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## BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS ON LAZARUS'S *EMOTION AND ADAPTATION*

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### Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Cognitive Appraisal Theory Without Being Conscious of It

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*Emotion and Adaptation*, by Richard S. Lazarus, is an intellectual monument. It is an academic shrine to the mind of the psychologist, where visitors may dwell for a while in awe of the magnificence of its scope and ennobled by its scholarly integrity. For pilgrims such as myself, who saunter about in search of deep and comprehensive reflections on psychological topics of importance, *Emotion and Adaptation* is an epitome of the true discipline. The book contains everything you ever wanted to know about cognitive appraisal theory without being conscious of it, and much more. From Heideggerian “nonreflective understandings” to Gibsonian “affordances”, from Schacterian “arousal processes” to Ekmanesque “affect programs”—almost every major concept and distinction in the study of cognition, emotion, motivation, coping, and development worthy of note is noted, and critiqued. Better yet, Lazarus comes out on the right side of things most of the time, or at least *I* think he does. I came away from the experience of reading this book (or should I say *encyclopedia*) greatly admiring the author, feeling re-dedicated to the life of the mind, and eager to quibble. In this essay, I summarize Lazarus's main message about the nature of the emotions by examining a single proposition, which he refers to as his “psychobiological principle.”

Lazarus formulates his psychobiological principle as follows:

*If a person appraises his or her relationship to the environment in a particular way [e.g., as irrevocable loss], then a specific emotion [e.g., sadness] which is tied to the appraisal pattern, always follows. A corollary is that if two individuals make the same appraisal, then they will experience the same emotion, regardless of the actual circumstances. (p. 191)*

Lazarus grounds his principle by suggesting that “we are constructed in such a way that certain appraisal patterns and their core relational themes [e.g., the appraisal that one has transgressed a moral imperative] will lead to certain emotional reactions [e.g., guilt]” (pp. 191, 122) and that, “once the appraisals have been made, the emotional response is a foregone conclusion, a consequence of biology.” (p. 192) At one point, he writes, “Once we have appraised that our ego-identity has been enhanced, we are bound to react with pride, and so on for each core relational theme and its emotion” (p. 359). At another point, he asserts that “appraisal is a necessary and sufficient condition” for the production of an emotion (p. 171). According to Lazarus, the psychobiological principle “provides for universals in the emotion process of the human species and probably applies to other animals, too” (p. 191). He believes the principle is “evident observationally” (p. 191).

Lazarus's psychobiological principle, or some principle more or less like it, is definitive of all cognitive appraisal approaches to the study of the emotions, although the principle is not always labeled as such or interpreted in precisely the same way by different theorists. Ellsworth (in press), for example, writes that, “according to appraisal theories of emotion, emotions consist of patterned processes of appraisal of one's relation to the environment ... along with associated physiological responses and action tendencies” and that, for example, “if someone has lost something beloved, and if the loss is seen as due to circumstances beyond anyone's control, then the person will feel sad” (p. 37). Universalizing her formulation, Ellsworth suggests that “the dimensions of appraisal identified in studies of Westerners are culturally general, that similar patterns of appraisal will result in similar emotions across cultures” (p. 10). Ellsworth, however, does not view her principle as evident observationally, at least not yet. Because of the limited data available on ap-

praisal processes and emotional functioning in non-Western cultural traditions, she tentatively advances the principle as a hypothesis. I have a somewhat different view of the central principle of cognitive appraisal theory, which I discuss after I summarize Lazarus's particular approach.

In *Emotion and Adaptation*, the emotions are analyzed as a cognitive system. This is because Lazarus believes that the emotions are ways of apprehending states of the world that have significance for personal well-being. The emotions are "about" the world. They are mental maps about certain kinds of truths. That is what makes them "cognitive." That is why "appraisal" must be included as a fundamental feature of an emotional response.

What is a cognitive appraisal? According to Lazarus, it is an evaluation of the significance of what is happening in the world for personal well-being (p. 89). These "significations" or meanings are classified into two kinds—harmful to the self (losses or costs) and beneficial (gains). It is not entirely clear why Lazarus elects to cast his rich analysis in a utilitarian framework of cost-benefit analysis, especially given the role of moral evaluations (e.g., a perceived injustice, not necessarily to one's self) in mediating an emotional response (e.g., indignation).

The two kinds of meanings (costs and benefits) are then further specified in terms of "core relational themes" (e.g., irrevocable loss, demeaning offense, physical danger, threat, enhancement of ego-identity). The core relational themes are analyzed as abstract schemata, as "irrevocable loss" rather than as "irrevocable job loss" or "irrevocable loss of a child." Thus, despite his "cognitivism," Lazarus pulls up short of fully defining the emotions by reference to their "objects" (loss of a job in contrast to loss of a child). He elects to treat his core relational themes categorically, as detachable abstract schemata (e.g., as irrevocable loss) while acknowledging that it is possible that "there are as many emotions as there are specific ways there are to be harmed or benefited" (p. 117).

