

Clear and brief: emotions

Emotions are part of our everyday lives: Whether we feel annoyed if someone line-jumps at the cash desk or whether we feel happy when we have mastered a challenge – we cannot escape our emotions. Many emotions and the accompanying facial expressions are considered universal (e.g. anger, sadness or happiness). This means that wherever in the world you are reading this article you are supposed to decode the woman’s emotion in Ill. 1 similarly: she feels happy. Despite the high agreement across members of diverse cultures in terms of facial expressions and the experience of emotional states, how to deal with emotions differs cross-culturally, and certain emotions are subject to culture-specific display rules about which emotion can be shown to whom (cf. e.g. Ekman, 1989; Glasenapp in this issue).

WHAT IS AN EMOTION?

1. An emotion is usually caused by a person consciously or unconsciously evaluating an event as relevant to a concern (a goal) that is important; the emotion is felt as pleasant when a concern is advanced and unpleasant when a concern is impeded.
2. The core of an emotion is readiness to act and the prompting of plans; an emotion gives priority for one or a few kinds of action to which it gives a sense of urgency – so it can interrupt, or compete with alternative mental processes or actions.
3. An emotion is usually experienced as a distinctive type of mental state, sometimes accompanied or followed by bodily changes, expressions, or actions.
(adapted from Oatley & Jenkins, 1996, p. 96)

EXPLANATORY APPROACHES

The complex structure of emotions results in the fact that within emotion research different theories and approaches exist which focus on particular physiological or psychological aspects.¹ Wilhelm Wundt, e.g., postulated that the nature of the emotional state was determined by its position on 3 dimensions: pleasantness – unpleasantness, rest – activation, and relaxation – attention (Scherer, 2000, p. 145 f.). Among emotion researchers, the first 2 of these dimensions are widely accepted, the third dimension is under discussion.

One of the most popular concepts is Plutchik’s model of basic or primary emotions (cf. Meyer et al., 1997). Plutchik proposes 8 bipolar emotions which developed in the course of evolution. He arranges the emotions in his so-called “Wheel of Emotions” (cf. Ill. 2) positioning similar emotions next to each other and contrasting opposing emotions: joy – sadness, anger – fear, trust – disgust, surprise – anticipation. The wheel model illustrates the relationship

DEFINITIONS

Affect: cover term for a broad range of feelings, can be experienced in the form of emotions and moods

Emotion: intense feeling caused by an event, brief in duration, accompanied by expressions, action-oriented

Mood: less intense state than emotions, longer in duration and without a specific target

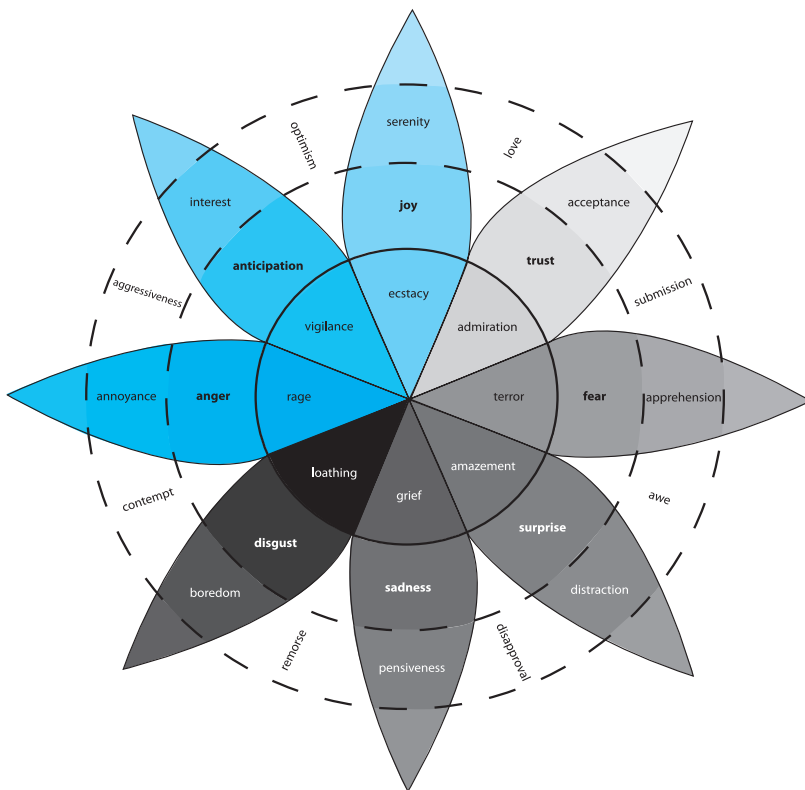
Feeling: basically synonymous with emotion, but focusses on the subjective experience of an emotion (adapted from Otto et al., 2000, pp. 11-14)

between primary emotions and other related ones (e. g. submission arouses from mixing the 2 basic emotions trust and fear) and the intensity of an emotion: the intensity decreases when moving outwards and increases when moving towards the wheel’s center (e.g. terror (highest level of intensity) – fear (basic) – apprehension (least level)).

HOW EMOTIONS OCCUR

Most current researchers subscribe to a “multicomponential” model of emotions. Scherer (2000, p. 138/139) formulates: “Emotions are episodes of coordinated changes in several components (...) in response to external or internal events of major significance to the organism.” These components involve:

1. Cognitive appraisal (evaluation of an event or object, e.g. a snake)
2. Bodily symptoms (e.g. rapid heart-beat)
3. Action tendencies (e.g. running away)
4. Expression (e.g. facial or vocal)
5. Feelings (subjective experience of an emotional state)



Ill. 2: Plutchik's "Wheel of Emotions" describes the relationship between 8 primary emotions and other related emotions

define emotional intelligence as "the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions" (1989, p. 189). The emotional intelligence quotient (EQ) is assumed to play an important role in our personal and professional lives, more important even than our intelligence quotient (IQ). Goleman (1996) states that the IQ contributes 20 % to life success, the rest comes from the EQ. Emotional intelligence affects our physical health, mental well-being, relationships with others, success, conflict resolution and leadership ability and is therefore considered the key to a personally, professionally and socially fulfilling life.

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NOTE

¹ cf. e.g., Scherer, 2005; Ulich, 2003; Myers, 2004.

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HOW CHILDREN DEVELOP EMOTIONS

Newborns and infants experience 2 general emotions: pleasure and distress (NSCDC, 2004). Babies experience pleasure when they are e.g. fed, held and soothed, and distress when they feel cold, wet or hungry. Within their first year of life children are assumed to develop all basic emotions (fun, interest/curiosity, anxiety, discomfort/disgust, fear/timidity, sadness, affection and anger). Toddlers and preschoolers are increasingly capable of managing their feelings and have already acquired a better understanding of a range of emotions. This understanding develops through their emerging capacity to interpret their own personal experiences, other people's behavior and responses to a certain action. By the end of preschool, children's emotional repertoire also includes complex emotions such as pride, shame, guilt and embarrassment (ibid.) and they

develop increased capacities to use language to communicate their emotional state. School-age children begin to understand that people can have ambivalent feelings (e.g. being happy and scared at the same time about being home alone) and are increasingly able to focus on the inner experience of an emotion (whereas toddlers emphasize outer circumstances). In puberty, adolescents not only have to face hormonal changes, but also a development of the pre-frontal cortex. It is responsible for all sorts of cognitive functions like putting events in proper perspective and understanding people (Blakemore et al., 2010). As a consequence, adolescents have difficulty in regulating their emotions and are subject to "mood swings."

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

A hot topic of psychological research in the last years is the concept of "emotional intelligence." Salovey and Mayer