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### Some Reasons to Expect Universal Antecedents of Emotion

Phoebe C. Ellsworth

University of Michigan Law School, pce@umich.edu

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# THE NATURE OF EMOTION

Fundamental Questions

Edited by  
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Richard J. Davidson

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1994

# Some Reasons to Expect Universal Antecedents of Emotion

PHOEBE C. ELLSWORTH

First, human beings are all of the same species. Their bodies, their autonomic nervous systems, their hormones, and their sense organs resemble each other in structure and in use, and there is no doubt that these brains, autonomic nervous systems, hormones, and sense organs are essential to emotion.

Second, in order to survive in the world, human beings must be able to appreciate changes in the environment that have important consequences for their well-being, and they must be able to respond to these changes effectively. They must cope with immediate perils and take advantage of immediate opportunities, and they must be concerned with the various threats and opportunities that are not so immediate. There are commonalities in the kinds of external events that make life better or worse for human beings, just as there are commonalities in our internal equipment. Like all species, humans are built to respond to the things that matter, and the way humans do it is by emotion. Enormous loud objects rapidly bearing down on us must be escaped, and fear provides the motivating force. Encouraging behavior from an attractive member of the opposite sex comes to evoke desire in most people at about the time they reach sexual maturity. If our species is to survive, our babies must grow up, and so their mothers must love them. When we need something, and see an opportunity to get it, we feel hopeful, perhaps challenged if we also perceive an obstacle, and are moved to go after it. When we get it, we feel relief or joy. Although physical and social environments around the world are all different from each other, they all include novelty, hazard, opportunity, attack, gratification, and loss. These are changes that people must deal with, and these are the kinds of events that generate emotion. To ignore them would make learning impossible, and would jeopardize life itself.

To respond appropriately to these consequential events, we must perceive them fairly accurately and recognize their importance. If our brains are similar, and our perceptions are accurate, it follows that this kind of important environmental event

will be a universal antecedent of emotion across societies, although not necessarily among all individuals within any particular society. There are universal antecedents to emotion insofar as there are universal human needs and goals. (By "universal" I mean, as most psychologists do, "very general." There may be societies that deviate from these very abstract propositions in some respects, but "almost universal" is the best most social psychologists dare to aspire to.)

There is some evidence for quite specific emotion elicitors that are very common, if not universal, but there is not very much evidence. Loss of support or sense of direction, separation from a mother, sudden intense noises, abrupt movements, caresses, and secondary sexual characteristics have all been suggested as universal elicitors of specific emotional responses, but the actual research record is quite thin. Most studies compare only a handful of cultures, or only two, or show a similarity between humans and some other primate species (Suomi & Harlow, 1976). Aside from a few reflexive responses such as the startle response and responses to certain tastes, however, the specificity of the elicitors that have been proposed is questionable, if by "specificity" we mean that a particular, well-defined stimulus (e.g., separation from the mother) elicits a particular, well-defined emotional response (e.g., anxiety). Most of the specific universal elicitors described reliably lead to negative or positive emotions, but further specification is problematical (Frijda, 1986). Separation from the mother is arousing and unpleasant, but the specific response is by no means universal even within a culture, sometimes appearing as grief, sometimes as fear, sometimes with signs of anger. In humans, the potential for complexity is as universal as anything, and in order to find underlying consistency, appraisal theorists suggest that we consider stimuli at a more abstract level. Several more abstract elicitors have been proposed (cf. Arnold, 1960; Frijda, 1986; Ortony, Lazarus, 1991; Clore, & Collins, 1988; Roseman, 1984; Scherer, 1984; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985; Stein & Levine, 1989; Wiener, 1985).

### Novelty or Strangeness

A change in one's environment merits attention and, I would argue, gets attention, universally. Such a change is a major entry point, arguably *the* major entry point, to the world of emotions. Novelty is not positive or negative in itself. It may result in interest, fear, relief, or any emotion, but, without it, emotions are unlikely. Novel events trigger an identifiable neural circuit, creating something like a predisposition or state of readiness for emotion (LeDoux, 1989; Posner & Rothbart, 1992). Of course, the novel stimulus need not be an external event; it can be a thought or a memory. If a person remembers the long-ago death of a child after many weeks of not thinking about it, the memory is novel in context, and the grief is elicited anew.

### Valence

A rapid, seemingly automatic response to stimuli as positive or negative is also common to many emotional experiences and is very likely universal across cultures

(Zajonc, 1980). Many of the “specific” emotion elicitors that have been proposed are stimuli that trigger this sort of immediate positive or negative response, rather than further differentiated varieties of positive or negative response. The idea that pleasantness–unpleasantness is a fundamental characteristic of emotional experience is common to almost every theory of emotion, and valence accounts for the largest proportion of the variance in most studies of emotion.

A sense of valence is frequently assumed to be an immediate, inevitable response, but it is not *necessarily* so; sometimes people can feel that a stimulus is potentially significant, but not yet know enough to feel positive or negative (Ellsworth, 1991; Kagan, 1991). A stranger approaching one’s door or an odd noise somewhere in the house may elicit alertness and a sense of intensity that will only turn into a valenced response as more information becomes available. Sometimes people can feel ambivalent over quite long periods of time. But even in these situations valence lurks as a universal, because it is the knowledge of the likelihood of a valenced response that makes the stimulus emotionally significant in the first place. The *possibility* of a valenced response—“this event may be good or bad for me”—is enough to elicit emotion.