In Lazarus's approach, a cognitive appraisal is an abstract evaluation of the significance of what is happening in the world for personal well-being, yet none of the significant actual events happening in the world are treated as part of the appraisal. In effect, the abstract schemata of appraisal theory (irrevocable loss, enhanced ego-identity) make it possible for Lazarus to treat two mental appraisals as equivalent regardless of differences in the identity of the events they are about. It is assumed that mental processes do not function concretely and that, in the production of an emotional experience, there is no fundamental qualitative difference between, for example, "I feel

the way I feel *because my child has died*" and "I feel the way I feel *because I was fired from my job*." Although it is a frequent move among cognitive appraisal theorists to analytically detach mental states from their content, one is left wondering precisely whose style of appraisal has been privileged in the theory and whether the theory has really helped us understand the mental life of the native from the native's point of view. Indeed, one question not addressed in the book is whether there is individual or cross-cultural variation in the abstract versus concrete organization of emotional experiences. Is it possible that there exists a good deal of individual and cross-cultural variation in how many distinct emotions have been made available (through processes of abstraction and concretization) for a person to experience?

The abstract core relational themes identified by Lazarus have a dual ontological status. "Demeaning personal insult," for example, is treated as both an evaluation of external events (which causes anger) and as a constitutive part of the internal psychological experience of the emotion as well. In one of the most fascinating chapters in the book ("Issues of Causality"), Lazarus forthrightly and proudly acknowledges that he views his core relational themes (e.g., loss, threat, insult) both as the cause of the emotion and as part of the experience of the emotion, the effect (p. 173). Lazarus recognizes that this blurring of the distinction between independent and dependent variables, between cause and effect, will bother some readers, but he is too sophisticated, subtle, well-read, and up-to-date to be deterred by the old-fashioned procrustean scruples of a positivist philosophy of science and causality. Nevertheless, Lazarus's formulation is going to leave many readers wondering whether a postulated mental appraisal (which he claims is a causal condition of the emotion) is anything other than a reified redescription of a component of the meaning of the emotion. It left me wondering whether it is really necessary to reify meanings (redescribing them as though they were antecedent causal events) in order to acknowledge their central role in our mental life.

Harmful significances (and their specific core relational themes) are then linked by Lazarus to negative emotions such as fright-anxiety, guilt-shame, envy-jealousy, disgust, sadness, and anger. Beneficial significances (and their specific core relational themes) are linked to positive emotions such as happiness-joy, pride, love, relief, and compassion.

A "cognitive appraisal" is an evaluation of the abstract significance of events in the world for personal well-being. In *Emotion and Adaptation*, this evaluation process is classified into two kinds of processes: a

“primary appraisal” process that evaluates core relational meanings (e.g., What type of harms and benefits are involved? Is this an irrevocable loss?) and a “secondary appraisal” process that evaluates what to do about it (e.g., How can a sense of well-being be restored? Who is to blame for my emotional state?). Thus, each emotion (e.g., anger) is conceptualized as a package deal consisting of a primary appraisal of some particular self-involving state of the world (a demeaning offense) and a secondary appraisal activating some particular action tendency (e.g., the desire to attack) and some coping strategy. Indeed, according to Lazarus, it is the presence of these cognitive appraisal processes that distinguishes emotional feelings (e.g., disgust) from other types of feelings that are non-emotional (e.g., pain, pleasure, distaste) (p. 56). The psychobiological principle echoes throughout the book: “Emotion is a result of appraisal” (p. 172).

Further specifications of the appraisal process are offered. For example, to evaluate the significance of what is happening in the world for personal well-being (primary appraisal), one must assess the relevance of events for one’s goals. According to Lazarus, “if there is no goal relevance [to happenings in the world] there cannot be an emotion” (p. 150). Quite crucially, Lazarus distinguishes his core relational themes (e.g., threat, offense, loss) from such evaluative dimensions as controllability, pleasantness, and uncertainty, which he views as aspects of knowledge external to the appraisal process. He is critical of the failure of other cognitive appraisal theorists to distinguish knowledge from appraisal (pp. 146–147).

Last, Lazarus is quite clear that cognitive appraisal (e.g. the evaluation of an event as a demeaning personal insult) can be either conscious or unconscious, deliberate or automatic, fast or slow. Cognitive appraisal should not be thought of as a sequential conscious decision process going on inside the head. Lazarus has important things to say about affordances and processes of nonreflective evaluation. He does not believe that subjects are necessarily aware of their own cognitive appraisals. He writes: “... if appraisals are assessed by self-report methods, there is the danger that what is obtained is superficial, and therefore will not lead to successful predictions of manifest emotions” (p. 167). It is not entirely clear that appraisals are the kinds of things that can be assessed at all, although they certainly can be attributed. Indeed, after reading *Emotion and Adaptation*, I found myself wanting to ask Lazarus the following question: Does the assessment by a psychologist that someone has made an unconscious, rapid, and automatic appraisal of loss amount to anything other than believing that the person is sad?

