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Defining Emotion: A Brief History

Maria Gendron

Department of Psychology, Boston College, USA

Abstract

The effort to define the term “emotion” has a long history in the discipline of psychology. Izard’s survey (2010) canvassed prominent emotion theorists and researchers on their working definitions of emotion. The particular assumptions about emotion reported, as well as the conclusion that the term “emotion” lacks a consensus definition, both have historical precedent. In this commentary, I place Izard’s findings in this historical context and discuss the implications of his survey for the future of emotion research.

Keywords

assumptions, definition, emotion, history, psychology

The struggle to define “emotion” in scientific terms is as old as the field of psychology. In a noble attempt to clarify this age-old question, Izard canvassed prominent emotion theorists and researchers on their working definitions of emotion. Yet his findings suggest that maybe psychology has still failed to move forward from the past. In this commentary, I place Izard’s findings in a historical context and discuss the implications of his survey for the future of emotion research.

Everything Old is New Again

Izard makes several key points, each of which echoes past arguments in the history of psychology. For instance, one key finding from Izard’s survey is that the noun “emotion” should be contextualized in scientific discourse, presumably because it is ambiguous. This observation has emerged again and again in the history of emotion research. For example, in the 1930s, writers such as Duffy (1934) questioned the utility of “emotion” as a scientific term. Duffy wrote, “we should study these phenomena in their own right, and under precise labels that do not mean different things on different occasions and to different writers” (1934, p. 103; see also Dunlap, Meyer, & Hunt as discussed in Gendron & Barrett, 2009). The conclusion at the time was to abandon the term “emotion” as a scientific construct

because it did not efficiently communicate a set of predictable features. The present, less radical, conclusion is that the term “emotion” must be contextualized (or as Izard suggests, further specified based on discrete emotion categories). It is unclear how the present solution will advance our psychology, however. When Plutchik (1980) reviewed definitions of emotion throughout the history of psychology, he concluded that, “there is no sense of the definitions moving in a certain direction with time” (p. 80). The eclecticism in response to Izard’s survey suggests that psychology has yet to converge on a definition of emotion and may have difficulty doing so in the future.

Similarly, in the appropriate historical context, some of the conceptual “advances” noted by Izard are not as novel as they seem. For example, Newman, Perkins, and Wheeler (1930) defined emotions as multi-component patterns. Spencer (1855) included “perceptual” and “cognitive” processes in the definition of emotion (see also James and Wundt, as described in Gendron & Barrett, 2009). Spencer wrote, “Memory, Reason, and Feeling, are different sides of the same psychological phenomena” (p. 585), so that “no act of cognition can be *absolutely* free from emotion . . . no emotion can be *absolutely* free from cognition” (italics in original, p. 586). Irons (1897a, b) emphasized “cognitive” contributions to emotion elicitation, a precursor to the modern appraisal approach. The fact that these assumptions have only recently entered into widely-accepted definitions of emotion suggests that we ignore history at our own peril. A longer historical lens may afford a more cumulative science.

It is worth noting that the degree of consistency with historical tradition revealed in Izard’s survey may, in part, be a product of the sample of respondents (35 individuals; four nationalities; eight women) and the set of questions (e.g., “What activates an emotion?” implies that emotions are entities that are triggered). Thus, the particular definitions of emotion arrived at in Izard’s survey might be specific to a small set of Western individuals. Even the term “emotion” itself may be a Western psychological conception (Danzinger, 1997). Further, the history of “emotion” theorizing highlighted here (and reviewed in Gendron & Barrett, 2009) is also limited to

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Corresponding author: Maria Gendron, 301 McGuinn Hall, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467, USA. Email: gendroma@bc.edu

Western psychology. A broader sampling of definitions of “emotion” (from the past and present) may reveal more progress and variety than is in evidence here.

Specific and Vague

Izard’s data contain a wide variety of assumptions about emotion. The mean endorsement ratings of these assumptions allow for a sense of whether researchers converge, which they do to some extent. But is there underlying structure to the *variety* in responses? Over the last century, definitions of emotion fell into four main theoretical traditions that are each distinguished by a cluster of core assumptions (see Gendron & Barrett, 2009). In Izard’s data, it would be valuable to know if there was an implicit organization to the assumptions listed, and whether they clustered based on these distinct theoretical perspectives. A lack of clustering would suggest that today’s definitions of emotion are a-theoretical, or have transcended these historical boundaries.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Izard’s survey reveals what some scientists and theorists *believe* about emotion. Yet true scientific consensus can only be reached based on consistency in empirical findings. Reviews have failed to identify the scientific criteria that distinguish one emotion from the next, or even emotions from cognitions (see Barrett, 2006; Mauss & Robinson, 2009; Ortony & Turner, 1990; Russell, 2003). To the extent that variety in definition reflects the

empirical record (failure to identify scientific criteria), then Izard’s survey provides an important cautionary message to those who wish to treat “emotion” as a scientific construct.

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