Book Reviews

**Origins and Organisation of Emotion**


When a cognitive psychologist, a social-personality psychologist and a cognitive scientist join to write a book on the cognitive structure of emotions, the result is bound to generate interest in the community of emotion investigators. This book meets the challenge of that interest and reassures us of the unique advance that is possible when such collaborations occur.

Scientific activity in the study of emotions has markedly increased in the past decade, although its contribution has been disproportionately more theoretical than empirical (Izard and Saxton, 1988). What, then, is the need for yet another theory of emotion? The authors themselves do not consider this issue, perhaps reflecting their belief that their proposed account of emotion is sufficiently novel and important. I tend to agree. Although the book makes clear the theory's amenability to empirical test, it remains largely untested at the time of writing the book. Thus, unencumbered by data, the authors have the luxury of assumption and speculation and latitude to chart the scope of the theory. However, as they candidly state, there is potential for theory revision (even abandonment) as empirical evidence emerges. Hence, any evaluation of the theory at the time must proceed on the basis of its face validity, links to other theories and existing data, tractability and potential for empirical test.

The field can claim several useful accounts of 'emotion as a function of cognition' (Arnold, 1960; Lazarus, Kanner, and Folkman, 1980; Leventhal, 1980; Mandler, 1981), but several features of Ortony et al.'s proposal qualify it as an independent contribution. As a proposed theory of the structure of emotion it is concerned with the origin of emotions, their interrelationships, the nature of individual emotions and conditions that produce the experience of emotions. It is a distinctly cognitive theory, derived from the assumption that 'emotions are best represented as a set of substantially independent groups based on the nature of their cognitive origins' (p. 13). The theory shares with other cognitive accounts of emotion an insistence on the central role of the cognitive antecedents of the human experience of emotions. Among the features that distinguish it from other cognitive theories of emotion, however, is attention to the appraisal of these antecedent conditions. Emotions within a class are held together by the similarity of conditions that elicit them, and a particular emotion results from the particular appraisal function that it performed. The simple and appealing argument is that if the experience of individual emotions arises from construals of the world, then understanding the conditions that elicit these emotions is key to understanding the structure of emotions.

It is the first half of the book that I found most absorbing. The chapter on the structure of the theory identifies three classes of emotion that can result from focusing on events (pleasure/displeasure), agents (approval/disapproval), and objects (liking/disliking). For example, a child-beating event can lead to a variety of emotions as a function of the specific aspect of the situation appraised. Focus on the agent should lead to a valanced response towards the actor, resulting in an attribution emotion such as reproach or contempt. If focus is on the event, its undesirability may cause distress or, if the appraisal includes the victim, it can produce pity. Subsequent chapters address the mechanisms by which appraisals are performed (goals, standards, and attitudes) and attend to the neglected dimensions of emotion and intensity, assuming that clusters of emotions are formed as a result of similar events that affect their intensity.

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I found some issues of particular interest. One concerns the idea of basic emotions, i.e. the view common to many theories of emotion that there exist a few ‘basic’ emotions that are universal, primary, etc. The idea is widely accepted even today (Izard and Saxton, 1988), and one contribution of this volume is to challenge this fundamental assumption. While pointing out conceptual difficulties with the basic emotion position and rejecting the idea, the authors nevertheless hold that a continuum of ‘basic-ness’ of emotions exists (see also Ortony and Turner, 1990). An emotion is more basic if it has ‘less complex specifications and eliciting conditions’ (p. 28). Thus, although the idea of a finite set of basic emotions has no place in their theory, they do not give up the idea of relative ‘basic-ness’ of emotion types. This belief strikes me as odd, and susceptible to some of the same pitfalls as the idea of basic emotions they reject. We would not think it appropriate to line up various expressions of cognition and ask which are more basic (Hárdin, 1991) and the special need for this hierarchy in the study of emotion eludes me. The idea that it is the commonality of eliciting conditions that differentiate emotions can be retained without defending the idea of relative basic emotions, which may empirically fare no better than the idea of absolute basic emotions.

Emotion theories have focused on the positive-negative (valence) dimensions of emotions and analyses of specific emotions to the exclusion of serious attention to the role of emotional intensity. I was impressed by the two chapters on this aspect, especially the discussion of its role in event, person, and object appraisal, and in particular the role of proximity, unexpectectedness, likelihood, likings, effort, familiarity and strength of cognitive unit (among other factors) in producing varying degrees of intensity. A critical feature of this discussion is the ease with which the ideas lend themselves to experimental analyses. Simply by identifying these factors as necessary in the production of an emotion experience, the authors have established a place for the role of intensity in theories of emotion.

In the theory, the combined interests of cognitive science and social psychology are clearly evident in the role assigned to goals, standards, and attitudes. The attention to these variables occurs in the context that views emotion as occurring through personal and interpersonal descriptions. What we have is a theory that legitimizes a social psychological view of emotions, but unlike general social constructivist models that have proved less empirically tractable, this one is embedded in a tough-minded analysis of everyday events that give rise to emotions. I was struck by a certain similarity of this approach to that of Fritz Heider’s (1958) fundamental contribution to the study of interpersonal relations. If this theory does for the study of emotions even a little of what Heider’s account did for the study of person perception, it will have been hugely successful.

REFERENCES