the cause of my anxiety to the police officer walking past me, which serves as the basis for the belief, "Police officers are out to get me"). Furthermore, by providing information regarding the source of emotions,

the belief will facilitate identification of the type of emotions (Lazarus, 1991), which may or may not correspond to the actual type. An individual may be motivated to accept such a belief as true, regardless of the extent to which it accurately reflects the true cause and type of the emotional arousal, to reduce distress that accompanies unexplained emotional arousal (Wilson & Gilbert, 2008; Zimbardo, LaBerge, & Butler, 1993). In other words, suspicious belief formation and maintenance may serve an emotion regulation function (Boden & Gross, in press; Newheiser, Farias, & Tausch, 2011).

Past research has demonstrated links between individual differences in emotional clarity and suspiciousness (Berenbaum et al., 2006). In two studies, Berenbaum and colleagues (2006) examined the relation between facets of emotion and dimensions of schizotypal personality disorder reported by college students and individuals from the community who were over-sampled for peculiar beliefs and perceptions (37.3% of the sample had clinically significant levels of peculiar beliefs). In both samples, it was found that participants who reported lower levels of emotional clarity tended to report more suspicious/paranoid beliefs, and these associations were not an artifact of variance shared with negative affect or emotional intensity/instability. Because these studies included traditional individual difference measures of emotional clarity, we interpret these findings as demonstrating links between suspiciousness and type, but not source, awareness.

Two experimental studies have found evidence that induced reductions in source awareness, specifically, are associated with elevated levels of suspiciousness (Boden & Berenbaum, 2007; Zimbardo, Andersen & Kabat, 1981). Zimbardo and colleagues (1981) investigated the relation between hypnotically diminished source awareness and suspiciousness. Participants who were posthypnotically induced to experience emotional arousal (i.e., increased heart rate and respiration) and amnesia for the source of arousal had higher levels of pre- to post-induction suspiciousness than did participants who were posthypnotically induced to experience: (a) partial deafness or an itch but no amnesia, and (b) partial deafness and amnesia. Boden and Berenbaum (2007) induced anger and then provided participants with either: (a) no information about their emotions; or (b) information that was expected to make them aware of the antecedents of these emotions. It was found that men who were not provided with information about their emotions were more suspicious than were men who were provided with this information, whereas there were no differences among women in either condition. Furthermore, this effect was attributable to the experimental manipulation and not to potential confounds (e.g., the affect induction). It was hypothesized that the gender effect was primarily driven by women being more attentive to their emotions than were men (as we found in an accompanying study), and thus, being less influenced by a manipulation intended to enhance their emotional understanding.

1.3. The Present Research

The results of the studies reviewed above provide preliminary evidence that suspiciousness is associated with type awareness (Berenbaum et al., 2006), and source awareness (Boden & Berenbaum, 2007; Zimbardo et al., 1981). However, none of these studies specifically investigated the relations between individual differences in both facets of emotional clarity and suspiciousness. This was our goal in the present study. We explored two hypotheses. First, source and type awareness would incrementally predict suspiciousness when statistically accounting for each other and a third dimension of emotional awareness, attention to emotions. As attention to emotions has been indirectly linked to suspiciousness and peculiar beliefs in several studies (Berenbaum et al., 2009; Boden & Berenbaum, 2004; 2007; Kerns, 2005), we attempted to demonstrate that the facets of emotional clarity, specifically, and not emotional awareness, broadly, predict suspiciousness. Our second hypothesis is based on previous research that has found that negative emotional arousal is positively associated with peculiar beliefs (Boden, Berenbaum & Topper, 2012). We

