

Audio 3. EMOTION

By Anna Tcherkassof

Why do emotions seem so familiar to us, yet so enigmatic? They are inherently part of our daily life, and yet we find it difficult to explain exactly what they are. This is because what we call ‘emotion’, in fact, refers to various psychological realities.

The definition of emotion

Emotion psychologists do not consider any kind of sensation, mood, feeling or sentiment to be an emotion (Tcherkassof, 2008). All these states belong to the sphere of *affects* – automatically emerging states whose nature is intrinsically pleasant or unpleasant. However, most psychologists consider emotion as a specific process, made up of a coherent set of components, arising together or independently: a cognitive appraisal component, a neuro-physio-psychological component, a motor expression component, a phenomenological subjective feeling component and a motivational component. Components are triggered by an object evaluated as significant. Emotion is always aroused by a relevant stimulus object (a person, event, idea, etc). A stimulus object generates emotion even if the person is not aware of it. As the emotion process consists in a response which synchronises most of the interrelated components, it gives the emotional episode quite a unitary aspect.

This precise scientific definition allows us to differentiate emotion from other affective states which are less differentiated than the wide palette of various emotions – less intense and more diffuse. This is the case, for example, with mood, a chronic phenomenon of moderate intensity, not as acute as emotion, and lacking the maintaining object which is a feature of emotion. Emotions are also different from sentiments, which are affective dispositions towards objects, and which refer to the hedonic tonality of conscious cognitive contents, such as having a liking or a strong aversion for someone. The term feeling can be very confusing, because it is the word most often used in general conversation to denote what is felt, including emotion. But as Sander and Scherer (2009) stress, emotion and feeling should not be used interchangeably. Feeling, when understood as ‘experiencing an emotion’, corresponds to what psychologists call the subjective (and/or phenomenological) experience process, a *component* of emotion, and the most familiar component for all of us. It goes from (sometimes hardly) perceiving oneself as being in a different state, to feeling a specific, clear and distinct emotional state.

Since the various components of emotion are independent, emotion arises long before we are aware of it. Hence emotion proceeds from different levels of consciousness. Emotion can be unconscious – aroused by something we are unaware of (subliminally displayed images, for example). This level of consciousness is called *anoetic*. Emotion is actually present since some of its components are activated: physiological and/or behavioral outward signs are observed, for example. Its presence is also evidenced at a cognitive level (beliefs, reasoning, judgment, etc). However, one is not able to report a conscious feeling (nor an emotional reaction); at the same time an affective response reveals the presence of an emotion. Emotion can come also within a *noetic* level of consciousness, a kind of emotional phenomenal awareness (the direct experience of the taste of wine, for instance). We realize that we are emotionally moved or experiencing an affect, without knowing exactly why, and are unable to clearly identify which emotion is being experienced. This level of consciousness favors attribution processes, in order to give a meaning to what is felt. Finally, awareness of being the subject of a clearly identified emotion can result from *self-noetic* processes. In this case,

one can easily report one's feeling, for instance: "I am very angry".

The verbalization of emotion is an important dimension, especially through social sharing (Rimé, 2005). People are eager to talk with others about emotional events, especially if the emotional experience was intense, although they share about minor events, as well. Thus, in general all emotional episodes are socially shared, usually almost immediately, and repeatedly. Yet, talking with others about one's emotional experience will not necessarily improve one's well-being, contrary to the naïve theory that people hold according to which "talking helps" and brings emotional relief. Even though scientific work has shown that social sharing is not related to emotional recovery, the benefits of emotional sharing are numerous, especially for interpersonal and intergroup relations.

The regulation of emotion

Emotion is often experienced as coming upon us unawares and outside the control of our will. This is why many people seek to master and tame their emotions. Emotion regulation holds a central place in psychology, since it is an important aspect of people's everyday functioning. Borrowing Power's definition, emotion regulation refers to "the processes, both intrinsic and extrinsic, responsible for learning to recognize, monitor, evaluate, and modify emotional reaction" (Power, 2008). These processes are both automatic and controlled, both unconscious and conscious. They take place throughout all phases of the emotional process.

It is possible to get rid of an emotion using different strategies. Many people believe that focusing on precise features of an emotional experience will increase its intensity, but Philippot's work on clinical and non-clinical populations has shown the opposite. Concentrating on specific details of one's emotional experience, on what makes it *unique* (rather than focusing on ways in which it is *typical* of such experience), has been shown to be an effective way to manage the intensity of emotional feelings and physiological arousal (Philippot, Neumann & Vrielynck, 2007). Another effective emotion regulation strategy consists in undertaking action, thus shifting attention away from the emotion. Engaging in cognitively demanding activities absorbs part of the (limited capacity) working memory process. This allows us to regulate unwanted negative emotional responses, because working memory processes our focal activity to the detriment of negative emotional information.

Of course, individual differences exist. Some people are readily overwhelmed by their emotions, while other people manage to control them quite easily. These individual differences are notably linked to people's knowledge about the efficiency of different emotion regulation strategies, to their ability to apply and implement that knowledge and to their personal dispositions towards using specific strategies in emotional situations.

Emotion is a complex phenomenon involving various components and different levels of consciousness. It can be authentic or deceitful. It can be subjectively experienced but hidden from others – or, on the contrary, remain outside the conscious awareness of the subject, yet perceptible to others, for instance through body language. We not only have emotions, we also handle them; thus we shape our emotions and we are part of them.

Selective references for further reading:

Philippot, P., Neumann, A., & Vrielynck, N. (2007). Emotion information processing and affect regulation: Specificity matters! In M. Vandekerckhove et al. (Eds.). *Regulating emotions: Social necessity and biological inheritance* (pp. 189-209). New York: Blackwell Publisher.

- Power, M. (2008). Emotion regulation: “Out, Damned Spot, Out!” *Emotion Researcher*, 23, 11-12.
- Rimé, B. (2005). *Le partage social des émotions*. Paris, France : Presses Universitaires de France.
- Sander, D. & Scherer, K.R. (2009). *Traité de psychologie des émotions*. Paris, France: Dunod.
- Tcherkassof, A. (2008). *Les émotions et leurs expressions*. Grenoble, France: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble.