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On Emotion and the Emotions: A Comment to Dixon, Mulligan and Scherer, and Scarantino

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Abstract

One reason why the debate about “emotion” runs into a dead end is that the second historical source which considered “emotion” as a cognitive function in the late 19th century was forgotten in Anglo-American psychology.

Keywords

emotion, feelings, physiology

Three articles in this issue, Dixon (2012), Mulligan and Scherer (2012) and Scarantino (2012), propose remedies for the perceived definitional malaise of the keyword “emotion.” From a historical perspective, Dixon nicely pinpoints the term in place, time, and action, at least in the British archipelago. He calls attention to the first transition from theological to secular categories of knowledge about the mind, the semantic shift from “passions” to “emotions.” However, the historical diagnosis is incomplete. It obliterates the second historical input to the scientific term “emotion,” the continental tradition of thought since Kant. Research in this tradition was highly important for the formation of the scientific category of “emotion.” “Emotion” became a function of the brain, like vision. Experimental physiological psychology in Germany that grew out of the physiological research on the senses conceptualized emotion as core ability of human beings. It looked at the invisible, unconscious, and *cognitive* aspects of emotion.

It is a particular bias of psychological research mainly in the 20th-century United States that has focused on “basic emotions” and research concentrating on facial expressions, always referring to Darwin as the authority in terms of a scientific analysis of emotion. However, in the late 19th century, German physiological research was the leading authority in defining “emotion” in psychology even for English-speaking authors like James. One reason why the debate about “emotion” runs into a dead end is that this other historical source of scholarship, which gave a different meaning to “emotion” in the late 19th century, was forgotten in Anglo-American psychology. Furthermore, the point is that “emotion” as a scientific term is

not only used in psychology. Much research on emotion from the late 19th century took place in the medical faculty; in physiology, psychiatry, and neurology. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) program announcements “Basic and Translational Research in Emotion” issued since 1994 use the term “emotion” in a generic sense like the German *Gefühl*.

The question then is: What does a definition of “emotion” define? Scarantino (2012) raises the point that we should rethink the category. If the term “emotion” functions as a signifier for a class of phenomena, it should include all members of the class, like “bird” designates all members of a specific class of flying animals. In the late 19th century, the term was used in this way. “Emotion,” or better *Gefühl* because it was a German definition, designated the class of emotional phenomena by its least common denominator and distinguished it from the class of sensation, *Empfindung*. Hierarchically grouped were first, *sinnliche Gefühle*, simple sense-related feelings or sensory emotion (to which also belonged gut feelings and the hunch); second, the more complex and distinct emotions for which language had developed proper names; and third, the group of a higher order of emotions that were characterized to a great extent by their intellectual content, to which belonged esthetic, intellectual, ethical emotions and religious sentiment, in German all called *Gefühle*. James adopted this usage of “*Gefühl*” from Wundt for the English language. Indeed, he carried out the second semantic shift, which collapsed “feelings” and “emotions” to “emotion” (James, 1880, 1884, 1890).

The adoption of a generic term did not abolish the use of special terms altogether though, like feelings in German *Affekte*, or sentiments, or proper names that further characterize certain members of the general class. “Emotion” rather than “feeling” was chosen as a scientific term in English at the turn of the 20th century, precisely because it was felt that the term did its job better than “feeling.” It avoided the debate about unsolvable questions of conscious awareness and speculations about “how a frog feels to himself when it croaks” (Thorndike & Herrick, 1915, p. 466). My point is not to return to behaviorism here, but to recall that J. B. Watson (1913) explained his turn to the observation of behavior through the psychologists’

inextricable debate about the question what “feelings” are. If Mulligan and Scherer (2012) advocate that “feeling” and “feelings” should be distinguished anew from “emotion,” the question arises whether the semantic distinction will indeed solve the problem or simply bring back the old problem.

The problem with “emotion” is not so much that it was defined as being “indefinable.” Instead, the phenomenon is complex and contains partly nonlinguistic and unconscious processes. Psychologists have defined “emotion” according to the respective aspect that stood in the foreground of their analysis at different times. Wundt saw a crucial role for “emotion” in cognition. He had argued that “emotion” was initially unconscious processing and contained a judgment, which was transmitted through the emotional feeling (Wundt, 1863). This judgment could elicit further conscious processing which changed the process of the emotion. Wundt (1880, pp. 218–219) suggested that we become consciously aware of feeling something when the result of the emotional evaluation is integrated and processed in the prefrontal cortex. However, this idea was not appreciated by psychologists at the time. Nevertheless, at the turn of the 21st century, a definition of “emotion” as a scientific term should include central nervous processing. In this respect, Mulligan and Scherer’s

(2012) suggestion that a certain degree of integration and synchronization of central nervous processing might be crucial in the creation of emotion is intriguing.

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