CHAPTER 4

What Is a Positive Emotion?

The Psychological Construction of Pleasant Fear and Unpleasant Happiness

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Imagine yourself in the following scenarios:

You are sitting stiffly in a roller coaster car, creeping up one click at a time. You reach the peak of the hill and are suddenly whirling downwards. Your heart is pounding and your stomach drops as crisp air blasts your face. You delight in the uncontrollable rush dipping and swirling high above the ground. You feel an invigorating fear.

You are walking down the hall, trying to get to a meeting on time. You run into a difficult colleague and end a tense exchange with a biting remark. Your stomach tightens the moment the last sarcastic jab escapes your lips. The cutting retort echoes poignantly in your head as your colleague slinks away. You feel a disturbing happiness.¹

Humans partition the world into categories. In most scientific models of emotion, fear, disgust, and sadness are categorized as unpleasant or "negative" emotions; gratitude, joy, and pride are categorized as pleasant or "positive" emotions.² But human experience is more complex and varied. There are times when negative emotions such as fear can feel pleasant (e.g., riding a roller coaster), and positive emotions such as happiness can feel unpleasant (e.g., after successfully verbalizing a retort at a difficult person). These examples appear to violate traditional scientific and colloquial understandings of emotion, but they are common in everyday life.

From a cognitive science perspective, it is not surprising to find instances of pleasant fear or unpleasant happiness. Research on concepts and categorization has demonstrated that some instances of a category are more typical, or better examples of the category, than others (see Figure 4.1; Barsalou, 1985; Rosch & Mervis, 1975). For example, apple and orange are more typical instances of the category fruit than coconut and olive (Rosch & Mervis, 1975). Likewise, fury and rage are more typical instances of the category anger than impatience and resentment (Russell & Fehr, 1994).³ Categories have a graded structure, which means members of the category have varying degrees of typicality. Some members of a category are less typical, or atypical, of the category. The pleasant fear of riding a roller coaster is an atypical example of the categories positive emotion and fear.

In this chapter, we consider atypical emotions—categories of negative emotion, such as fear, which feel pleasant, and categories of positive emotion, such as happiness, which feel unpleasant—and focus on the consequences for the study of positive emotion. We first describe our theoretical approach, the conceptual act theory, which emphasizes that variety exists within emotion categories (e.g., instances of fear differ from each other). This model defines emotions as psychological constructions that emerge from the categorization of ongoing affective variations of arousal and valence in the body and brain. Next, we discuss the cognitive science literature on concepts and categorization, and explore the notion of typicality. We then discuss a novel approach to concepts called "situated conceptualization," which is based on grounded cognition and employed by the Conceptual Act Theory to understand emotion. We then present recent empirical research that demonstrates the reality of atypical emotion experience. In conclusion, we consider how the exploration of atypical emotion may further positive emotion theory and research.

A Psychological Construction Perspective

The construct of atypical emotion contradicts the traditional emotion models that dominated affective science during the 20th century. "Basic emotion" theorists, for example, sought evidence for the universality of six emotion categories: anger, fear, sadness, disgust, joy, and surprise (e.g., Buck, 1999; Davis, 1992; Ekman, 1972; Izard, 1993; LeDoux, 2000; Levenson, 1994; McDougall, 1908/1921; Panskepp, 1998; Tomkins, 1962, 1963). These emo-

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¹ Typical and atypical examples of emotions from Wilson-Mendenhall, Barrett, & Barsalou, 2013.
² Adapted from Barsalou, 1985.
³ Adapted from Russell & Fehr, 1994.

Figure 4.1. Items considered typical are rated as good examples of a category. Apples are more typical examples than olives of the category fruit (Rosch & Mervis, 1975). Based on the organization of emotion concepts typically found in the affective circumsphere (e.g., Russell & Barrett, 1999), unpleasant experiences are more typical examples than pleasant experiences of the category fear (situations appear with predicted variations in typicality: Wilson-Mendenhall, Barrett, & Barsalou, 2013a).
tions were considered universal because it was thought that everyone experienced them and that they looked and felt the same, and as a result could be universally recognized by their signs, for example, through facial expressions. Each emotion was thought to manifest itself in a specific neural network, with coherent response patterns in autonomic physiology, behavior, and subjective experience (e.g., Ekman, 1972; Izard, 1971; Panksepp, 1988; Tomkins, 1962, 1963). The deviation of a person's cognitive interpretation of a situation causes different emotions. The experience of being cut off by the driver of another car in busy traffic, for example, could result in anger or fear. Evaluating the other's act as aggressive and conflicting with one's own goals produces anger, whereas evaluating the incident as a threat to one's own life produces fear. Appraisal models allow for great heterogeneity in emotional experience (e.g., Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003; Frijda, 1986; Scherer, 2009; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985), but these models tend to focus on singular patterns of responding that correspond to the six basic types of emotion (Barrett, 2009b). Elsewhere these models have been referred to as “the modal model” (Barrett, Ochsner, & Gross, 2007) or “the natural kind” model of emotion (Barrett, 2006a).

