

The Tower of Appraisals: Trying to Make Sense of the One Big Thing

Richard A. Shweder

Department of Comparative Human Development, University of Chicago, USA

Abstract

This commentary on four theoretical articles published in this issue of *Emotion Review* discusses the one big thing that links them all and raises some questions about the ontological status of the appraisal part of appraisal theories of emotion.

Keywords

Appraisal theory, emotions, mind/body problem

Until I read Agnes Moors' (2014) article I had not realized I might qualify as a "second flavor" appraisal theorist; perhaps on the grounds that I subscribe to the view that the study of what individuals think, feel, want, value, and do ought to take precedence over the study of emotions in the cross-cultural study of variations in human psychologies. That was the easy insight (see Shweder, 2004).¹ Finding a way to comment on the full set of these articles however turned out to be challenging. All four are so thick in theory laden abstractions and metaphysical assumptions about psycho-biological processes and mind–brain connections that I began to wonder: what is the common ground upon which these theorists stand? Are they really writing about the same object of investigation? Can one discern a singular territory underneath the alternative ways they position themselves and map the terrain called "emotion"? Aside from simply pointing to the English word "emotion" (a lexical object whose vernacular meaning is certainly not their shared interest) how is one to identify the domain about which they are all theorizing? Upon first encounter the four voices seemed cacophonous. My initial impression was of a grand theoretical deliberation conducted in the Tower of Babel. Then I tried to relax and detect some points of resonance in the apparent discord.

Jessica Tracy (2014) offers a useful hint about how one might actually coordinate, or at least line up, the various theoretical

reflections. She does so in a revealing endnote. There she clarifies (and qualifies) her evolutionary convictions about how things went in the distant past for members of our species. Tracy invites us to imagine the existence of original "recurrent situations" whose rather consequential selection pressures (adapt or die!) resulted in the evolution of a universal set of distinct biologically preprogrammed and once functional (although not necessarily still functional) survival promoting human emotions (indexed by English words such as fear, anger, sadness, and shame). With reference to those original recurrent situations, she offers this rather significant caveat:

By evolutionary recurrent situation, I mean the appraised or interpreted situation, which is more predictive of the emotion experienced than the specific situation itself ... It is the appraisal of threat, and not the potentially threatening object itself, that elicits the fear. It is noteworthy that this emphasis on appraisal results in a good deal of common ground between evolutionary approaches to emotion and many appraisal theories of emotion. (Tracy, 2014, p. XXX)

Compare that statement with the "psychobiological principle" articulated by the grand master of appraisal theory Richard Lazarus in his book *Emotion and Adaptation* (1991) where he writes:

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

Lazarus goes on to say "we are constructed in such a way that certain appraisal patterns and their core relational themes [for example, the appraisal of threat] will lead to certain emotional reactions [for example, fear]" and that "once the appraisals have been made, the emotional response is a foregone conclusion, the consequence of biology" (1991, pp. 191–192).

Now contrast the appraisal theories of both Tracy (2014) and Lazarus (1991) with Agnes Moors' (2014) appraisal theory. She would presumably classify Tracy and Lazarus as "first flavor" appraisal theorists, given their postulation of "emotions" as fixed patterns or closed programs for psycho-biological or mind-body causal interactions. In Moors' own "second flavor" approach that concept of an "emotion" is set to the side and is even viewed as an impediment to empirical research. As Moors remarks

[I]nstead of trying to explain anger or fear, they [second flavor appraisal theorists like herself] try to explain the tendencies to dominate, attack, freeze, or avoid, without linking them to anger or fear, and ultimately, even without worrying about whether the components under study are emotional or not. (2014, p. XXX)

"Whereas the first flavor [appraisal theorist] tries to discover the appraisal patterns causing specific emotions, the second flavor [appraisal theorist] examines the influence of appraisal values on other components [presumably, for example, affective and somatic feelings, action tendencies, etc.] without linking them to specific emotions." (Moors, 2014, p. 6)

