Theoretical Perspectives on Emotions

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Abstract

Emotions have been debated in many contexts and their conceptualisation remains contested. Thus, this paper explores the literature review relates to emotion and its theoretical perspectives. The review starts with the introduction to the theoretical perspectives on emotions, and the philosophy of emotions, as the origins and concepts are important in relating emotions to the multiple perspectives. Even though the biological approach is accepted in considering emotions, after reviewing the literature this paper also consider that culture makes a key contribution to how people express, regulate and utilise emotions. Last, the limitation of psychological theories of emotion are also discussed.

Keywords: *Emotion, emotion theories and perspectives, biological approach to emotions, psychological approach to emotions, limitation of psychological theories.*

Introduction

There are a number of theoretical perspectives on emotions. Emotions are sometimes referred to as mood, and thus these two terms are often used interchangeably (see Beedie, Terry & Lane, 2005). However, emotions are argued to be direct responses to events, issues, relationships and objects that are important to people (Lazarus, 1991; Fridja, 1988), whereas mood is longer-lasting, more diffuse and not always linked to something specific (Isen, 2000; Weiss, 2002). Another term, 'affect' is also used; it is a broad term including emotion, mood and disposition (Barsade & Gibson, 2007). In general, four types of emotions have been identified: anger, fear, sadness and happiness (Turner, 2007). According to Turner (2007), anger, fear and sadness are examples of negative emotions, while happiness is a positive emotion. These examples of positive and negative emotions have been considered to be primary. Turner (2007) adds that disgust and surprise are also considered to be primary. Shame and guilt are not primary but the elaboration of primary emotions. Other examples of emotions such as interest, anticipation, curiosity, boredom and expectancy are less likely to be primary, and in fact they may not even be emotions at all, but, rather, cognitive states (Turner, 2007).

The Philosophy of Emotions

To begin a discussion concerning emotions, it would be helpful to think about the idea or concept of emotions from several perspectives: psychological, sociological, cognitive and physiological. Psychologists, sociologists, economists and even

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physical scientists have become more interested in studying emotions in recent years (Cappelletti, 2005; Naqvi, Baba & Antoine, 2006; Salovey & Grewal, 2005). Some theorists stress psychological factors, while others emphasise behavioural and subjective aspects. In addition, some deal only with extremes, whereas some mention that emotions add colour to human behaviours. In a nutshell, there is no consensus of opinions among different theorists (Strongman, 1987). However, the interplay between biological, social and cognitive processes in emotions is becoming increasingly tractable and emotional phenomena are now studied in the context of theories and methodologies that require collaboration among social, cognitive, developmental and clinical neuroscientists (Cacioppo & Gardner, 1999). Cole, Martin and Dennis (2004) conclude that most emotion theories share a tendency towards seeing emotional regulation as influenced by neo-Darwinian thinking. That is, emotions are perceived as "biologically prepared capabilities that evolved and endured in humans because of their extraordinary value for survival" (Cole et al., 2004:319). William James (1884) distinguishes two groups of phenomena in emotions: a group of physiological phenomena, and a group of psychological phenomena called the state of consciousness (in Arnold, 1968). Our individual thoughts and definitions will almost certainly range over some or all of the following aspects: feelings, behaviour, physical or physiological responses and situations (Strongman, 1974). Strongman notes that emotions are subjective, internal feelings. They are behavioural and physiological changes that happen in "definite situations" and have "effects on others" (1974:14).

The Theory of Emotions

Emotion theory was first introduced by William James and Carl Lange in 1887 and was known as James–Lange theory (in Cannon, 1968). This theory states that external experience that stimulates an individual will stimulate the body, and consequently an experience of emotions or changes in feelings will occur. This means that an individual feels sad because he or she cries tears or feels afraid because his or her heart beats rapidly (Amal Jamaludin, 2009). The James–Lange theory of emotions attempts to distinguish between mental processes which have no obvious physiological concomitants and those in which straightforward, easily observable changes occur. The James–Lange theory suggests that "emotion: 1) occurs when people mentally perceive some fact, 2) that this will produce some mental effect which is emotion and, 3) that this produces bodily expression" (Strongman, 1974:15). This theory proposes that emotions happen as a result of physiological responses, rather than being the cause of them. Meanwhile, the Cannon–Bard theory (1927, in Strongman, 1974), also known as thalamic theory, suggests that the neurophysiological side of emotional expression is subcortical. Cannon (1927, in Strongman, 1974) argues that "all emotions depend on a similar chain of events" (in Strongman, 1974:17). Another psychologist who studied emotions was McDougall. McDougall (1928) argues that "what we call emotions and feelings occur as adjuncts to several basic processes; they come from the way in which we perceive our environment and our various bodily changes" (in Strongman, 1974:18). These early theories provide useful knowledge from the perspective of psychological and physiological phenomena regarding what emotions are, how emotions occur and the effects on an individual. If an individual knows what emotions are and how they occur, the individual can recognise their effects and understand how to cope

and deal with them. More importantly, all emotions, from love, joy and happiness to anger, fear and sadness, are significant in understanding ourselves and others. Emotions help people to discover the wonders of their lives and warn them when they are in danger (see Meyer, 1997).