hypothesized that both source and type facets would predict suspiciousness when statistically accounting for specific types of negative emotional arousal (anger, anxious arousal, social anxiety) that have been found to be associated with suspiciousness (e.g., Chadwick, Trower, Juusti-Butler, & Maguire, 2005; Martin & Penn, 2001). Anger and anxiety may contribute to suspiciousness because interpersonal stimuli that generally contribute to anger and anxiety (i.e., other individuals blocking goals and threatening physical, social or psychological harm; Lazarus, 1991; Sherer, 1999) are the objects of suspicious beliefs. As negative emotional arousal has been found to be inversely associated with emotional clarity in several studies (e.g., Berenbaum et al., 2006), we statistically accounted for anger, anxious arousal, and social anxiety to ensure that potential relations between facets of emotional clarity and suspiciousness were not artifacts of shared variance with these factors.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants ($n=216$; 51% female) from a large Midwestern university took part in this study for course credit or monetary compensation. The mean age was 19.8 years ($SD=1.5$), and the racial composition was primarily European-American (58.3%), followed by Asian/Asian-American (24.5%), Hispanic/Latino/a (9.3%), and African-American (5.1%). Groups of participants completed self-report measures of emotional arousal, emotional awareness, and peculiar beliefs in two study sessions occurring on separate days. The ordering of measures was counter-balanced across participants.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Source awareness—Source awareness was measured using the 6-item Source Awareness Scale (SAS; Boden & Berenbaum, 2011), which was designed to assess the extent to which respondents typically understand the cause of particular types of emotions they experience. Participants responded to items (e.g., “I often have to search for a reason why I am sad, angry, or scared”) using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Items were scored so that higher scores represented higher source awareness. The SAS has excellent psychometric properties and reasonable evidence of convergent and discriminant validity (Boden & Berenbaum, 2011). See Table 1 for internal reliability and descriptive statistics for all scales included in this study.

2.2.2. Type awareness—Type awareness was measured using selected items from well-validated measures that were chosen based on the recommendations of studies that determined the best representatives of these domains (Boden & Berenbaum, 2011; Palmieri, Boden & Berenbaum, 2009). Participants responded to 10 items (e.g., “I can never tell how I feel”) from the clarity subscale of the Trait Meta Mood Scale (TMMS; Salovey et al., 1995) and identification subscale of the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS; Bagby, Parker, & Taylor, 1994; Bagby, Taylor, & Parker, 1994) using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Items were scored so that higher scores represented higher levels of type awareness. The construct of emotional clarity, which includes type awareness, has been found to have reasonable evidence of convergent and discriminant validity, and to be meaningfully associated with a variety of psychological constructs (Bagby, Parker, et al., 1994; Bagby, Taylor, et al., 1994; Berenbaum et al., 2006; Salovey et al., 1995).

2.2.3. Attention to Emotions—Attention to emotions was also measured using selected items identified by Palmieri et al. (2009). Participants responded to 10 items (e.g., “I often think about my feelings”) from the attention to emotions subscale of the TMMS and the externally oriented thinking subscale of the TAS using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly

disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Items were scored so that higher scores represented higher levels of attention to emotions. The construct of attention to emotions has been found to have reasonable evidence of convergent and discriminant validity, and to be meaningfully associated with a variety of psychological constructs (Bagby, Parker, et al., 1994; Bagby, Taylor, et al., 1994; Berenbaum, et al., 2006; Salovey et al., 1995).

2.2.4. Suspiciousness—We used the Paranoia Scale to measure Suspiciousness (Fenigstein & Vanable, 1992). This scale was designed to assess paranoid thought in non-clinical populations (Fenigstein & Vanable, 1992), and thus assesses sub-clinical paranoia, or suspiciousness. This scale is composed of 20 items (e.g., “I sometimes feel as if I’m being followed”) that were answered using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all applicable, 5 = Extremely applicable). Previous research has found this scale to have good psychometric properties and reasonable evidence of convergent and discriminant validity (Fenigstein & Vanable, 1992).

2.2.5. Anger—The trait subscale of the State and Trait Anger Expression Inventory, 2nd edition (Spielberger, 1996) was used to measure anger. Participants responded to 10 items (e.g., “It makes me furious when I am criticized in front of others”) using a 4-point Likert scale to indicate how they generally feel or react (1 = Almost never; 4 = Almost always). This scale has good psychometric properties and reasonable evidence of convergent and discriminant validity (Spielberger, 1988; 1996).

2.2.6. Anxious arousal—Anxious arousal was measured using the anxious arousal subscale from the Mood and Anxiety Symptom Questionnaire (Watson & Clark, 1991). Participants responded to 17 items (e.g., “Startled easily”) using a 5-point Likert scale to indicate how they felt in the last week (1 = Not at all; 5 = Extremely). This scale has been found to have good psychometric properties and reasonable evidence of convergent and discriminant validity (Watson et al., 1995).

2.2.7. Social anxiety—Social anxiety was measured by the Social Avoidance and Distress Scale (Watson & Friend, 1969). Participants indicated whether each of 27 items (e.g., “Being introduced to people makes me tense and nervous”) were true or false. Previous research has found this scale to have good psychometric properties and convergent and discriminant validity (Watson & Friend, 1969).

