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Beyond Disambiguation: Explanatory Context Broadens Emotion Perception From Ambiguous Faces

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Abstract

Context can disambiguate facial expressions by shifting interpretations toward one of several plausible emotions. We tested whether context can also broaden emotional interpretation by making multiple affective components simultaneously plausible. In a 2026 online experiment, participants (*N* = 107) viewed 12 ambiguous expressions following everyday vignettes presented either with or without explanatory situational information. Participants were additionally assigned to a brief loving-kindness meditation (LKM) or an active control exercise.

Without explanation, expressions were predominantly perceived as angry. Providing an explanation reduced perceived anger only slightly but substantially increased perceived worry, eliminating the initial difference between these ratings. Importantly, explanatory context did not simply replace anger with another emotion: rather, participants perceived the face as showing both anger and worry. LKM did not produce a comparable shift. Exploratory process analyses suggested that explanatory context altered emotion perception through changes in situational construal. Context also increased empathy and interpersonal closeness.

Thus, context did not merely resolve emotional ambiguity. By helping observers understand why someone reacts as they do, it can support a richer interpretation of an ambiguous expression.

Introduction

Facial expressions in everyday life rarely provide an unambiguous indication of a person's emotion (Kafetsios & Hess, 2023). Observers therefore integrate expressive behavior with situational information when inferring what another person feels (Hess & Hareli, 2019). Verbal situation descriptions, visual surroundings, and person-related context cues (Barrett et al., 2011; Mauersberger, Kastendieck, et al., 2026; Wieser & Brosch, 2012) shape emotion perception, particularly when expressions are ambiguous (Pullinen et al., 2026).

Much of this work conceptualizes contextual influence as *disambiguation*: context shifts initially ambiguous perceptions toward the emotion that best fits the situation (Hess & Hareli, 2019). Accordingly, studies often require observers to categorize an expression with a single label (Aviezer et al., 2008; Pullinen et al., 2026; Wieser & Brosch, 2012). Yet contextual influence need not be limited to selecting among competing emotional interpretations. Context may also broaden the perceived emotional profile by making an additional emotion plausible without displacing the initially dominant one. For instance, someone can appear both angry and worried. Work on contextualized emotion decoding therefore distinguishes recognition of a focal emotion from attribution of *additional* emotions, allowing perceivers to construct an emotional profile rather than settle on a single category (Hess et al., 2016; Hess & Kafetsios, 2022; Kafetsios & Hess, 2022). At the same time, mixed emotional signals can be difficult to interpret. Hess (2025) argues that emotion knowledge is largely organized around discrete prototypes, encouraging perceivers to simplify mixed expressions and to evaluate expressers showing mixed emotions less positively than those showing clearer, "pure" expressions.

This raises an important possibility: *whether emotional complexity is perceived as difficult may depend on whether it can be made sense of*. An unexplained mixture of anger and worry may be experienced simply as an ambiguous signal that perceivers try to resolve by settling on one emotion term. Situational information can provide a coherent reason for why both emotions are present. Thus, a person who reacts sharply because they are under pressure, repeatedly obstructed, or treated unfairly may plausibly be angry but also worried. In such cases, context need not resolve ambiguity by pointing to either anger or worry but it may make a more complex emotional interpretation intelligible.

Appraisal theories provide the basis for this prediction. Emotions are linked to appraisals of circumstances, for example, whether goals are obstructed, resources are insufficient, or an event is unfair (Scherer, 2001; Smith & Lazarus, 1993). Because observers use emotional expressions to infer the appraisals underlying them (Hareli & Hess, 2010), explanatory information about the situation may help them make sense of an ambiguous expression by constraining these inferences. Consistent with this, Halberstadt and Niedenthal (2001) showed that explaining why an ambiguous expression reflected a particular emotion biased subsequent perceptual memory toward that emotion. However, because the emotion concept was explicitly supplied, the explanation favored a single interpretation. Yet situations can involve appraisals associated with different emotions and may therefore support more than one emotion at once (Oh & Tong, 2022): situational strain may make worry more plausible while frustration or goal obstruction points to anger. The present study assessed whether explanatory context can support a more complex affective interpretation of an ambiguous facial expression.