On the other hand, Goldie (2000) summarises conventional psychological thinking about emotions. Goldie (2000) explains the phenomena of emotions using a combination of philosophy and science. The role of culture is also considered in his explanation of the phenomena of emotions. He explores the links between emotions, moods and characters. He also explores the contexts of emotions in relation to phenomena such as consciousness, thought, feeling and imagination. He clarifies how individuals are able to make sense of their own and other individuals' emotions, and he also proposes how individuals can explain whichever emotions lead them to their responsive actions. He outlines six explanations referring to psychological aspects: 1) when a person experiences an emotion, he/she is engaged with the world, grasping what is going on in the world and responding accordingly, 2) an emotional experience or action out of the emotion can be made intelligible by reference to the thoughts which are involved in it, 3) an emotion can be educated, 4) emotions partially shape and determine what we value, 5) emotional responses can reveal to us what we value and what might not be epistemically accessible to us if we did not have such responses, and 6) we should respect our emotional responses and listen to what they have to say to us and about us. These illustrate how emotions make their contributions to individuals' relationships with their environments.

Referring to psychological perspectives (Strongman, 1974, 1987; Lyons, 1980; Sartre, 1948), I conclude that, overall, emotions or feelings include specific internal feelings (e.g. hatred, anger, sadness, fear and happiness – a person experiences these subjectively) and physiological response. Physiological response includes all physiological changes in the body that occur during an emotional experience, such as a racing heartbeat or having a stomach ache when a person is in a frightening situation, or any forms of emotions and feelings that are performed overtly – these include bodily movements and changes in facial expressions when a person experiences internal feelings (e.g. a person has slow movements and bows his or her head when he or she feels sad, or smiles when he or she experiences happiness).

The majority of research that falls particularly within the social approach to emotions has been concerned with expressions and recognition. The social approach highlights not only the importance of emotional expression but also gender as a personal characteristic that needs to be considered in relation to differences in emotional expression (see Strongman, 2003). Strongman (2003) argues that sociologists and anthropologists tend to see emotions as phenomena that occur 'out there' and not as something internal. However, Lazarus (1991) considers facial expression as an important basis for communication and recognition of emotions in other people. According to Lazarus (1991), the face provides valuable information about an individual's emotional state if one knows how to read it. However, the origin of facial expressions is debatable. They may be innate, sociocultural or both. Lazarus proposes that each emotion has its own pattern of expression and physiological activity. Meanwhile, a theory of emotions and adaptation requires propositions about the role of appraisal in each individual emotion (Lazarus, 1991).

Consequently, as per Salovey and Mayer's (1990) definition of EI, this perspective allows people who are emotionally competent to perceive and identify feelings in themselves and others. They have an ability to integrate and facilitate their thinking. Furthermore, they also understand their emotions and know how to think about feelings (in Morrison, 2007).

For many years, social psychologists have focused on emotional expression and its recognition in relationships ranging from friendship to love. Frijda (1969, 1970), a social psychologist who is interested in studying emotions, states that when someone expresses an emotion, he or she refers to three events, and when someone recognises an emotion, he or she uses three systems of identifying the response. He suggests the following (in Strongman, 1974:167):

1) People recognise emotions by the situations in which they occur. If they are asked to describe their fear, they usually refer to some recent situations in which they felt afraid.
2) Emotional expression anticipates actions. People observe emotional expression in others and ask what behaviours are likely to follow it.
3) People experience emotions. The meaning of any expressive behaviour may be bound by our subjective emotional experiences or attitudes.

Hence, this allows the conclusion that there exist some immediate, apparently intuitive perceptions of expressive meanings. As concluded by Crawford et al. (1992), the idea that emotions are expressions of some instinct, bodily responses, as well as signals or gestures to others as built on perceptions and cognition is important to people's use and understanding of the concept. Crawford et al. (1992) also state that emotions are memory, reflection and evaluation.

