

The Place of Emotion in International Relations Scholarship

Written by George E. Marcus

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GEORGE E. MARCUS, OCT 2 2013

The shift to attention on emotion and politics takes us back to the early '80s – a time when the cognitive revolution was well ensconced in both political science and psychology.^[1] When I began with my interest in emotion, the route I took – to derive theoretical and methodological (broadly defined) guidance from neuroscience research on emotion – was then rare. Since that time, the two – emotion as topic, neuroscience as approach – have grown from “what?”, to “cutting edge” to mainstream. Research has grown apace (Brader, Marcus and Miller, 2011) even going so far as to reach economists (Glimcher and Rustichini, 2004). It is worth remarking that in the field of political psychology, a natural home for research on the role of emotion, the earlier handbooks, one from the early 70s (Knutson, 1973) and the other from the mid 80s (Hermann, 1986)^[2] lacked a chapter on emotion and the Hermann volume did not have an entry in the index for either affect or emotion.

For scholars interested in new(ish) opportunities, new variables, new results, it is not then a surprise to find that international relations scholars have embraced the new direction (Mercer, 2006). Scholars have examined the recent Arab uprisings usefully incorporating emotion (Pearlman, 2013). At this summer's Annual Scientific Meeting of the International Society of Political Psychology, two panels focused on emotion and important elements of international relations: the first examined how emotion can account for the support for the use of violence, the second on emotions in reconciliation processes. However, often the attention to emotion is ad hoc, that is, relatively a-theoretical, or implicit (Hafner-Burton, Hughes and Victor, 2013).^[3]

Any encouragement I might offer for further work is merely that. Moreover, the field in various ways makes a focus on emotion obvious. As noted above, interest in the dynamics of violence as well as of reconciliation invites a turn to emotions. Similarly, conditions of amity and hostility, xenophobia and cosmopolitanism, trust in leadership and institutions, factors that stabilize hierarchy and those that undermine it, among many others, all invite consideration of emotion. That, and as adding new factors offers the prospect of new findings, explains the continued growth of research examining emotion. But to improve the “hit rate” on research on emotion let me offer some reflections.

Researchers, begin with a theoretical focus. There have been, broadly, three theoretical traditions. Presented in chronological order: first, the psychoanalytic, most often through the examination of the psyche of political leaders (Erikson, 1958; Langer, 1972; Volkan and Itkowitz, 1984). The second is the cognitive discrete emotion perspective (Ortony and Turner, 1990; Roseman, 1984; Smith, Haynes, Lazarus and Pope, 1993). Here emotion is a dependent variable, largely accounted for by prior cognitive appraisals. The third is the turn to the neuroscientific approach (Marcus, 2013).^[4] No matter the tradition a researcher adopts, there are tasks that await.

To advance some cautions, I shall use the familiar “feeling thermometer” item often used in emotion research to advance some cautions. Feeling thermometer measures typically rely on a 100 point metric. Subjects are asked to apply a temperature analogy – from how hot (liking) to cold (disliking) – while assigning a number to their feeling toward some target of interest, be that a political leader, a group or even a country, or to some policy (say “how would you say you feel about negotiating with [some antagonistic group or nation]?”). The result, a clear metric, has been around for over a half century. Here is how one contemporary advocate of the tool describes her use thereof: “The Feeling Thermometer is one of my favorite tools that we use at FOCUS. It helps kids and parents express how they

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feel. It also assists family members to understand that each person in the family may have different responses to the same event. The Feeling Thermometer provides a common language for families to identify and share feelings.”^[5]

The thermometer offers the advantage of being a single item measure, hence enabling efficient data collection across a wide range of stimulus objects of interest. A scholar is interested in how people feel about going to war, negotiating with the enemy, responding to various national leaders whether ostensibly friendly or hostile, about trusting various international organizations, or NGO's? No problem, just rely on a feeling thermometer for each. But too often scholars do not sufficiently seriously examine the underlying theoretical claims and presumptions on which all measurement approaches rest. So, let's examine how well the feeling thermometer measures meet theoretical and methodological standards.