The present study

For this, participants read about moderately norm-violating situations in which a person reacted sharply and subsequently saw an ambiguous anger-sadness expression. Anger-sadness blends were particularly suited to the present question because they suggest distress, a state that can include anger but also stress or worry.

For half of the episodes, participants also received information explaining why the person reacted sharply. These explanations contained no emotion labels and were not simply anti-anger cues; they involved frustration, goal obstruction, unfairness, or situational strain and therefore left anger plausible while also providing grounds for worry. In addition, we used a loving-kindness meditation (LKM) as an *observer-focused* manipulation intended to foster a more generally understanding and compassionate orientation toward others' behavior (Hofmann et al., 2011).

We therefore asked whether an explicit *target-specific* explanatory context is required to shift judgments from a relatively anger-dominant interpretation toward greater co-attribution of anger and worry or whether participants would spontaneously do so based on the LKM manipulation. Rather than predicting simple substitution of one emotion for another, we expected context to support a more emotionally complex interpretation. We examined two appraisal-related construals of the situation: hostile intention, reflecting the extent to which the reaction was seen as deliberately hurtful, and situational overload, reflecting the extent to which it was seen as arising from being overwhelmed by the circumstances. We

then tested whether changes in these construals were associated with changes in emotion perception, and whether the resulting affective interpretation was related to greater empathy and interpersonal closeness. Thus, the study tests whether context can do more than disambiguate an emotional signal: by helping observers make sense of multiple affective components at once, it may provide a route through which emotional ambiguity becomes socially meaningful rather than aversive.

Method

Participants and design

Recruitment ended after six preregistered weeks in September 2026. The sample comprised *N* = 107 (**age** *M* **= 28.66,** *SD* **= 10.13; 64 women, 37 men, 2 diverse, 4 unreported**) after prescreening/discontinuation and data-quality exclusions (audio, attention, completion time), providing 80% power for context effects of |β| = .13–.19.

We used a 2 x 2 mixed design with LKM vs. active breath-focus control between participants and explanation vs. no explanation within participants. Each participant evaluated six episodes per context condition; vignette order, context assignment, and face assignment were randomized.

Stimuli and context manipulation

Twelve everyday vignettes described moderately norm-violating behavior. The no-explanation version described only the situation and behavior; the explanation version added situational information, such as time pressure, burden, or obstruction, without explicitly justifying the reaction. Neither version contained emotion labels or explicit descriptions of the target's emotional state.

Each vignette was paired with one of 12 ambiguous anger-sadness expressions (six female, six male). For each identity, morph levels were selected from prior categorization data to approximate the perceptual anger-sadness boundary rather than assuming that a 50:50 blend was ambiguous (Mauersberger, Hareli, et al., 2026).

Procedure

After providing informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to LKM or active breath-focus control, delivered as standardized 7-min audio recordings matched in structure and speaking style. They then completed a practice trial and 12 experimental trials. On each trial, they read a vignette at their own pace and viewed the corresponding face for 9 s. Ratings followed face offset; neither vignette nor face remained visible. An attention check followed the sixth trial.

Ethics approval was granted by Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (2026-19).

Measures

Perceived anger and **perceived worry** were assessed with single items asking participants how much anger and worry they saw in the face, using 7-point scales. *Distress* was the mean of the anger and worry ratings, whereas joint *anger-worry endorsement* was defined as the minimum of the two ratings, indexing the extent to which both emotions were simultaneously perceived.

Situational overload assessed how overwhelmed the person appeared, and **hostile intention** assessed the extent to which the person appeared to act intentionally hurtfully. Both were also assessed on 7-point scales.

Affective empathy was the mean of two 7-point items assessing feeling with the person and emotional involvement in the person's situation.

Interpersonal closeness was assessed with a continuous 0-100 adaptation of the Inclusion of Other in the Self measure (Aron et al., 1992).

Transparency and Openness

We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions, all manipulations, and all measures. Data, analysis code, study materials, and the preregistration of the study design are available *here.* The present research question extends beyond the original preregistration.