The empirical evidence to date fails to support the existence of these modal emotion types, however, and points to a more varied and complex emotional life (even when the eliciting conditions are experimentally designed to produce these types). Several literature and meta-analytic reviews have converged on the conclusion that emotions do not correspond with consistent and specific signatures of autonomic action categories, the peripheral nervous system, voice, or facial expressions (e.g., reviews in chronological order: Duffy, 1934; Hunt, 1941; Mandler, 1975; Ortony & Turner, 1990; Turner & Ortony, 1992; Cacioppo, Berntson, Larsen, Poehlmann, & Ito, 2000; Russell, 2003; Russell, Bachorowski, & Fernandez-Dols, 2003; L Richards, 2004; Barrett, Lindquist, et al., 2007; Kagan, 2007; Mauss & Robinson, 2009; Barrett, 2011; Lindquist, Wager, Kober, Bliss-Moreau, & Barrett, 2012). Although the modal model still has its advocates (e.g., Ekman & Cordaro, 2011; Panlaise & Watt, 2011; Roseman, 2011; Scherer, 2009; Shariff & Tracy, 2011), alternative psychological construction approaches to emotion have gained substantial empirical support.

Psychological construction models of emotion offer a theoretical position for making a priori predictions about the experience of atypical emotions. Psychological construction models date back to the beginning of psychological science (Gendron & Barrett, 2009) but are not as well known as “basic emotion” and “appraisal” models. Our own version of psychological construction, the Conceptual Act Theory, posits that emotions are not unique to humans, but rather emerge from psychological processes that are not specifically dedicated to emotion. The psychological processes that construct emotion also construct personal meaning, which is usually not considered non-emotional, for example, memories, cognitions, and emotions, and thus emotion is not realized in dedicated neural circuits or networks but rather are constructed through the interaction of the elements responsible for more basic psychological mechanisms. In this chapter, we focus on two mechanisms that together produce the emergent state of atypical and typical emotions: core affect and conceptualization.

“Core affect” is a state of pleasure or displeasure with some degree of arousal. It is constantly changing based on how homeostatic shifts in the body are represented in the brain (based on how the actual visceral sensory inputs are integrated with prior experience; Barrett, 2006b, 2006c; Russell, 2003; Russell & Barrett, 1999). These homeostatic shifts can occur on a person’s own body as a consequence of an object or person the best course of action (Barrett & Bar, 2009) because of lack of sleep, or because of glucose depletion or inflammatory processes. Core affect is often described as a non-evaluative process that is performed by the brain; people think that evaluation is a process that contributes to emotion. But evaluation might just be another name for what emotions are. The fear of being accused of having a non-evaluative process that produces changes in core affect. Rather, as emotions unfold, a person’s core affect is a set of shifts, which means that affect is an important ingredient of emotion. Objects in the world are considered pleasant or unpleasant as a function of their ability to alter core affect. Because scientists can reliably measure core affect, it serves as a neurophysiological barometer of how a person’s internal state is becoming linked with the external world (Barrett & Bliss-Moreau, 2009). Physical changes that make up core affect are necessary but not sufficient to define an emotion, however. Affective changes must be related to the situation at hand to make a meaningful whole.