The Limitation of Psychological Theories of Emotion

Psychological theories of emotions are limited in scope and content (Crawford et al., 1992). Crawford et al. (1992) note that such limitations are reinforced by the ways that psychologists have chosen to study emotions. They add that even social constructionists have chosen methods such as questionnaires that fail to capture much of the richness and complexity of emotional experiences. A method is therefore needed that will recognise that emotions are constructed in both interaction with self and interaction with others and that enables the development of theory encompassing such interactions (Crawford et al., 1992). Therefore, the limitations of psychological theories only emphasise that theories concerning emotions are cognitive, motivational and relational (see Lazarus, 1991), internal feelings of states and behaviours (see Strongman, 1974, 1987), and physiological and psychological phenomena – the James–Lange theory (in Sartre, 1948). The psychological theories of emotions tend to isolate the importance of external factors, which are discussed based on sociological perspectives. Due to these limitations, sociologists who are interested in emotions have focused on the sociocultural determinants of feelings and the sociocultural bases for defining, appraising and managing human emotions and feelings (Hochschild, 1998). Hochschild (1998) argues that emotions emerge as a result of a newly grasped reality. He also adds that emotions bear on oneself and clash with the template of prior expectation. As emotions bear on oneself, they become a means by which individuals continually learn and relearn about a just-

now-changed, back-and-forth relation between oneself and the world, as it means something just-now to oneself. Meanwhile, Crossley (1998) emphasises the role and importance of communication in emotions. He argues that emotions are involved in communicative actions through experiences, and that any theories that fail to acknowledge and account for this therefore seem inadequate (Crossley, 1998). For example, the role of conversation between two or more people is identified as important in creating emotional meanings (Fussell, 2002). Edwards (1997, 1999, as cited in Xanthopoulou, 2008) analyses talk in interaction and looks at traditional emotion research in psychology, which provides a contrasting perspective that demonstrates how emotions are constructed concepts that are produced in interaction and talk. Further, emotional experiences can be influenced by the individual's or group's conception of emotions (Goldie, 2000). Goldie (2002) also analyses some studies regarding the conception of emotions and concludes that cross-cultural differences in individual or group conceptions of emotions seem to point towards emotions being social constructions. Not only are individual or group conceptions of emotions socially determined, but emotional experience itself is too (Goldie, 2002).

I consider both the psychological and the sociological perspective in an effort to understand the roles of emotions in relationships (see Scheve & Luede, 2005). Physiological theories, also known as naturalistic theories, maintain that emotions are products of natural processes that are independent of social norms and conscious interpretation. This view shows that emotions result from hormonal, neuromuscular feedback from facial expressions and genetic mechanisms (Ratner, 1989). Ratner (1989) states that almost all psychological theories and naturalistic explanations of emotions manifest variations on a basic theme. He argues that naturalistic theories are extreme and moderate positions, which only emphasises natural aspects of emotions and give short shrift to social aspects. On the other hand, Ratner (1989) mentions that social constructionists maintain that emotions depend on social consciousness concerning when, where and what to feel, as well as when, where, and how to act. Consequently, Clarke (2003) suggests that the study of emotions tends to polarise into two firm strands or camps: 1) biological or innate, where basically emotions are perceived as pre-existing, and 2) social constructionist, where all emotions are experienced and learned in the interaction between self and society.

Thoits (1989) states that cultural beliefs about emotions include the question of what should be felt or not and be expressed or not; ideology about emotions; common understandings of the causes, consequences and results of emotional experiences and interactions; beliefs about whether emotions can be controlled or not; and circumstances (determined by social contexts) from the requirements of society (expectations) to conform to emotions. Issues that can be seen in cultural beliefs (i.e. the area of focus) are the types of emotions that can be felt or not and expressed or not, and beliefs that emotions can be controlled or not, which reflect the issue of ideology of emotions in the setting of child and family practice (i.e. working relationships and decision-making processes).

Overall, I would suggest that emotional processes have numerous components (i.e. responses to events, motivations for action, appraisal, physiological changes, action tendencies and expressions, regulation, and subjective experiences). This

process arguably influences and is influenced by communication and sociocultural environment. Research has found that people benefit from recognising and responding to their emotions and to others – for instance, when decoding, understanding, experiencing or giving empathy appropriately.

Conclusion

Emotions have been debated in many contexts and their conceptualisation remains contested. However, the development and organisation of emotional processes and experiences, which could be argued to have biological underpinnings, have been said to be influenced, sustained or modified by the system of meanings in which one's self, other people, surroundings and social events or objects have made their contributions. Even though the biological approach is accepted in considering emotions, after reviewing the literature I also consider that culture makes a key contribution to how people express, regulate and utilise emotions.

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