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Review - What Is Emotion?

History, Measures, and Meanings
by Jerome Kagan
Yale University Press,
2007

Review by Jelle De Schrijver
Apr 22nd 2008

In the last decades a so-called affective revolution has taken place in the behavioral sciences: the role played by emotions in the guidance of human behavior became widely acknowledged. Yet, despite broad interest, it remains hard to define what an emotion is. Is it the representation of bodily changes (as William James argues), is it a functional response to guide survival (as Darwin suggests), or is it a conscious experience of a change in inner sensations (Kagan's view)? The use of brain imaging techniques opened a new path to the understanding of emotions, focusing on their neural underpinnings. Yet Kagan argues in 'What is emotion' that the pendulum has swung too far. He claims the one-sided emphasis on the neural counterparts of emotions ignores a wide variety of contextual factors that influence emotional experience. A brain state and the subjective interpretation of a change of feeling that originated in brain state, he remarks, are distinct phenomena. Furthermore, Kagan disputes that there are only six basic emotions as was pointed out by Ekman. He argues that many of the experiences humans have do not fit in one of the six categories. Housewives, asked about the most memorable moment of the day for instance, do not report a moment of high emotion, yet a general feeling of ease and quietness. Though these feelings do not fit in the general categories they are subtypes of emotions that are too often ignored by current research, Kagan alleges. With his critique, this eminent developmental psychologist wants to make sure future research of emotions will be scientifically sound.

The author's main argument rests on the observation that "a major problem in current research on the biological bases for emotions is that the probability that a specific feeling or appraisal will follow a particular brain state is low, whether we assess a thousand people or one person a thousand times.

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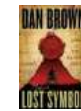
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Hence, there is minimal determinism between most incentives and the cascade of processes representing a brain profile, a feeling, an appraisal and an action." (p. 212). In short, he observes there is no complete overlap between one emotion and one brain pattern. This means that one 'brain image' does not allow us to discriminate between different emotional states that relate to it. The image underdetermines the actual emotional state, which entails there is not enough information in the image itself to make conclusions. Therefore, Kagan concludes, we should not focus explicitly on the brain as this 'underdetermination' does not allow us to perform sound scientific research.

Instead, Kagan points out that we should acknowledge the role played by the personal and situational context that influences how subjects emotionally experience the situation. In the central part of his book, Kagan sums up a whole range of contextual factors that influence the conscious experience of emotions. He focuses on the personal history of the agents that experience the emotions. A parent, for instance, will react different to pictures of infants than someone who has no children. He points at the differences between men and women in the experience of emotions of jealousy or anger, which makes them experience and react differently to similar situations. Furthermore, he points at the importance of dopamine and certain hormonal factors that make an individual experience reality differently. Also, people's temperament makes them react in other ways. There is, for instance, a difference between low and high reactive children. The former react with curiosity towards new situations, whereas the latter react with stress. Even ethnicity is argued to influence emotional experience. Another central aspect in determining emotional experience is the cultural background. The existence of certain words for emotions makes these emotions much more likely to occur in the culture where these words exist.

In short, Kagan distinguishes many different factors which make it very hard to study emotions in a straightforward way. As the author is one of the pioneers in temperament research, it is not surprising that he emphasizes the individual differences that make subjects react differently. All the remarks Kagan makes about the impact of the context on the emotional experience are of crucial importance, yet they do not seem to undermine the role played by neural sciences in current research, nor prove that knowledge of the brain underdetermines emotional experiences. For it seems perfectly plausible that all these contextual factors are translated in differences in the brain structure.

Actually, Kagan's focus on underdetermination is rather vague. It is not clear whether he argues that we will *never* be able to determine the exact relation between a pattern of brain activity and a certain emotional experience of the subject, or that we may be able to, but that we don't have the right technology yet. If the former is his intent, we may arrive at a fuzzy border between science and belief where only supernatural forces may explain how consciousness and the human mind came into being. If, alternatively, Kagan argues that we are not able yet to determine the relation between brain images and emotions, it seems we should embrace current brain research so that one day it will provide an ever expanding map relating the brain to conscious experience.

The author claims some brain scientists are wearing eye patches which prevent them to see the complexity of the field they are involved in. Yet, he misrepresents the ideas of these brain scientists. There probably is not one neural scientist arguing that the emotion of fear is exclusively positioned in the amygdala, yet Kagan draws a black and white picture. Most of the scientists would probably agree with many of the points he makes. Emotions are widely influenced by the context or the personal background of the subjects, yet it seems far fetched to suggest that these background factors have no causal effects on brain structure.

Despite all this, the book is an easy and interesting read. The author gives a broad overview of the study of emotion, with several intermezzos where he ponders on the functions and procedures of science. However, some question marks should be placed with regard to Kagan's one-sided critique on brain sciences.

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