3. Results

The correlations among all variables are presented in Table 1. Based on previous research that has found gender differences in suspiciousness (von Gemmingen, Sullivan, & Pomerantz, 2003), we began by examining if there were gender differences in suspiciousness. We found that men reported significantly higher levels of suspiciousness than women ($t(214)=2.96, p<.01$). Furthermore, women reported higher levels of attention to emotions than did men ($t(214)=3.89, p<.01$), but similar levels of source ($t(214)=0.69, p=.49$) and type awareness ($t(214)=1.26, p=.21$).

We then investigated whether source and type awareness significantly predicted suspiciousness after accounting for shared variance with attention to emotions in a hierarchical multiple regression analysis (HMR). Because we found gender differences in suspiciousness, we entered gender in Step 1 along with centered attention to emotions scores. We entered source and type awareness scores in Step 2. As shown in Table 2, source and type awareness significantly and substantially (i.e., accounting for almost 10% variance) predicted suspiciousness ($\Delta r^2=.09, p<.001$; $F(4, 215)=12.8, p<.01$) after statistically accounting for attention to emotions and gender. Examination of beta scores revealed that

source and type awareness, in addition to attention to emotions were negatively associated with suspiciousness. Based on previous research demonstrating that peculiar beliefs are sometimes predicted by interactions between facets of emotional awareness (Berenbaum et al., 2009; Boden, Dizen, Baker & Berenbaum, 2003), we investigated but found no evidence of significant two-way, three-way, or four-way interactions between variables.

Next, we tested whether the relations between source and type awareness and suspiciousness were artifacts of variance shared with specific types of emotional arousal previously found to be associated with peculiar beliefs (i.e., anger, anxious arousal, social anxiety). As expected, we found that these potential artifacts were associated with suspiciousness at the zero-order level (see Table 1). We conducted an HMR analysis predicting suspiciousness. Potential artifacts, gender, and attention to emotions were entered into Step 1, and source and type awareness were entered into Step 2 of the HMR. All continuous variables were centered prior to entry. As shown in Table 2, the addition of source and type awareness on Step 2 significantly improved the prediction of suspiciousness ($\Delta r^2=.02$, $p<.05$; $F(7, 195)=14.8$, $p<.01$). Examination of beta scores from Step 2 revealed that suspiciousness continued to be associated with source awareness ($B=-.15$, $p<.05$) when statistically accounting for attention to emotions, gender, and all potential artifacts, whereas type awareness was no longer significantly associated ($B=-.03$, $p=.72$).

4. Discussion

Extending previous research that has demonstrated links between suspiciousness and type awareness (as assessed by traditional individual difference measures of emotional clarity; Berenbaum et al., 2006), we found that source and type awareness incrementally predict suspiciousness when statistically accounting for each other, gender, and attention to emotions. These results also extend experimental studies that have linked source awareness manipulations to increased suspiciousness (Boden & Berenbaum, 2007; Zimbardo et al., 1981) by demonstrating that individual differences in source awareness are associated with suspiciousness. Extending previous research and suggesting that low source awareness is a robust predictor of suspiciousness, we found that the relation between source awareness and suspiciousness was not an artifact of shared variance with specific types of unpleasant emotional arousal. Alternatively, associations between type awareness and suspiciousness appeared to be influenced to a greater degree by shared relations with anger, anxious arousal, and social anxiety. Individuals with low type awareness may experience more suspiciousness because they are more likely to experience heightened levels of anger or anxiety, and interpersonal stimuli that generally contribute to anger (i.e., blocked goals) and anxiety (i.e., threat) are the objects of suspicious beliefs (Lazarus, 1991; Sherer, 1999).

We posit that people who have diminished emotional clarity, and especially diminished source awareness, are at increased risk of developing suspiciousness. This may result from misattribution of the cause of their unpleasant emotions, which serve as evidence for the validity of thoughts, ideas, and interpretations, and eventually, beliefs (Boden & Berenbaum, 2010). Suspicious beliefs about the intentions of others are formed and thereafter, maintained to make sense of and explain unpleasant emotional arousal that is wrongly perceived as resulting from intentional harm or hindrance by others. For example, an individual who has diminished understanding of why he is emotionally aroused may search for and attribute (a) the source of his emotions to his boss (e.g., "My boss is trying to harm me") or his girlfriend (e.g., "My girlfriend is unfaithful"), and (b) the type of emotion as anxiety or anger. A person with low source and type awareness may be more motivated to generate and accept explanations for emotional arousal that are less accurate, such as suspicious beliefs, because of the inherent unpleasantness of the emotional state. This hypothesis is consistent with research demonstrating that a lack of knowledge regarding the

source of a given emotional episode is inherently unpleasant (e.g., Zimbardo et al., 1993), and emotional arousal can be attenuated by generating and accepting causal explanations (see Wilson & Gilbert, 2008).

