

Emotion Review

Missing pieces in the emotion construction kit

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RUNNING HEAD: Missing pieces

Missing Pieces in the Emotion Construction Kit

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For Peer Review

Abstract

This reply considers how my paper's approach might be extended by attention to individual, contextual, and ecological processes. I agree that individual learning and agency play important roles in ontogeny; that sociologists have conducted informative work about the interpersonal and institutional contexts shaping on-line emotion construction; and that consideration of the relational niches in which discrete emotions consolidate can help to clarify their abstract structure. Emotion construction works with non-social as well as social materials.

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Missing Pieces in the Emotion Construction Kit

My paper tried to be programmatic not comprehensive, and the specific processes I mentioned were illustrative rather than exhaustive. Because of this special issue’s brief, my focus fell primarily on the operation of social factors. Quite rightly, the commentaries suggest ways in which this broad-brush picture might be fleshed out. Social and non-social processes clearly combine and interact during emotion construction.

Individual Development

The most directly critical commentary is Walle, Dahl, and Campos’s. However, I find myself disagreeing with them less than they seem to disagree with me. Their central argument is that individual agency and personal learning combine with biological and cultural influences during ontogeny.

I entirely agree that even young infants are not simply biological receptacles into which culture is poured, and that they play an active, participative role in emotion construction. As Parkinson, Fischer and Manstead (2005) put it: “... infants adapt to a pre-existing social world, but do not simply soak up its influences like sponges. Instead, they negotiate ways of making practical or communicative use of whatever cultural resources are at hand. Socialization is partly a process of coming to arrangements with others about how to proceed, given the constraints and opportunities of the current and anticipated social setting” (Parkinson, Fischer, & Manstead, 2005. p. 238).

Although I stand by the claim that socio-emotional development partly depends “on adopting culturally approved behaviour through modelling, reward, and punishment” (Parkinson, this issue, p. ?), I never intended to imply that this was the *primary* process. Indeed, I also emphasised how “[i]nfants’ adjustments to, and

operations upon, the stream of hyper-responsive stimulation from caregivers soon consolidate into familiar cycles of co-regulated activity” (Parkinson, this issue, p. ?). I honestly can’t see how this negates infants’ active participation in socialization.

However, I do not believe that individual agency operates independently of biology and culture. No child left to its own privately constructed devices could develop the psychological capacities underpinning emotion construction. Even practical learning depends on prior attunement to practical and social affordances of responsive environments. Further, emotions depending on mastery or individual struggle against non-social resistance are soon transformed by interpersonal feedback and caregiver intervention. Children come to calibrate their emotional orientations with (or against) those of other people. Thus object-focused frustration becomes an angry complaint about unfairness (Parkinson, Fischer, & Manstead, 2005).

Microsociology of Emotion Contexts

I also gladly endorse the insights in Scherke’s commentary. The microsociological tradition pioneered by researchers such as Goffman (1959) provides a rich data-source about the relation of emotions to the sociomaterial settings that give them purpose and significance, countering the more decontextualized approaches often favoured by psychologists. Ethnomethodological approaches too have much to offer. Attention to the ways in which emotional meanings are manufactured and worked up in conversations and more formal discourses can further clarify social-construction processes (e.g., Edwards, 1999).

Ecologies for Emotion Structure

More fundamental issues are raised in de Rivera’s sophisticated commentary. What kinds of concepts are emotion concepts? How do they relate to the realities of “emotional” functioning? De Rivera postulates an abstractable essence to categories

such as “anger” that does not depend on the contingencies of cultural or ideological history. Where then is this essence located?

Russell (2003) developed the idea of *core affect*, consisting of nothing more than combinations of subjectively felt pleasure and arousal. For him, everything else about emotion concepts is extrinsic and culturally variable. But de Rivera’s work implies that emotions derive meaning not as intrapsychically apprehended states but relational processes operating between agents and their environments. If so, certain patterns of orientation may be identifiable at an abstract level, and some of these may depend on ecological factors that are independent of social relations. If an animal’s consistent response to being physically trapped in a tight corner is an escalating, frustrated struggle, then this relational profile may provide a deep structure for the consolidation of an emotion concept. It might also help to explain why words roughly translatable as “anger” feature in a wide range of languages.

However, emotion categories not only develop as part of a simple naming process, but also evolve around pragmatic devices for influencing others. Saying that you are “angry” not only describes a state of mind (or a relation between person and environment), but also serves as an act of blaming. In my view, emotion concepts, like emotions themselves, evolve into flexible resources for performing a range of communicative functions, and their multiple usages are not easily distilled into abstract referential meanings. Although this conclusion does not rule out specification of a technical vocabulary, its terms might bear little resemblance to those in everyday language.

Distinct forms of emotion-relevant phenomena may well emerge during phylogeny and ontogeny in ways that are largely independent of cultural influence. However, any society only zeroes in on a subset of these possible “basic forms” and

elaboration of the associated emotion categories depends is shaped by norms, social practices, and ideology, in addition to correspondence with non-social reality.

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