We use words to name things. However, science puts some restrictions on terms meant to serve science. Scientific terms identify properties that are singular rather than compound. That is, property A is more or less of that property. Of course, in native languages lots of terms have multiple and even conflicting elements. Such lay terms as “justice” contains complexities of meaning and context that feed numerous disputes over what is a just person, institution, society or world (and not just by philosophers). And, many terms in science are derived, often too casually, from lay terms. Hence, emotion became “affect” and thinking “cognition” more to give some semblance of scientific luster than being sufficiently theoretically and methodologically well-grounded.

Does the term “feeling thermometer” meet that standard? Perhaps, but if and only if, people have only a summary singular feeling that ranges from low (feeling very cold, meaning negative) to high (feeling very warm, meaning positive) towards whatever designated target they are asked to assess. Given the then dominant conception of emotion in academic psychology in the 50s, that presumption was plausible. Emotion was then understood as a sort of storage vault for summary evaluations, ‘affect tags’ as it were (Fiske and Taylor, 1991). Here then we have two essential foundational but nonetheless empirical claims. First, that emotion is a valence measure, a single value that ranges from very positive through neutral to very negative. This understanding of emotion then was linked to claims about how humans have a fundamental need to sort out approach strategies from avoidance strategies meant to advance survival (Tooby and Cosmides, 1990). Second, the particular emotion people experienced was thought to be determined by some appraisal mechanism which in turn enabled those appraisals to be retained in memory in reduced form, not as the appraisals that led to the emotion but just the emotion itself. So, for example, a negative event we experienced would generate an emotional reaction but that emotion would depend on an appraisal of whether we, or someone else, is the cause of that event and further, whether the negative event was in public view or hidden. Hence: whether we feel guilt, as opposed to shame, depends on whether we understood the act in question to be caused by us and whether we believe it to be private (unknown to others) or visible (hence our actions seen by others). A then popular approach that encapsulated much of this conception was depicted as “schema theory” (Conover and Feldman, 1984; Lau, 1986; Lodge and Hamill, 1986). In sum, emotion is a simple valence measure that “stores” prior often more complex “cognitive” appraisals (Clore and Ortony, 2008; Ortony, Clore and Collins, 1989).

For some decades these presumptions have been shown to be false. Two studies in particular, both dated in the early 80s, began the collapse of these foundations. First, as to the construct validity of feeling thermometers, studies that contained multiple measures of good (presumably approach) emotion terms and multiple bad (presumably avoid) emotion terms, (Abelson, Kinder, Peters and Fiske, 1982) found that rather than there being but one valence dimension there were two largely orthogonal dimensions (Almagor and Ben-Porath, 1989; Plutchik and Conte, 1997; Russell, 1980; Tellegen, Watson and Clark, 1999; Watson, Clark and Tellegen, 1984; Watson and Tellegen, 1985). Thus the presumption that affective responses to some target, familiar or novel, could be safely measured by a single valence was fundamentally challenged by numerous studies that found that multiple concurrent dimensions are minimally necessary to properly and adequately assess subject's affective responses to target stimuli.^[6] To put the matter more simply, people experience at least two concurrent emotions when they are attendant to any stimulus; we feel both good and bad affective reactions, not good or bad reactions.

In sum, feeling thermometers scales are confounded measures, confounded in two respects. First, people asked to use a feeling thermometer cannot report that they feel both some measure of positive and negative affective

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reactions to political (indeed all) target stimuli. And, second, more recent research has challenged the unity of feeling “negatively” because people report not holistically negative reactions. Even in that seemingly coherently singular domain, that of negative feeling, people experience an admixture of anxiety and aversion to stimuli that have some admixture of risk and uncertainty because our brains differentiate between risk and novelty and generate feelings of aversion to the first, risk, and feelings of anxiety to the second, uncertainty. Feeling thermometers blot out all those differences and demand that subjects offer some summary assessment that is a confluence of these concurrent and multiple affective states. That people readily offer a response when asked how warm or cold they feel to some target does not make that response scientifically meaningful.