Betwixt and between the Tracy (2014) pole and the Moors (2014) pole of appraisal theorists we have Batja Mesquita and Michael Boiger's (2014) model in which "emotions" remain more or less the primary units of analysis but the causal appraisals and the feelings, motives, and actions they elicit are socially situated and theorized as psychosocial in character and in function (or dysfunction). And somewhat off to the side is Lisa Barrett (2014) who introduces us to another type of distinction for classifying theories, between causal appraisal models (of the sort embraced by Tracy, Moors, and Mesquita and Boiger) and constitutive appraisal models (of the sort embraced by Barrett; pp. XXX-XXX). That additional distinction prompts this reader to classify Barrett as a "third flavor" appraisal theorist, for whom appraisals are not viewed as independently identifiable things that make other independently identifiable things happen. Unlike Tracy, Moors, and Mesquita and Boiger, Lisa Barrett, the builder of a third flavor constitutive appraisal model, does not believe that situational appraisals have causal powers; they are just interpretations or descriptions that are part of an emotional experience and they don't trigger anything (Barrett, 2014, p. XXX).

The issue is deep and puzzling. Lazarus (1991) himself liked to play fast and loose with questions about the ontological status of "appraisals." For example, he treats "demeaning personal insult" as both an evaluation (of some external event) which causes the "anger" and as a constitutive part of the internal subjective experience of the emotion of anger as well. Lazarus liked to blur the distinction between cause and effect, between the independent and the dependent variable. He left some readers wondering whether the postulated causal appraisal (the demeaning personal insult) was anything other than a reified interpretation by an observer (self or other) of the subjective experience itself.

One would welcome far more discussion of the ontological status of the "appraisal" part of appraisal theories. If, for

example, an organism is observed to withdraw from a stimulus after experiencing pain (a subjective state which can't itself be directly observed) does that count as an action caused by an appraisal of threat? Is the posited experience of pain the appraisal? And which part of the picture is the elicited emotional response?

Inspired by one of Jessica Tracy's (2014) examples in her discussion of the falsification of theories, here is what I think would happen if we sent "second flavor" appraisal theorists out into the field and sampled on-line social interactions from major cultural regions of the world. I believe they would discover numerous occasions in which an observed success (from the point of view of the observer) was followed by a shame display. Yet I doubt we would conclude that the evolutionary or social function of shame is to discourage goal formation or devalue striving for success. I think we would be far more likely to view the observed success as merely apparent; and we would try to figure out why a shame display was being deployed as a means to symbolically distance oneself from or downplay the accomplishment. In other words, the connection between an emotion concept (such as shame or pride) and its "appraisal" condition is not falsifiable, but is rather a constitutive feature of its very meaning (as Lisa Barrett [2014] suggests). I would suggest that there is nothing you can observe in the causal or temporal structure of human behavior that is going to falsify your understanding that successfully acquiring the things you most want in life is a condition associated with pride and not with shame.

Jessica Tracy's (2014) endnote is noteworthy because it points to a single domain of investigation or the one big thing theorized in all four essays. And that one big thing is the way human beings appraise (classify, construe, cognitively mediate, evaluate the meaning and significance of) events (or "stimuli" in the older discourse of behavioral learning theory). It points to the processes (at the level of mind and/or the level of body) by which those very mental events (the appraisal of "threat" for example, whether made fast or slow, whether automatic-habitual-unconscious or self-consciously assessed and deliberated over) do (or do not) have causal consequences for what we feel, want, and opt to do (in other words, for other mental events) and for the functioning of our biological systems (including our organic survival). There are undoubtedly muddles in all these models. Bafflement comes with the territory when one gets anywhere near the unsolved (and perhaps unsolvable) mind-body problem. Having theory laden debates about the nature of psycho-social-biological processes can be fun. I am just not sure they take us very far. One does look forward however to tasting (or at least reading) more on-line second flavor empirical reports from diverse cultural settings. I for one will wait for the tasting; and only then draw strong conclusions about the nature and distribution of the "emotions."

Note

- 1 By "emotion" I mean the unit of analysis for interpreting human mental states referenced with English emotion words such as fear, anger, sadness, happiness, shame, and pride.

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