Future research is needed to address several limitations of the current study. First, future research can address limitations associated with the use of self-report questionnaires by conducting structured interviews and/or obtaining peer-ratings of source and type awareness and suspiciousness. Second, limitations to generalizability of our findings associated with the use of college student samples can be addressed by including more diverse samples. In this regard, including samples with clinically significant levels of suspiciousness will allow for investigations of the role of source and type awareness in psychiatric disorders characterized by suspicious/paranoid beliefs (e.g., paranoid personality disorder/schizophrenia). Third, clearly more research is needed to explicate how/when individuals with low source and type awareness are most likely to become suspicious. Experimental studies that include manipulations of emotional clarity may be useful in this regard. Lastly, future research can address limitations to the breadth and scope of these findings by investigating whether source and type awareness are related to a variety of peculiar beliefs besides suspiciousness. Cross-sectional research suggests that this hypothesis is true, as emotional clarity is associated with a variety of types of peculiar beliefs (Berenbaum et al., 2009; Berenbaum et al., 2006).

If the present results replicate in clinical samples, they will have implications for the treatment of psychiatric conditions in which suspiciousness/paranoid peculiar or delusional beliefs are a prominent symptom. Based on our findings and those of previous research (Boden & Berenbaum, 2007), we hypothesize that psychosocial treatments of these conditions will benefit from increasing patients' emotional clarity, including source and type awareness. Treatment studies can investigate whether doing so leads to decreases in conviction of associated paranoid beliefs, and/or decreases in distress related to those beliefs.

Acknowledgments

Preparation of this paper was supported by a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health (MH071969). This manuscript was based on Matthew Tyler Boden's dissertation submitted to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. We would like to thank the following assistants who helped conduct this research: Marian Wiley-Moore, Jessica Barkwill, Sandra Domico, Jennifer Ernst, Julie Feldman, Amanda Hester, Emily Kostner, Sandra Perez, Trang Pham, Steffen Olsen, Marius Zyman, Nicole Heller, Katie Johnson, Britt Anderson, and David Tang.

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1. Emotional clarity consists of two facets, type awareness and source awareness
2. Source awareness refers to a general understanding of the cause of one's emotions
3. Type awareness refers to a general understanding of the type of one's emotions
4. Source and type awareness were incrementally, inversely related to suspiciousness
5. Findings held when controlling for attention to emotions, gender, emotional arousal

Zero-order Correlations, Descriptive Statistics and Internal Reliabilities (Cronbach's α displayed on the Diagonal) for Continuous Variables.

Table 1

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	M (SD)	Range
1. Source Awareness	.82							3.9(0.7)	1.0–5.0
2. Type Awareness	.57**	.87						3.8(0.7)	1.4–5.0
3. Attention to emotions	.16*	.23**	.83					3.9(0.6)	1.8–5.0
4. Suspiciousness	-.30**	-.30**	-.31**	.87				2.1(0.6)	1.2–4.0
5. Anger	-.18*	-.14*	-.07	.39**	.88			2.0(0.6)	1.0–3.7
6. Anxious arousal	-.24**	-.35**	-.15*	.39**	.27**	.84		1.5(0.4)	1.0–3.4
7. Social anxiety	-.12	-.22**	-.09	.30**	.27**	.14*	.93	0.3(0.2)	0.0–1.0

* $p < .05$;

** $p < .01$.

Table 2
Results of a Two Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses (HMR) Predicting Suspiciousness.

Step	Variables	HMR1			HMR2		
		Beta	Multiple r^2	Δr^2	Beta	Multiple r^2	Δr^2
1 st	Gender	.13	.11**	.11**	.15*	.33**	.33**
	Attention to	-.27**			-.20**		
	Emotions				.19**		
	Anger				.19**		
	Anxious arousal				.29**		
	Social anxiety						
2 nd	Source Awareness	-.18*	.20**	.09**	-.15*	.36**	.02*
	Type Awareness	-.16*			-.03		

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.

Note. Significance of individual variables examined through significance testing of individual beta weights. HMR1 includes gender, attention to emotions, and source and type awareness as predictors. HMR2 includes gender, attention to emotions, anger, anxious arousal, social anxiety, and source and type awareness as predictors.