A “situation,” by definition, includes internal changes in the body and mind, as well as external events in the environment. In an emotion, bodily changes and events in the world are knitted together in a conceptualization of a situated affective response. Conceptual interpretation of a situation creates a useful heterogeneous representation of an affective experience, cognition, and the body in context (Barasalou, 1999, 2003, 2005; Wilson-Mendenhall, Barrett, Simmons, & Barasalou, 2011). As people experience a situation, they categorize the agents, objects, settings, events, properties, relations, bodily states, core affect, mental states, and so forth, that are present (Barasalou, 2011; Wilson-Mendenhall et al., 2011). As patterns of brain activity in an emotion occur across multiple modalities (sensation, perception, action, core affect, attention, etc.), the brain uses prior experience in these modalities, in the form of conceptual knowledge, to conceptualize the current situation. People develop concepts for emotions (e.g., anger, fear, pride) as they do many other aspects of experience that are concrete (e.g., cat, chair, apple, trumpet) or abstract (e.g., justice, truth, science, meeting). When a pattern of activity is similar to an instance of an emotion stored in memory (including the context), the information stored in that instance will guide behavior. When this occurs, it often shifts core affect, perceptual construal, actions, executive functioning, and so on, because the concept produces inferences about how the body and mind should respond in the situation (based on prior knowledge). The conceptualization function, which is sensitive to conceptual changes in the body and brain meaningful. Concepts enable humans to integrate incoming infor-
I. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Rochs & Mervis, 1975) found evidence for typicality effects by asking people to rate how good an example various members (e.g., oriole, penguin) were of the category (e.g., bird) and listed examples such as robin and oriole as very typical, but other examples, such as penguin and ostrich, as atypical. With respect to emotions, participants rated maternal love and friendship as better examples of love than romantic love or love of work (Fehr & Russell, 1991). Participants also rated fury as a better example of the category anger than impatience (Russell & Fehr, 1994). According to the classical view, however, a robin and a penguin are equally good examples of bird and maternal love and patriotic love are equally good examples of love. It is quite clear that people do not subscribe to this view.

4. What Is a Positive Emotion?

Objects can be close to a prototype (i.e., the ideal or best example of a given category), moderately close, or atypical (i.e., not very close). Cases that are equally distant from the prototypes of two different categories are also seen as members of each category. This variation in typicality among members of a category is consequential for many reasons. In general, when a task requires someone to relate an item to a category, the item’s typicality is important (Murphy, 2002). When learning artificial categories, people learn typical items before atypical ones, and they learn categories more quickly when they learn typical items first (Rochs, Simmons, & Schuman, 2003). Finally, typical items are also more useful for inferences about category members (Rips, 1975). Similar effects have been found with emotion concepts. Participants who read narratives about various gratitude experiences reported that narratives containing central, compared to peripheral, features would induce greater feelings of gratitude among the protagonist (Lambert, Graham, & Fincham, 2003). For the emotion categories love and anger, typically predicted how awkward a sentence appeared when a subtype was substituted for the category in a sentence (Fehr & Russell, 1991; Russell & Fehr, 1994). For example, “Romantic love has to be worked at and strived for to be truly achieved” was rated as less awkward than “Infatuation has to be worked at and strived for to be truly achieved.” Typically also predicted participants’ ability to recall statements about an emotional experience of compassionate love (Fehr & Sprecher, 2009). Thus, typicality influences a range of judgments about instances of an emotion category.

The ubiquity of typicality across all categories raises questions about what causes variation in typicality. Why is olive considered an atypical instance of the category fruit, whereas apple is considered typical? Why is the pleasant fear of riding a roller-coaster atypical, compared with the unpleasant fear of running for one’s life? Rochs and Mervis provided the first explanation for typicality effects: Items are typical when they have high family resemblance with other members of the category (Rochs & Mervis, 1975), which means that a given item shares a high number of properties with other members of the category. Typical items tend to share properties with other category members but tend not to share properties with category nonmembers. This view explains why commonly encountered examples of a category are more typical for that category than rare examples of the category. Chickens are fairly common birds, for example, but they do not have common bird properties (e.g., ability to fly) (Rochs & Mervis, 1975). Likewise, the pleasure associated with riding a roller-coaster might be a common experience, but pleasant fear does not share many properties with other members of the fear category. In particular, pleasant fear does not share the valence of the category (unpleasants are unpleasant). Variations in arousal may also predict typicality of emotion experiences (e.g., low arousal fear of an awkward social interaction). The family resemblance view predicts that pleasant fear and low arousal fear are atypical emotions, and that these instances will be more similar to other categories (e.g., excitement).

Other factors beyond family resemblance cause variation in typicality. Three possible determinants of graded structure of concepts received attention: central tendency, ideals, and frequency of instantiation (Baron, 1983). An object’s central tendency is similar to its membership status. It passes any kind of central tendency information (average, median, or modal values on dimensions; highly probable properties; etc.).