Another paper published about the same time (Zajonc, 1980) challenged the other foundational claim, that affective responses are a summary of and responsive to earlier conducted assessments. In that study Zajonc argued that people manifested their preferences, their feelings of liking or disliking, without the involvement of any expressive or implicit reasoning. Innumerable studies since have confirmed that affective responses very early in the chain of neural processing of both internal and external sensory datum. In brief, consciousness is the result of a slow process that culminates around 500 milliseconds after largely electrical signals arrive to the brain (Libet, Wright, Elwood W., Feinstein and Pearl, 1979; Libet, Gleason, Wright and Pearl, 1983; Libet, 1985).^[7] Affective appraisals, on the other hand, are very fast neural processes. They arise no later than 40 – 60 milliseconds after the arrival of sensory information from outside (light, noise, and the like) and information from inside the body (i.e., somatosensory, that is signals from the body), to the brain, that is over 400 milliseconds before consciousness (Öhman, Flykt and Lundquist, 2000; LeDoux, 1992; LeDoux, 1995). Affective responses are appraisals that occur before and inform later neural processes including of course those that are displayed in consciousness (Marcus, 2003; Marcus, 2012).

This insight has led to a shift, only just begun, away from a spatial conception of the relationship between affect and cognition (for example, the frequent assignment of the body as the site for the former and the brain as the site for the latter) to a temporal conception wherein fast, affective processes precede later, slower, and less deft “cognitive” processes (Marcus, 2002).^[8]

This shift turns to the next major theoretical and methodological task: to identify the number and function responsibilities of the fast affective appraisals. At the moment most of the interest has centered on three appraisals: (1) appraisals of the success or failure of familiar routines in obtaining familiar rewards; (2) appraisals of the success or failure of familiar routines in securing valued interests against familiar punishments; and (3) appraisals of the novelty of the contemporary situation. The first is expressed as variation in enthusiasm, the second is expressed as variation in aversion, and the third is expressed as variation in anxiety.^[9] Here I want to close with two points to accelerate progress in emotion research in international relations as well as in other domains of politics. First, further research in the neuroscience of emotion is likely to identify yet other affectively rooted appraisals (Panksepp, 1998; Panksepp and Biven, 2012). Hopefully, pointing that out will accelerate that augmentation. Second, and perhaps more importantly, these multiple concurrent preconscious affective appraisals are mutually engaged so that a research focus on any one must theoretically and methodologically specify the concurrent interplays as well as their disparate and coordinated “downstream” effects of further later affective responses, on modes of thought and of action. Examining any one affect response in isolation is risking the production of under- and mis-specified results. Hopefully these cautions will not discourage. I offer them to improve the benefit we can all obtain from research yet to come.

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^[1] Soon thereafter some important work was done by, among others, Conover and Feldman (1986) as well as Sullivan and Masters (1988).

^[2] A lapse since rectified by most recent field overviews (Sears, Huddy and Jervis, 2003; Huddy, Sears and Levy, 2013).

[3] Though see Sabucedo, Rodríguez, Durán and Alzate (2011) as a counter example of research based on a relatively full informed theoretical foundation.

[4] For a fuller history see Marcus (2000) or Cornelius (1996).

[5] From: <http://www.focusproject.org/focus-on/the-feeling-thermometer>

^[6]

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For the 80s the provisional conclusion was that two dimensions, one “positive”, the other “negative”, were minimally necessary. An alternative conception, one achieved by rotating the dimensions 45 degrees, argued for “valence” and “arousal”, was advanced largely by Prof. James Russell (Russell et al., 1980; Russell, A. and Carroll, 1999). In the 90s and since, with the emergence of aversion (or, anger), the “negative” domain, once thought to be coherent, has split into two contrary domains, anxiety marking the unexpected and novel as distinct from aversion which marks the familiar and punishing (Marcus, MacKuen, Wolak and Keele, 2006). This then leaves us with a minimal set of three concurrent affective responses as being the most common experience subjects report, if enabled by the measures available, to political stimuli.

^[7] All senses, but for the olfactory, convert input (e.g., light reaching the retina cells, sound waves moving the little bones in our ears) to electricity, as are somato-sensory inputs. Our bodies have nerves that convert tension in the tendons and muscles as a function of movement and resistance to electricity that converge to the spine and hence to brain so that the brain knows what’s happening “out there” in the body. Hormones also serve this communication function as well.

[8] Psychoanalytic accounts, for example, hold to a spatial arrangement of its division of neural domains, with the superego, ego, and id being arrayed above and below one another (for example, the id being “subconscious” i.e., below the other two).

^[9] These are the foundations of the theory of affective intelligence though other scholars have explored them as well.

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