### Certainty and Uncertainty.

Besides responding immediately to novelty, a person may continue to experience some level of uncertainty about an event over a period of time. One may be uncertain about the valence of an event, as described above. When the valence is known, a person may still be uncertain about the probability of the event’s occurring, his or her ability to deal with it appropriately, or just *how* good or bad it is. Uncertainty about probably positive events leads to interest and curiosity, or to hope. Uncertainty about probably negative events leads to anxiety and fear.

A sense of certainty may also color the emotional experience, and changes from a state of uncertainty to certainty or vice versa generally have emotional consequences. When certainty replaces uncertainty, fear turns to relief or despair, and hope may evolve into trust (Frijda, 1986, p. 209).

### Obstacles and Control

Since emotions are motivating responses to consequential events in the environment, the perception of obstacles and the assessment of one’s ability to cope with the situation are fundamental to emotional experiences. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) term these coping appraisals “secondary appraisals,” as opposed to the “primary appraisals” of the event itself. If we assume that all people have implicit and explicit goals, and that obstacles exist in all cultures, then the perception of a goal obstacle is a highly likely universal elicitor of emotion. The particular emotion will depend on the size of the obstacle and the degree of confidence one feels about overcoming it (control). A fairly high sense of control may lead to a sense of challenge; as one’s sense of control decreases, challenge may change to frustration or fear. Prolonged

lack of control can lead to desperation, hopelessness, and resignation. In our research (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985), we have found that a sense of control is itself positively valenced; people are happier about events they think they've brought about themselves than they are about equally pleasant events brought about by others or by chance. There is no evidence that this correlation is universal.

Also, the perception of an obstacle and the sense of control, along with a third, related concept, the need to expend effort, are conceptually distinct. I've included them under the same heading here because the conceptual distinction has only sometimes been borne out in our empirical work.

## Agency

If we know the cause of an event, we are often considerably better equipped to deal with it than if we don't know the cause. This is especially true of negative events, which typically demand more immediate and appropriate action than positive events (Rozin & Fallon, 1987). Missing opportunities is bad for survival, but ignoring significant threats is worse. We have consistently found that the attribution of agency is important in differentiating among the negative emotions of anger, sorrow, and guilt. Negative events seen as caused by other people evoke anger; negative events seen as caused by oneself evoke shame, guilt (or regret); negative events "caused" by fate or chance or uncontrollable circumstances result in sorrow.

I would tentatively suggest agency as a universal appraisal affecting the nature of people's emotional response. This still leaves a lot of room for cultural variation, however. First, cultural belief systems regarding the causes of events will affect emotional responses to those events; fate, for example, may play a much larger role in some cultures than in others. Second, there is some evidence that perceptions of agency are not as consistent in their relationship to specific emotions across cultures as are the other appraisals we have discussed. Mauro, Sato, and Tucker (1992), for example, found that attribution of agency was important in differentiating among emotions for Chinese and American subjects, but the Chinese were more likely to be saddened when negative events were caused by other people, whereas for Americans sadness is associated with the perception that the event was caused by circumstances beyond anyone's control.

## Norm/Self-concept Compatibility

Scherer (1984) proposes a final ("final" in both the ontogenetic and phylogenetic sense) component of emotion that he calls "norm/self-concept compatibility," that is, the extent to which one sees some aspect of oneself as meeting or violating one's personal standards or the standard of one's reference group. Ostracism from one's group or rejection by one's parents (in childhood) or one's mate (in adulthood) are plausible candidates for universal sources of distress in a social species such as humans (Gray, 1971), and the perceived threat of such ostracism may make the

awareness that one has violated important standards a highly general, perhaps universal, elicitor of emotion as well.

It should be obvious that I tend toward a view of emotion as process, rather than as a set of entities, and the “antecedents” I have suggested are perceptions that initiate or elaborate emotional processes or change their course, not stimuli that trigger a fully articulated experience corresponding to a categorically distinct “basic” emotion.

It should also be obvious that the antecedents I talk about are not generally the environmental events themselves, but the events-as-perceived by the person. It is in these “perceptions” or “appraisals” or “interpretations” that we may find evidence of universals, rarely in the external event.

The antecedents I’ve suggested show a rough progression from relatively simple, automatic, and less “cognitive” to relatively complex, potentially modifiable, and more “cognitive.” I’ve considered the hypothesis that there is more room for individual and cultural variation in the more complex appraisals, such as agency and norm/self-concept compatibility, and thus that these will be less likely to be universal. There’s a plausibility to the idea. On the other hand, even at the least “cognitive” levels—the perception of novelty or discrepancy and the primitive valence response—there is enormous room for individual and cultural variation in the events themselves. Culture and environment create familiarity and therefore define unfamiliarity. A car is unlikely to be “noticed” in an American city; a camel attracts attention. In a North African village, it is the other way around. At the most complex level, as I mentioned above, there is fairly good evidence that social ostracism may be a universal source of misery. The empirical record is still embarrassingly thin.