Results

Linear mixed-effects models (LMMs) predicted each outcome from explanatory context, LKM condition, and their interaction, with crossed random effects for participants, vignettes, and faces. To account for multiple testing, we applied Holm corrections separately to the six context effects (situational overload, hostile intention, perceived anger, perceived worry, affective empathy, and interpersonal closeness), the six LKM main effects, and the six LKM x Context interactions. Analyses of the derived distress and joint-endorsement scores were conducted separately without multiplicity adjustment. Exploratory indirect effects were estimated using participant-level bootstrap confidence intervals.

Manipulation check

Descriptive statistics for LKM x Context cells are reported in Table 1. Providing an explanation increased perceived situational overload, b = 0.92, 95% CI [0.76, 1.08], β = .55, Holm-adjusted p < .001, and reduced hostile-intention attribution, b = -0.66, 95% CI [-0.82, -0.50], β = − .40, Holm-adjusted p < .001.

Explanatory context changes emotional interpretation

Without explanation, anger was rated higher than worry (Table 1). With explanation, anger decreased only slightly, whereas worry increased substantially. Context therefore produced a small reduction in anger, b = -0.15, 95% CI [-0.29, -0.01], β = − .11, Holm-adjusted p = .031, but a much larger increase in

worry, *b* = 0.83, 95% CI [0.66, 1.00], β = .47, Holm-adjusted *p* < .001. Consequently, the anger–worry difference fell from 1.17 (*p* < .001) to 0.15 (*p* = .219; see Fig. 1). Importantly, this convergence reflected more than reduced anger: context increased both distress, *b* = 0.34, 95% CI [0.25, 0.43], *p* < .001, and joint anger–worry endorsement, *b* = 0.41, 95% CI [0.27, 0.55], *p* < .001, indicating greater simultaneous attribution of both emotions. No comparable shift emerged for LKM: neither LKM main effects nor LKM x Context interactions were significant, all Holm-adjusted *ps* ≥ .899.

Process analyses suggested two pathways by which explanatory context was associated with changes in emotion perception. Context reduced hostile-intention attribution, which was in turn associated with less anger and more worry, yielding indirect effects of -0.17, 95% bootstrap CI [-0.23, -0.11], and 0.16, 95% CI [0.10, 0.22], respectively. Context also increased situational overload, which was associated with greater worry, indirect effect = 0.40, 95% CI [0.30, 0.51], but not anger, indirect effect = -0.06, 95% CI [-0.15, 0.02]. For the combined affective state, indirect effects through hostile intention were negligible, whereas increased overload carried the context effect to both distress, indirect effect = 0.17, 95% CI [0.12, 0.23], and joint endorsement, indirect effect = 0.23, 95% CI [0.15, 0.30].

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics by LKM Condition and Explanatory Context

Outcome	**Control**		**LKM**	
	No explanation *M* (*SD*)	**Explanation** *M* (*SD*)	**No explanation** *M* (*SD*)	**Explanation** *M* (*SD*)
Situational overload	4.12 (1.00)	5.10 (0.92)	4.07 (1.03)	4.93 (0.96)
Hostile intention	3.63 (0.92)	2.95 (1.01)	3.64 (1.03)	2.99 (1.06)
Perceived anger	4.70 (0.71)	4.43 (0.94)	4.82 (0.83)	4.76 (0.88)
Perceived worry	3.61 (0.97)	4.49 (1.02)	3.55 (1.08)	4.38 (1.00)
Distress	4.15 (0.60)	4.46 (0.67)	4.19 (0.75)	4.57 (0.67)
Joint anger–worry endorsement	3.05 (0.84)	3.40 (0.93)	3.19 (1.00)	3.66 (0.83)
Affective empathy	3.48 (0.91)	4.56 (0.73)	3.40 (0.88)	4.29 (1.15)
Interpersonal closeness	15.14 (11.96)	29.00 (19.48)	17.24 (12.88)	28.41 (21.59)

Explanatory context changes interpersonal responses

Explanatory context increased interpersonal closeness and affective empathy (Table 1). These effects were significant for closeness, *b* = 12.46, 95% CI [9.14, 15.78], β = .49, Holm-adjusted *p* < .001, and

empathy, b = 0.98, 95% CI [0.84, 1.12], β = .63, Holm-adjusted p < .001. Neither LKM main effects nor LKM x Context interactions emerged, all Holm-adjusted ps = 1.00.