“Familiarity” refers to a person’s subjective estimate of how often he or she has experi-
enced an entity across all contexts, whereas frequency of instantiation is the same person's subjective estimate of how often he or she has experienced an object as a member of a particular category. Barsalou (1985) suggested that frequency of instantiation is more important than familiarity in determining typicality. "Ideals" are characteristics that objects should have to belong to a goal associated with their category. Barsalou proposed, for example, the ideal for foods to eat on a diet is zero calories. The fewer calories an object has, the better it serves the goal associated with the category (i.e., losing weight). Objects with a larger number of calories become increasingly good examples, and are therefore more typical of the category foods to eat on a diet. If a person's goal is thrill seeking, then pleasant fear may become a typical instance of fear (ideals may be probably a major instance of fear). The typicality of a given instance is dynamic and will fluctuate depending on context.

Different factors can influence typicality depending on the type of category in question. Whereas central tendency and familiarity determine typicality in common taxonomic categories (categories that have a hierarchical structure, such as biology: kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, species), ideals are more likely to determine typicality in goal-derived categories (e.g., clothes to wear in the snow). Ideals and frequency independently predicted variance in typicality, but central tendency did not. Thus, the factors that determine typicality depend on the nature of the category.

Ideals also determine variance in typicality ratings. An experimental study investigated the typicality of ideal instances of two novel categories that comprised different people (Barsalou, 1985). The two categories to which ideals fulfilled the ideal dimensions of height and wealthness correlated with the experts' typicality ratings of the trees; however, familiarity was the sole predictor of typicality in the voters. The influence of knowledge or mindset would likely generalize to typicality judgments of emotion categories. If one's ideal dimension for positive emotion is bring about desirable consequences, then the ideal might be rated as the most typical positive emotion. The focus on downstream consequences, for example, represents the rubric for analyzing mental states in all of Barsalou's (1985) Buddhist context. The ideal dimension for emotion categories was quite common in everyday life.

4. Is What a Positive Emotion?

The classical view of concepts failed because it did not predict the continuum of typicality that category members exhibit. The classical view, for example, does not distinguish between pleasant and unpleasant fear, and suggests that these experiences are equally good examples of the fear category. Despite this knowledge about the varied instances within categories, scientists have relentlessly pursued the typical or ideal instances of emotion experiences. Instances of each basic emotion category (e.g., fear, anger, sadness, disgust, joy, surprise) are the ideals of those categories. These are the instances that most people consider the clearest cases of emotion that necessarily have all of the component parts (Russell, 2003; Russell & Barrett, 1999). The exception to this is fear; the ideal is one that makes fleeting or freezing behavior upon encountering a threat in the environment (such as a bear or snake) and is accompanied by a very specific facial expression (i.e., widened eyes, open mouth) and physiological profile (i.e., increased heart rate, blood pressure, and skin conductance). Ideal episodes are quite rare in everyday life, however, and fear experiences and expressions are quite common in everyday life. This is why the ideal of a category is not the one that is most frequently encountered, but the one that maximally achieves the goal that the category is organized around (Barsalou, 1985, 1992).

The other hand, atypical experiences of emotion categories might be quite common in everyday life. We next turn to a situated view of concepts and discuss how emotions can be understood as conceptualized within an environment. This perspective provides the theoretical basis for studying atypical emotions.