Now for my quibble with this great book. In some

sense or other, I view myself as a cognitive appraisal theorist (see, e.g., Shweder, 1991, 1993, in press; also see Mesquita & Frijda, 1992). And I share many assumptions and principles with Lazarus. Nevertheless, I do not believe that Lazarus’s psychobiological principle is evident observationally. I do not even believe that it is the kind of formulation (a “hypothesis”) that might one day be supported or disproved by new evidence from cross-cultural research. In my view, cognitive appraisal theory is not so much a theory as a framework of concepts for generating interpretations about the mental life of others.

I am skeptical about the principle, not because I think it is unimportant or wrong (although, if the principle is interpreted as a proposition about an invariant causal connection between two types of events in the natural world—the making of an appraisal of a particular type and the having of an emotional response of a particular type—then I do think the principle is wrong). Nor am I indifferent to the paucity of good ethnographic evidence on emotional functioning in different ethnic groups and cultural traditions (including Western traditions). Emphatically, we need much more evidence of this type.

Rather I am inclined to resist Lazarus’s appropriation of cognitive appraisal theory to a psychobiological principle because I believe that the psychobiological connection he alludes to exists in name alone and that the way appraisals and emotions are “tied to” or “bound to” one another is a matter of conceptual necessity, not causal necessity. I think Lazarus is right that it is a “foregone conclusion” that, for example, loss and sadness are tied to each other, but not as events in the empirical world. They are bound to one another because the appraisal condition (loss) is intrinsic to our concept of what it is like to be sad. We are not biologically constructed in such a way that mental event A (the appraisal of loss) and mental event B (the experience of sadness) must go together. It is the idea of sadness that is so constructed. Internal to the idea of sadness is a connection to loss that we have no choice but to employ if we are to interpret others as sad. The link between the appraisal condition and the emotion is part of an a priori conceptual architecture, which is available for us to put to use in our attempts to comprehend others as persons and to arrive at a reading of their mental life. Yet, this conceptual architecture is not the only conceptual architecture in town. It may or may not be the conceptual architecture that is actually online, giving shape and meaning to the mental life of this or that person or people.

This point can be made most clearly by considering Lazarus’s treatment of the relatively commonplace anthropological observation that, in some cultures (e.g.,

Tahiti), people respond to loss not with sadness but rather with “fatigue, sickness or other kinds of bodily distress” (p. 193). Does this observation lead him to conclude that his psychobiological principle is wrong? Of course not. Instead, it is the principle itself that provides the constituting framework for making sense of what is going on and for generating a series of interpretive possibilities, all of which presuppose a conceptual connection between loss and sadness.

One possible interpretation is that, because there is an appraisal of loss, the native really is experiencing sadness but (a) denies it, (b) defends against it, or (c) does not have a vocabulary or language for describing it. Lazarus favors (c).

A second possible interpretation is that an appraisal of loss did not really occur. In the anthropological literature, the appraisal of loss is usually a deliberate self-conscious appraisal made by the observing anthropologist who has witnessed a circumstance he or she thinks of as loss. Perhaps the native did not appraise things that way.

A third possible interpretation is that the native does not respond to loss emotionally, perhaps because of some psychobiological pathology that has switched off the causal connection between the appraisal and the emotional experience. A more extreme possibility (fantastic to be sure) is that there is an order of beings midway between robots and persons—beings who have no emotional or mental life but can experience fatigue, sickness, and bodily distress.

So, the appraisal theorist has three interpretive options in making sense of the native who responds to loss with fatigue, sickness, or bodily distress. The appraisal theorist can identify and give a name to the type of appraisal and mandated emotional experience that is assumed to be unconsciously, rapidly, and automatically activated, despite what the native says. The appraisal theorist can claim that no relevant unconscious, rapid, or automatic appraisal has been made at all. Or, he or she can posit that the “other” is either pathological or not really a person.

Notice that a self-report is neither a necessary nor sufficient datum for the cognitive appraisal theorist as he or she tries to weed out these interpretive possibilities. If the native explicitly denies appraising the death of a child as loss, the appraisal theorist is free to discount the testimony. If the native explicitly confirms appraising his or her circumstance as loss but gives no evidence of experiencing sadness, the appraisal theorist is free to either assume the native is really sad (whether or not the native shows it) or to suspect some form of pathology. As far as I am able to judge, this entire spectrum of interpretive possibilities is itself made possible by our knowledge of the meaning of sadness

and the a priori conceptual link between sadness and loss.

