

Categorisation of vocally expressed positive emotion: A first step towards basic positive emotions?

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Most of the study of basic emotion expressions has focused on facial expressions and little work has been done to specifically investigate happiness, the only positive of the basic emotions (Ekman & Friesen, 1971). However, a theoretical suggestion has been made that happiness could be broken down into discrete positive emotions, which each fulfil the criteria of basic emotions, and that these would be expressed vocally (Ekman, 1992). To empirically test this hypothesis, 20 participants categorised 80 paralinguistic sounds using the labels achievement, amusement, contentment, pleasure and relief. The results suggest that achievement, amusement and relief are perceived as distinct categories, which subjects accurately identify. In contrast, the categories of contentment and pleasure were systematically confused with other responses, although performance was still well above chance levels. These findings are initial evidence that the positive emotions engage distinct vocal expressions and may be considered to be distinct emotion categories.

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