Situational Conceptualization

In a situated view of concepts, the situational context is integrated with the representation of a concept. This has been called "situational conceptualization" (Barsalou, 2003, 2005, 2007).
Theory. First, because situations can vary, a single emotion category will include a range of situated conceptualizations. This means that there is considerable variability of experience within one emotion category. Consider sadness. After a short night of sleep, someone might wade through a crowded cafe to obtain a cup of coffee, only to realize that he forgot his wallet at the office, thereby activating a relevant situated conceptualization for sadness. The person’s core affect shifts into a highly unpleasant state and might encourage him to give up the pursuit of coffee and opt for rest. The person with a conceptualization may engage in a different course of action, e.g., not paying attention to the lack of energy and thereby recruit a compensatory strategy to rest, which could replenish energy for more productive work at a later time. During this evolving process, the relative impacts of colleagues or supervisors and other information in the environment (e.g., a stack of papers, a list of e-mails) may be construed as overwhelming and thus result in core affect shifting into feelings of strong negative valence, which initially encourage retreat from normal activity and decrease arousal significantly, but then motivate subsequent actions to change the memory and environment for resources to restore one’s affective state or gain new resources. Analogously, if someone reflects on losing a loved one, a relevant situated conceptualization for sadness in this situation becomes active. During this course of action, one may interpret memories as knowledge that there can never be another interaction. When sharing this situation with a mutual friend, however, the mutual interaction ameliorates the pain. As a result, one’s core affective state may shift into feelings of positive valence (for similar descriptions of situated conceptualizations for fear, see Wilson-Mendenhall et al., 2006b). The conceptualization of an emotion state can also produce heightened core affect if other aspects of the situation trigger the conceptualization first. For instance, if a person suddenly encounters a fond memory of a loved one, one may interpret memories as knowledge that there can never be another interaction. When sharing this situation with a mutual friend, however, the mutual interaction ameliorates the pain. As a result, one’s core affective state may shift into feelings of positive valence (for similar descriptions of situated conceptualizations for fear, see Wilson-Mendenhall et al., 2006b). The conceptualization of an emotion state can also produce heightened core affect if other aspects of the situation trigger the conceptualization first. For instance, if a person encountered a fond memory of a loved one, one may interpret memories as knowledge that there can never be another interaction. When sharing this situation with a mutual friend, however, the mutual interaction ameliorates the pain. As a result, one’s core affective state may shift into feelings of positive valence.
4. What is a Positive Emotion?

Table 4.1. Example Atypical and Typical Scenarios

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Atypical scenario</th>
<th>Typical scenario</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You are suffering from a severe illness.</td>
<td>You are recovering from a minor injury.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You are feeling down and listless.</td>
<td>You are feeling energetic and enthusiastic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You are experiencing a lot of stress.</td>
<td>You are feeling relaxed and at peace.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary

The situated conceptualization view of emotion differs from other theories of emotion. This approach focuses on the cultural and situational factors that influence the experience of emotion. It argues that emotion is not an abstract concept, but rather a result of the interaction between the individual and their environment. This perspective highlights the importance of context and culture in shaping the experience of emotions.

Note: Scenarios also systematically varied in arousal. For comparison, all the examples shown here are high arousal.

imburse themselves in each scenario as they listened with eyes closed, and experience the scenario as if it were actually happening to them, in as much vivid detail as possible. Participants tended to rate both the typical and atypical instances of each emotion as familiar and relatively easy to immerse oneself in (i.e., "being there") immersed in the feeling). Although it might come as a surprise that atypical instances were not rated as relatively less familiar than typical instances, typicality is often not driven by frequency or familiarity (see the earlier discussion of typicality determinants). Chicken is an atypical instance of the category bird, for example, but chickens are familiar birds to most people (Rosch, 1973). In a similar fashion, the thrill of riding a roller-coaster may be an atypical instance of fear, but it is a familiar experience for most people. Because this initial evidence suggests that atypical scenarios are familiar and compelling, it highlights the importance of studying the variability within emotion categories.

Psychological construction approaches predict that secondary emotion to an event is based on an interaction between an affective state and the context in which it occurs. (Andrews-Hanna, Reider, and Schacter, 2008) Consistent with this view, recent meta-analyses of emotion experience implicate many of the anatomically inspired, limbic structures that have been studied in emotion research (e.g., Barrett, 2009; Barrett, 2013). The existing evidence suggests that the situation evoking atypical emotional experiences is the context in which the event occurs, and that attention to contextual and situational factors is necessary in order to understand the experience of emotion. 

Furthermore, Wilson-Mendenhall and colleagues (2013a) predicted and found that atypical (vs. typical) instances were associated with heightened activity in the salience network when participants were asked to rate the pleasantness or unpleasantness of their emotional experiences when immersed in each scenario. "Salience" refers to the process by which highly processed sensory information is integrated with visceral, autonomic, and hedonic information to inform decision making (Menon & Uddin, 2010; Seeley et al., 2007). Because valence is a prominent feature that makes the instance atypical, it was hypothesized that focusing on the affective feeling would place greater demands on integrating shifting body signals with the sensory and social context. 