Serial-process analyses suggested that these context effects were partly associated with the overload-distress pathway. Context increased perceived overload, greater overload was associated with greater distress, and greater distress was in turn associated with greater empathy, b = 0.18, p < .001, and closeness, b = 2.38, p < .001. The serial indirect effects were reliable for empathy, indirect effect = 0.03, 95% bootstrap CI [0.01, 0.05], and closeness, indirect effect = 0.41, 95% CI [0.09, 0.75]. Serial pathways through hostile intention were not reliable for either empathy or closeness.

Discussion

Explanatory context changed the composition of the emotional interpretation, whereas LKM did not. Without explanation, ambiguous targets were perceived as predominantly angry; with explanation, anger decreased slightly whereas worry increased substantially. Context therefore did more than shift the relative prominence of anger and worry. By increasing their joint endorsement, it made both emotions more plausible simultaneously, suggesting that contextual information can enrich the perceived emotional profile rather than merely favor one interpretation over another. This complements work showing that expressions can convey multiple emotions and that perceived emotion need not map directly onto a blend's physical composition (Fang et al., 2018; Hess et al., 2016; Mauersberger, Hareli, et al., 2026).

The findings also confirm that perceivers can simplify mixed emotional signals: without explanation, they favored anger over worry. Hess (2025) argues that mixed expressions are difficult to map onto readily accessible discrete-emotion concepts and therefore invite simplification. The present results suggest that situational information renders complexity intelligible by allowing participants to map the expression onto a suitable socially available trope, namely, being snappish when overwhelmed or stressed. Importantly, only explicit context and not the LKM manipulation intended to foster greater understanding and compassion toward others had this effect. That is, the trope had to be explicitly primed. A manipulation that only encourages empathy did not suffice to spontaneously elicit the concept that someone might react with anger under strain.

The process analyses are consistent with an appraisal-based account of this broadening. Reduced hostile-intention attribution was associated with less anger and more worry, with little change in overall anger–worry intensity. By contrast, greater perceived situational overload was associated with more worry and greater combined anger–worry attribution. These distinct pathways suggest that explanatory context may do more than cue an alternative emotion category. Instead, it may help observers infer a configuration of appraisals in which frustration and situational strain coexist, making worry plausible without necessarily displacing anger. This interpretation is consistent with appraisal and reverse-appraisal accounts, which propose that observers use emotional reactions together with contextual

information to infer underlying appraisals and intentions and thereby interpret the expresser's state (de Melo et al., 2014; Hareli & Hess, 2010, 2012; Hess & Hareli, 2017; Van Kleef, 2009, 2010).

The interpersonal findings extended this process: Greater overload was associated with greater perceived distress, which in turn was associated with greater felt empathy and closeness. This may help explain why emotional complexity is not necessarily socially costly. Hess (2025) found that greater perceived mixedness was associated with lower liking and closeness, perhaps because mixed signals make it harder to understand the expresser and anticipate what they are likely to do (also see, Lim et al. ,2021). Emotion concepts are socially useful precisely because they render behavior intelligible and predictable (Hebb, 1946). Here, explanatory context allowed participants to use a common trope to the same effect: when anger and worry were jointly perceived, the situation provided a plausible account of why they co-occurred.

Strengths and limitations

A key strength is that the contextual manipulation did not prescribe an emotional interpretation: Neither situations nor explanations contained emotion labels, and the target's behavior remained unchanged. Moreover, explanations retained anger-compatible information while adding situational information that could support additional affective interpretations, allowing us to test broadening rather than cueing a predefined alternative category (cf. Halberstadt & Niedenthal, 2001).

Several limitations remain. First, the present design does not identify the precise processing stage at which context influenced emotion judgments. The explanatory manipulation likely affected interpretation rather than early perceptual encoding, but this cannot be determined from the present data. Second, the study used static morphs. Because real-life expressions unfold dynamically and temporal information can shape emotion perception, it remains to be tested whether explanatory context similarly broadens the interpretation of dynamic expressions.

