

Disciplining Emotion

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Abstract

This commentary discusses the article “The Many Meanings/Aspects of Emotion: Definitions, Functions, Activation, and Regulation” by Carroll Izard (2010). Reading the article from the vantage point of cultural anthropology, these comments applaud its “ethnographic” thrust in explicating conceptual models used by scientists to define and analyze emotion. At the same time, reading the article as a kind of auto ethnography finds problems with its assumptions and methods that limit the extent of the exploration and preordain certain findings.

Keywords

emotion, ethnography, folk psychology

When I was asked to comment on the article “The Many Meanings/Aspects of Emotion” by Carroll Izard (2010), I was excited by the prospect of an exploratory study surveying the range of meanings associated with the category of “emotion” by leading scientists. As an anthropologist with an interest in these issues as they relate to ordinary language(s) and culture(s), an investigation of the ways scientists think about the scope and focus of the category “emotion” holds real interest. In the language of anthropology, the author is offering up a kind of *ethnography* (admittedly a survey-based ethnography) of the knowledge systems at play in his own culture—that of the scientific community that takes emotion as an object of research. What is not clear is the extent to which the author wishes to claim that his findings are more than that, that they actually map the range of behavioral processes associated with emotion rather than scientists’ beliefs about emotion process.

Let me hasten to add that I do not wish to imply that scientific theory-building is just one of many folk psychologies. But I would like to suggest that broadening the sample of respondents, even within the world of English speaking scientists and scholars, would produce a different mapping or, rather, many different mappings. If we read this article as ethnography, one of the first questions is “whose culture is surveyed here?” There is some slippage in the language used to frame this issue.

The author writes that “Distinguished scientists were selected to represent each of the various disciplines and specialties concerned with emotion theory and research.” As stated, the claim appears to be for a study that is comprehensive in scope: “*the* various disciplines and specialties.” Yet when specified, we learn that these disciplines “represent behavioral and cognitive neuroscience, computational cognitive science (artificial intelligence/robotics), and clinical, cognitive, developmental and social psychological science.” All of these are disciplines of psychology that have evolved in recent decades in response to the growth and specialization of neurological and cognitive science, listed along with the older traditions of clinical, developmental and social psychology.

There is of course a vast range of social scientific and humanistic research on emotion that is excluded from the above list—anthropological, sociological, and linguistic approaches, to name a few. For a wider and longer look at the disciplines that have long been engaged in analyzing the operations of emotion, see the recent volume *Language and Emotion* by James Wilce (2009). The obvious exclusions limit the range of generalization in predictable ways such that the title might more accurately read “The Many Meanings/Aspects of Emotion in *the Psychological Sciences*.”

To read this article as an exploration of the conceptual models utilized by scientists in defining the objects of their research is to place it squarely within a tradition of research on folk psychology that, oddly, is not acknowledged in the article. Whether or not one agrees with the hypothesis that common sense models of psychology influence scientific psychology, the connection through the use of a common, ordinary language (English) is unavoidable and potentially instructive.

Thus, for example, D’Andrade’s analysis (1987) of Americans’ everyday reasoning about psychological processes shows that concepts of emotion occupy an important mediating position within American understandings of internal psychological states such as “perceptions,” “beliefs,” “feelings,” “desires,” “intentions,” and “resolutions.” His analysis of transcript data shows that commonsense ideas about emotion link concepts of perception,

thought, and action within more complex schemata applied to the interpretation of behavior. When Izard finds that scientists do not have a single consistent concept of emotion, he is quick to note that this variation may represent a number of facets of emotion that fit together in some kind of larger model. Thus, the

idea that emotion (or a specific emotion) is motivational does not necessarily conflict with the idea that it has particular neural substrates and is informational, social, and relational, and monitors or assesses the significance of events, and may include appraisal processes and other forms of cognition. (Izard, 2010, p. 368)

Stated this way, the author seems to have discovered that scientists' talk may be ordered in the form of prototypic event schemas much like those utilized by ordinary English speakers.

The most provocative result reported in this study is the finding that the majority of respondents find the term "emotion" too ambiguous (polysemous?) to be useful. Most of the sample agreed with the proposition that "'Emotion' is ambiguous and has no status in science" (mean of 6.2 on a 10-point scale where 10 indicates complete agreement). Here also, the cross-cultural data are instructive. Research on the ethnopsychological categories of nonwestern languages often show that other folk psychologies "blur" relations between "thought" and "emotion," as in Lutz's discussion of terms in the Ifaluk language that range "from what we consider thought to what we consider emotion" (cited in D'Andrade, 1987, p. 141).

The psychologists' anxiety over the scientific status of the term "emotion" reminds me of anthropology's longstanding

ambivalence with the word "culture"—a term even more complex than emotion, as documented in Kroeber and Kluckhohn's classic study (1952) identifying 164 definitions of the term. Whereas some may throw up their hands and search for ways of avoiding such complexity, the concept has remained a central organizing construct for the field for over a century, energizing theoretical debates of all kinds.

Whereas surgical removal of a messy term has the appeal of eliminating a source of confusion, attempts to inoculate scientific language from the vagaries of ordinary language are doomed to failure. Social scientific practice begins and ends with the interpreted realities of personal experience and social action. Except for those who move their research entirely into the realm of biology, the questions and results of emotion research will necessarily continue to articulate with the meaning-making activities of purposeful subjects living in social worlds.

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