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The importance of typicality, as a property of categories, is clear in cognitive science research. It is one of the most important predictors of performance on categorization tasks (category learning, verification, etc.). As demonstrated in this study, typicality also predicts patterns of brain activity, suggesting that it deserves further study in the domain of emotions.
findings suggest that experiences of compa-
ssion may differ from the prototypical representation of compassion obtained from semantic comparisons of emotion states. We predicted and found that the category compassion includes pleasant and unpleasant instances of experience, but prototypical conceptualizations of compassion are pleasant.

To examine prototypical conceptualizations of compassion, we asked people to rate the similarity of the feeling of compassion to a number of other emotion-related adjectives (e.g., sad, distressed, happy, sad, grateful) following neutral and compassion emotion induction. We also asked the same people to rate their own internal states along a vari-
cy of typical positive (e.g., happy, excited, proud, wed) and typical negative (e.g., angry, afraid, sad) emotion categories. To judge both sets of the behavioral task, we asked people to rate their own internal states along a vari-
cy of typical positive (e.g., happy, excited, proud, wed) and typical negative (e.g., angry, afraid, sad) emotion categories. Both sets of judgments followed laboratory-based compassion or neutral induction conditions that included audio clips of people describing events from their lives. Neutral stories focused on themes related to encounters with famous people and events related to work. Compassion stories focused on themes related to others’ suffer-
ing through disease and loss.

Multidimensional scaling analyses of the similarity judgments rendered two-
dimensional maps of the emotion concepts in relation to each other, which yields a prototypical characterization of the emo-
tion concepts. Consistent with prior work, these similarity ratings were best depicted using a two-dimensional solution, in which one dimension represented arousal (e.g., alert/vigilant vs. calm and quiet/drowsy at the other) and the other valence (e.g., sad/ afraid at one end and happy/greatful at the other). Across all conditions, compassion was located in the low arousal, pleasant quadrant of the circumplex, suggesting that people typically conceptualize compassion as pleasant even after exposure to other-suffering stimuli (e.g., Shaver et al., 1987). The pattern of results for self-reported feel-
ing states proved more variable, however.

Following the compassion induction, par-
ticipants reported feeling increased compa-
ssion along with a number of unpleasant states. Furthermore, ratings of compassion correlated with typical unpleasant states (i.e., sadness, sorrow, sympathy, upset) but not with typical pleasant states (i.e., happy, excited, proud, wed) following the compassion induction. The opposite pattern emerged following the neutral induc-
tion: Participants’ moderate feelings of compassion correlated with pleasant states (i.e., happy, excited, proud, wed), but not unpleasant states (i.e., sadness, sorrow, sympathy, upset). These results replicated across two studies implementing within-
and between-subjects designs.

These data demonstrated that feeling states within a single emotion category (i.e., compassion) vary in experience. The prototypical cognitive representation of an emo-
tion (e.g., compassion, happiness) can be different from what people experience (e.g., compassion as unpleasant). Just as the typical conceptualization of fear is unpleasant, people can experience pleasant instances of it (Wilson-Mendenhall et al., 2013a). Together, these data support theoretical views that predict heterogeneity within an emotion category (cf. Barrett, 2009b).

What is a Positive Emotion?: Prospects for Positive Emotion Theory and Research

Emotion categories are goal-directed cate-
cal categories that develop to guide action (Barrett, 2006b). The most typical members of a goal-directed category are those that maxi-
mal achieve the goal of the category as or-
organized around, not necessarily those that are most frequently encountered in con-
cer discussions on ideal (see also Barsalou, 1991, 2003). Of course, goals can change across situations and context, suggesting that typicality is a dynamic phenomenon (Barsalou, 1985, 2003, 2008). The most typ-
ical instances of an emotion category repre-
ent the ideal form of the category—that is, whatever is ideal for meeting the goal that the category is organized around—not those that most commonly appear as instances of the category. One goal that surrounds the category anger, for example, is to remove an obstacle in the environment. Thus, a highly arousing and unpleasant experience of anger is ideal in the extent to which it achieves the goal of removing the obstacle. Goals that surround the superordinate category posi-
tive emotion might include to feel pleasant, to achieve a desirable outcome, or to seize an opportunity. In turn, the instances of

positive emotion that maximally achieve a goal such as to seize an opportunity will be most typical. Thus, the answer to the ques-
tion “What is a positive emotion?” or “What counts as a positive emotion?” is a matter of a person’s goals. In general, understanding a person’s goal(s) will allow a researcher to make predictions about which states that person will find typical or ideal for an emo-
tion category.