In other words, the psychobiological principle is not really a hypothesis at all and is certainly not “evident observationally.” What is evident observationally is that many, many people respond to apparent loss without evincing sadness, to apparent insult without evincing anger, to apparent “transgression of moral norms” without evincing guilt, and to apparent goal attainment with direct and explicit expressions of disappointment and regret, and so forth. Yet, what is evident observationally is just grist for the interpretive mills of a cognitive appraisal theory. The connections and links built into cognitive appraisal theory (loss and sadness, transgression and guilt, etc.) are not there as a result of being observed. They arise out of the meanings inherent in our emotional state concepts, meanings presupposed by the mental state language (the “folk psychology,” to use the contemporary philosophical parlance) that we use to “mind-read” the subjective states of others.

To avoid misunderstanding, let me make it quite clear that I am all for making use of cognitive appraisal theory to construct interpretations of what it is like to be a Tahitian or to be this or that Tahitian. It is our scheme of a priori mental state concepts that leads us to wonder about what it is like to be someone else and to construct a plausible and intelligible account about the beliefs and processes of consciousness of others. Indeed, if we are to comprehend others as persons with a mental life, we have no other choice but to make use of some version of cognitive appraisal theory, at least to the extent that we interpret others as having an emotional life that we can understand.

Yet, as an anthropological advocate of comparative research on the emotions and as a fan of Lazarus’s cognitive appraisal approach, it seems evident to me that there is no conceivable observation that any anthropologist could ever bring back from some faraway place that would lead Lazarus to conclude, for example, that for some peoples of the world the appraisal of irrevocable loss is causally connected to pride and happiness and the appraisal of enhanced ego-identity is causally connected to sadness and shame. Perhaps the best I can do is raise a fourth interpretive possibility that, as far as I can remember, Lazarus does not consider.

That fourth possibility is that the native does not respond to loss emotionally—not because the emotion (while experienced) is denied or repressed or inexpressible, not because of a pathology or because the native lacks a mental life, but because the secondary appraisal system is able to reach into the primary appraisal system and short-circuit the link between the actual appraisal of loss and the emotionalized experience of it.

In other words, I would raise the interpretive possibility that, with sufficient cultural consciousness about the management of experience and with the right mix of socialization practices and mental disciplines, the psychological processes that control whether the emotions are brought online at all supersede the processes that control how a loss is experienced, given that the emotions have been allowed to come online. On this account, there might well be genuine cross-cultural differences in the extent to which primary evaluations of, say, loss actually result in the “emotionalization” of experience at all (see Shweder, in press). On this account, the emotional response is not a foregone conclusion of biology. We are not bound to react, at least not emotionally.

In sum, cognitive appraisal theory is an invaluable tool for constructing interpretations of what it is like to be a person. Nevertheless, I do not believe that its most fundamental principles are inductions about causal connections in the natural world. Cognitive appraisal theory is best understood as a form of what Smedslund (1991) called “psychologic,” which makes it possible for us to generate interpretations about the mental states of others and to “mind-read,” if that is what we choose

to do. *Emotion and Adaptation* is a fabulous book. So much the better for psychologic.

#### Note

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## How Do We Represent Both Emotional Experience and Meaning?

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In *Emotion and Adaptation*, a comprehensive treatment of emotional experience, Richard Lazarus puts emotions where they belong—namely, in the context and dynamics of everyday life. With emotion situated in everyday experience, as it unfolds over time, the relational meaning among emotions, events, states, and actions becomes clearer. Lazarus does not view emotions as discrete, isolated units that can be defined exclusively in terms of defenses, expressions, reactions, or actions. Emotions are intimately connected to the monitoring of environmental conditions and to personal states of well-being. When changes occur in perceived states of well-being, distinct feelings or emotions arise and are expressed through specific action “tendencies” as well as through facial and bodily reactions. Situations in which emotions arise are appraised and reappraised, and this monitoring leads to the formulation of ways of coping with the problems that evoked the emotions, as well as with the problems that

the emotions themselves cause. Emotions are thus defined as part of a dynamic process—sensitive to and changing with the environmental circumstances in which they occur.

The dimensions that regulate the evocation of emotion are appraisals and interpretations of perceived changes in states of well-being. These appraisals involve the evaluation of beliefs, values, and preferences. The ways in which environmental events or self-generated actions influence, block, or facilitate the maintenance or attainment of well-being are at the heart of emotional experience. Thus, emotions have relational meaning because of the transactions that are carried out between the person and the environment in the context of an event that unfolds over time.

Lazarus’s model of emotion and adaptation is the result of a lifetime of work and reflects the influence of his productive association with several collaborators, notably Susan Folkman and James Averill (Lazarus,