Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

COMMENTARY

Check for updates

Do we need to reconceptualize emotions?

Franziska Hartung (ID)

UK School of Psychology, Institute of Population Health Sciences, Tyne, UK

ABSTRACT
Over the past decades, the emerging and ever-growing body of studies in empirical aesthetics has made one thing abundantly clear: our current models and conceptualizations of emotional experiences have outlived their usefulness. How do we go from here?

A growing body of empirical studies on aesthetic emotions in fiction, literature, art, theater, film, dance, and music has challenged our understanding of how we conceptualize emotions from a (neuro)scientific perspective. The complex emotions that result from aesthetic experiences cannot be reduced to basic emotions and push the limits of dimensional models that categorize emotions based on a spectrum of arousal and valence, control and valence, or approach and avoidance. Willems rightfully criticizes those approaches as unidimensional and overly simplistic. Existing models of emotions are not useful to describe the complex reality of emotional experiences because they are based on a problematic assumption: that isolating processes in order to understand them, will eventually facilitate understanding of the whole. We focus so much on experimental control and simplicity hoping for clear interpretable outcomes that we often fail to study natural phenomena and our findings are often not generalizable outside of this very isolated context of experimental research.

The MA-EM model is trying to circumvent this problem by a) focusing on perceiving and interpreting emotions and b) conceptualizing complex emotions as mixed or ambiguous. Indeed, emotions can be mixed or ambiguous, but there is still a wide space of emotional experiences that are neither mixed nor ambiguous and yet still cannot fit within our current categories of emotional experience. Moreover, a large part of the emotions we experience when we engage with fiction or other people are not emotions we perceive or infer in others, but emotions that erase from engaging with them (e.g., suspense in a horror story). And those emotions are our own emotions, not the ones that we perceive in others. These are often emotions that are well defined (not mixed) and clear (not ambiguous) for lay understanding, that we can easily name and communicate, yet fail to describe and categorize them scientifically with our current models of emotions, e.g.; the exhilaration of joy and fear for our life while bungee jumping or the suspense (fear, anticipation of something bad but also joy and reward) when watching a horror movie.

The MA-EM model still relies on the underlying dimensions of emotions that it criticizes for being overly simplistic. The difference is that it allows emotionality without clear categorization (ambiguous emotions) and co-occurrence of multiple emotions at the same time (mixed emotions). While not explicitly stated in the proposed model, this suggests multiple (layered?) underlying dimensions of emotions that can be activated independently (mixed) and without clear salience of a given dimension (ambiguous). This reconceptualization of emotional dimensions into experiences with independent underlying components that can be activated simultaneously might address the problem of explaining the complexity of natural emotions that humans commonly experience on a daily basis and should be tested.

The MA-EM model cannot solve the inadequateness of our models of emotions. But it does highlight the conceptual problem of our current models and more importantly draws possible solutions based on two cognitive mechanisms that are already well understood and have interdisciplinary application. Simulation and mentalizing are cognitive and neural mechanisms that can help us reconceptualize emotions based on empirical approaches

CONTACT Franziska Hartung ✉ franziska.hartung.info@gmail.com 🖴 Dame Margaret Barbour Building, Wallace Street, Richardson Road, NE2 4DR, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom

studying the complexity of naturally occurring emotions with experimental designs that deliver generalizable findings. This is a useful approach for explaining how we perceive and process our emotions and those of others, be it fictional characters or other people.

Most researchers agree that emotions can be described along degrees of valence and arousal, but what if these are not defining features but accessory features? Emotions do not have to be mixed or ambiguous to have features from different dimensions. Maybe emotions do not exist in one spectrum but orthogonal dimensions of experience that can share degrees of valence and arousal? The neural systems underlying emotional experience seem to support the idea of independent subsystems and mechanisms for different emotions. While behaviorally emotions seem to be part of the same experiential dimension, from a biological perspective we have very little reason to assume that they are. They do not only activate different brain areas but are based on fundamental differences in underlying neural mechanisms.

I do agree with Willems that emotions are very complex and our current empirical study of them oversimplifies behavioral, conceptual, and biological aspects of emotional experience. It is evident that our current models of emotion are neither true, nor helpful. In order to unify research on emotion across subdisciplines, we need new models that incorporate the complexity of emotional experience into descriptive and mechanistic accounts. Interdisciplinary research is needed to embrace the reconceptualization of emotional experience, behavior, its evolutionary basis, and its biological correlates.

Disclosure statement

Funding

ORCID

Franziska Hartung http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5660-2324