A situated conceptualization approach also emphasizes individual differences in people’s experience of atypical emotions. We predict that individuals’ differences will be found to the extent that people construct different emotional categories around different goals. We predict that a number of individual dif-
ferences and forms of cultural experience (including experiences with different reli-

ligions, differences in regions of a country, differ-
est socioeconomic status; see Cohen, 2009) will result in systematic differences in goals surrounding different emotion categories and will therefore result in varying tenden-
cies to experience atypical emotions. Recent work capitalized on the different goals endorsed by individuals across cultures and demonstrated that different situations are perceived as more frequent to the extent that the goals they trigger are common (Boiger et al., 2014; Mesquita, Uchida, & Barrett, 2013). Ameri-
cans, for example, condone experiences of anger that facilitate the goal to maintain dignity and feel good about one-self. Those in Japan and South Korea are less likely to condone experiences of shame, which facilitates the goal of harmony. In this study, U.S. and Japanese students rated the frequency of various situ-
ations they encountered in their daily lives. Across three countries, a situation was perceived as more frequent to the extent that the situation elicited stronger conditioned emotions (anger in the United States, shame in Japan) and as less frequent to the extent that the situation elic-
it stronger conditioned emotions (shame in the United States, anger in Japan). This pat-
ttern of results occurred despite the fact that pilot data demonstrated the two cultures did not differ in the amount to which they actually experienced these particular situ-
ations. These data demonstrate that cultural goals are particularly relevant to the extent to which a person and a culture experiences particular emotions. In this view, individual differences, as they relate to differences in

endorsed goals, will likely explain a person’s tendency to experience atypical emotions. We also predict that individual differ-
ences in emotion differentiation will influ-
ence the experience of atypical emotions. Substantial individual differences exist in the degree to which individuals label their affective experiences with discrete and specific emotion categories—a phenomenon called “emotion granularity.” Individuals with high granularity report on their affective states using the same terms to refer to a global, unspecified state (Barrett, 2004; Barrett, Gross, Christensen, & Benvenuto, 2001; Demur-
alp et al., 2012; Feldman, 1993; Lindquist & Barrett, 2008b). High emotion granu-

larity is an adaptive skill because discrete emotion labels provide precise information about appropriate behavior in varying emo-
tional situations (Barrett et al., 2001; Corn-
don & Wilson-Mendenhall, 2011). While emotion granularity has typically been assessed by examining a person’s use of labels to distinguish between emotion cat-
egories, it is likely that individuals vary in their ability to distinguish instances of an emotion within a single category. For example, the ability to distinguish between the fear of snakes and the fear of public speaking may represent a type of granularity that is often overlooked. Atypical fear experiences might be atypical because they are less threatening (i.e., they are less likely to match the ideal of the category, which is centered around the goal to escape threat). The ability to make this distinction actually to recognize atypical fear experiences might be adaptive and conducive to well-being. Yet our understanding of how emotion categor-
ies develop for different individuals remains limited and awaits further empirical study.

Positive emotions have been distinguished from negative emotions in their ability to broaden thought-action repertoires and build resources (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001). In turn, positive emotions have been defined from a functionalist perspective, with the aim of discovering the different adaptive consequences of awe, compassion, pride, gratitude, and other positive emotions. Each emotion construct represents a unique com-
bination of ingredients and refers to different situated conceptualizations. Across situated conceptualizations, these emotions will have different adaptive outcomes. Heterogeneity within an emotion category means that all emotions will have a variety of adaptive outcomes across contexts. A general adaptive outcome of atypical emotions—because they are produced from situated conceptualizations—is that they guide situated actions. With atypical emotions, actions are tailored to the situation at hand. Thus, pleasant fear may motivate one to take advantage of resources (e.g., in a job interview, or a challenging performance in front of a crowd; see examples in Table 4.1) rather than avoid the threatening situation. These atypical pleasant emotions may act as social glue and bind people together, for example, when sharing a pleasant fear experience of watching a horror film. Pleasant fear may contribute to experiences of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), for example, in an energizing competition. Recent work examined the ability of fear to promote positive aesthetic experiences of art (Eskine, Kacinik, & Prinz, 2012). Following a short fear-inducing video, participants had more positive impressions of the artwork than those who watched a happiness-inducing video. Eskine and colleagues (2012) suggested that fear may enhance the appreciation of art through its ability to remove a person from daily life and thereby grab his or her full attention. To the extent that fear causes people to focus attention and experience a pleasant moment or flow as a result, they may accrue resources, attain goals, and enhance overall well-being as a result. Pleasant experiences (e.g., reflections on a lost loved one) may signify the importance of relationships and motivate relationship-building pursuits with others. The functional outcomes projected by the situated conceptualizations of atypical emotions remain an area ripe for empirical research. 