Finally, worry is not sadness. The stimuli were anger-sadness morphs selected near the identity-specific perceptual boundary. Still, participants clearly perceived worry in these faces, particularly with explanatory context, suggesting that the ambiguous morphs were sufficiently open to support this additional affective interpretation. Importantly, worry is also distinct from anger, whose characteristic appraisal and action-tendency profile includes other-blame, goal obstruction, and antagonistic responding (Kuppens et al., 2003; Shaver et al., 1987; Smith & Lazarus, 1993).

Conclusion

The present findings show that context information can allow observers to arrive at a richer emotional interpretation rather than merely resolve ambiguity into a single category. When emotional complexity can be made sense of, it may also be associated with more positive interpersonal responses.

Statements and Declarations

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Ethics Approval: The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Institute of Psychology at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (2026-19).

Informed Consent: All participants provided informed consent.

Data, Materials, and Code Availability: Data, analysis code and study materials are available *here*.

Author Contributions: H.M. and U.H. conceptualized the study. H.M., M.-M.H., and U.H. contributed to the methodology. M.-M.H. conducted the investigation. H.M. and M.-M.H. performed the formal analyses and curated the data. H.M. prepared the figures, wrote the original manuscript draft, and was responsible for project administration. H.M. and U.H. supervised the project, and U.H. provided resources. All authors reviewed and edited the manuscript and approved the final version.

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Figures

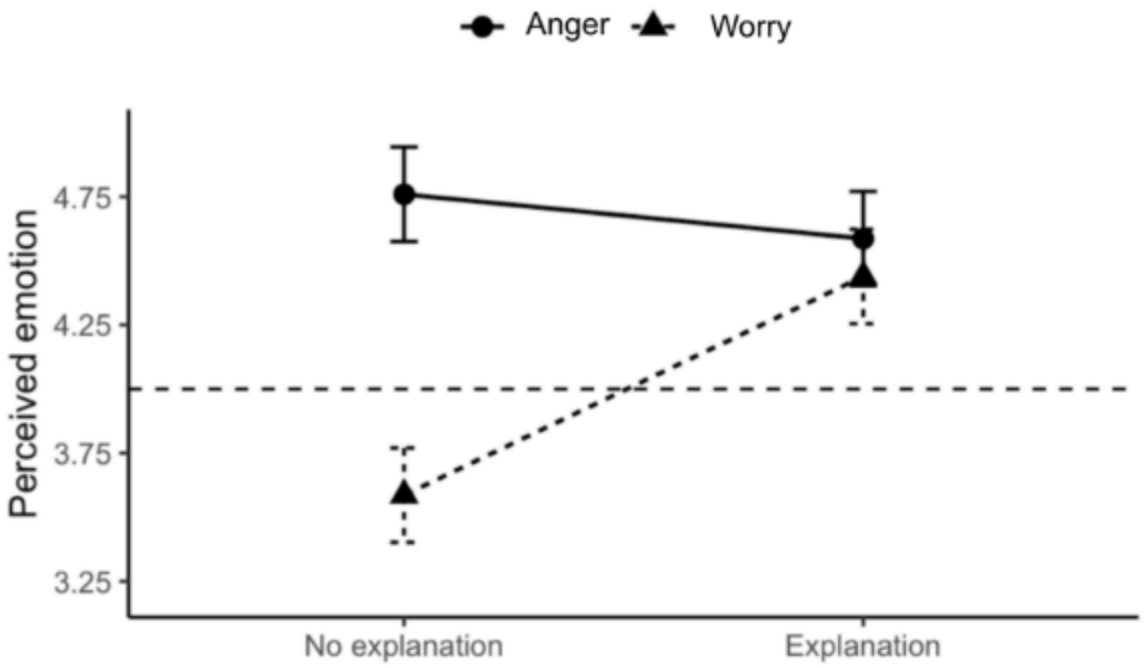


Figure 1

Model-estimated perceived anger and worry as a function of explanatory context, averaged over LKM condition. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The dashed horizontal line indicates the midpoint of the 1-7 response scale