



Short Communication

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Emotion – Part 1

Sineena Ali*

Corresponding Author: Sineena Ali, United Arab Emirates

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One of the toughest questions in the field of affective science is one of the simplest, namely: What is an emotion? Theorists have tried to address this question by posing two other questions: What attributes are shared by all emotions (necessary conditions)? What attributes— if present—guarantee that something is an emotion (sufficient conditions)? Unfortunately, efforts to derive this kind of tidy classical definition of emotion are thwarted by the fact that emotion refers to an astonishing array of responses, from the mild to the intense, the brief to the extended the simple to the complex, and the private to the public. Disgust at a prejudiced comment counts as an emotion. So does amusement at a funny mishap, anger at social injustice, joy at the prospect of receiving a promotion, surprise at a friend’s “new look,” grief at the death of a spouse, and embarrassment at a

child’s misbehavior.

To understand emotion regulation, we first need to know what is being regulated. This sounds simple, but emotion has proven famously difficult to pin down. Part of the problem is that what people seem to want when they try to “pin down” emotion is the list of necessary and sufficient conditions for something to qualify as an emotion. What is it that we must have for something to be an emotion (necessary conditions)? What is it that—if present— guarantees that something is an emotion (sufficient conditions)?

Efforts to derive this sort of tidy classical definition run athwart the

fact that “emotion” is a term that was lifted from common language, and refers to an astonishing array of happenings, from the mild to the intense, the brief to the extended, the simple to the complex, and the private to the public.

The first core feature of emotion has to do with when it occurs. According to appraisal theory, emotions arise when an individual attends to and evaluates (appraises) a situation as being relevant to a particular type of currently active goal (Lazarus, 1991; Scherer,

Schorr, & Johnstone, 2001). The goals that underlie this evaluation may be enduring (staying alive) or transient (wanting another piece of cake). They may be conscious and complicated (aspiring to become a professor) or unconscious and simple (trying to avoid stepping in puddles). They may be widely shared (having close friends) or highly idiosyncratic (finding a new way of tying one’s shoes). Whatever the goal, and whatever meaning the situation has in light of the goal, it is this meaning that gives rise to emotion. As this meaning changes over time—due either to changes in the situation itself or changes in the meaning the situation holds for the individual—the emotion will also change. The second core feature of emotion has to do with its multifaceted nature. Emotions are whole- body phenomena that involve loosely coupled changes in the domains of subjective experience, behavior, and central and peripheral physiology (Mauss, Levenson, McCarter, Wilhelm, & Gross, 2005). The subjective aspect of emotion is so central to many

instances of emotion that the terms “emotion” and “feeling” often are used interchangeably. But emotions not only make us feel, they also incline us to act (Frijda, 1986). These impulses to act in certain ways (and not act in others) include changes in facial behavior and body posture, as well as situation-specific instrumental actions such as staring, hitting, or running. These changes in experience and behavior are associated with autonomic and neuroendocrine responses that both anticipate emotion-related behaviors (thereby providing metabolic support for the action) and follow them, often as a consequence of the motor activity associated with the emotional response (Lang & Bradley, 2010). As functionalist accounts of emotion make clear, the multifaceted responses that comprise emotion often (but not always) are useful in helping to achieve the goals that gave rise to emotions in the first place (Levenson, 1999).

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