Examining the variation in behavioral adaptations supported by different instances of a single emotion category may expand the scope of affective science. Some fears might feel good and promote beneficial consequences. In a clinical setting, for example, not all “fears” should be treated the same, just as not all “anger” should be avoided. Indeed, the ability to experience anger in some contexts (e.g., in confrontation, negotiation) can be useful and is preferred by some people (Tamir & Ford, 2012; Tamir, Mitchell, & Gross, 2008). The ability to tailor one’s situated conceptualization in a manner appropriate to the situation at hand will prove beneficial for well-being (see also Condon et al., 2014).

We propose that a significant step in the science of emotion will occur when researchers focus on the heterogeneity of emotional life, studying both typical and atypical emotion instances within various discrete emotion categories. Rather than a sole focus on the typical positive and negative emotions (while keeping these phenomena separate), we suggest that it will be more fruitful to examine the various situated conceptualizations that describe the atypical and typical instances within each positive and negative emotion category. A fine-grained analysis of the population of instances within a given category will ultimately yield greater understanding and predictive power of the situations that produce emotional experience and behavior. In particular, an understanding of unpleasant experiences of gratitude, awe, and hope, and pleasant experiences of disgust, and sadness will provide a more dynamic account of emotion and well-being.

Notes

1. Scenarios were developed as part of Christine D. Wilson-Mendenhall’s dissertation (see Wilson-Mendenhall, Barrett, & Bazaral, 2013b).

2. Positive emotions are called “positive” because (1) they feel pleasant, (2) the events that preceded the emotional feeling are goal-congruent, or (3) the affective state produces desirable consequences (cf. Harmon-Jones, Harmon-Jones, Abravanel, & Peterson, 2009). In this chapter, we use the terms “positive” and “negative” to refer to categories that exist in psychology, but the terms “pleasant” and “unpleasant” to refer to instances of specific mental states.

3. From the conventions of emotion research, gratitude, love, pride, and joy are typical instances of the category positive emotion and anger, fear, sadness, and disgust are typical instances of the category negative emotion (although no empirical data have demonstrated that nonresearchers share this view). An emotion such as schadenfreude, on the other hand, represents a possible atypical instance of the category positive emotion. Furthermore, variations in typicality exist within a category, as suggested by our opening examples of atypical fear and atypical happiness.

4. The conceptual act theory of emotion was introduced in 2006 and has been elaborated through a series of theoretical and empirical papers (Barrett, 2006b, 2009a, 2011, 2012; Barrett & Bliss-Moreau, 2009; Barrett & Kensinger, 2010; Barrett, Mesquita, Ochsner, & Gross, 2007; Barrett, Ochsner, & Gross, 2007; Lindquist & Barrett, 2008a; & b; Lindquist, Wager, Weber, Bliss-Moreau, & Barrett, 2012; Wilson-Mendenhall, Barrett, Simmons, & Baruss, 2011). In this chapter, we present a summarized view.

5. In some cases, the ideal prototype of a category may not exist in nature even though it fits the goal of the category. We revisit this issue later.

6. Our discussion of ideal parallels work on ideal affect by Jeanne Tsai and colleagues (for a review, see Tsai, 2007), who have demonstrated that ideal affect, the affective experiences that a person wants to feel, differs from actual affect, the affective experiences that a person actually feels. Several variables predict differences in ideal affect, including culture, religion, age, and experience with medication (Koenig-Holm, Sze, Ochs, & Tsai, 2013; Schiebe, English, Tsai, & Carretens, 2013; Tsai, Krouson, & Fung, 2006; Tsai, Miao, & Seppala, 2007). Westerners, for example, want to feel high-arousal positive affect. Tsai and colleagues emphasize ideal forms of affect along dimensions of valence and arousal, but our emphasis here is that a person’s goals also determine the ideal form of a particular emotion category (e.g., fear, gratitude).

References

4. What Is a Positive Emotion?


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