



Nature of Emotions ^[1]

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In order to have deep understanding of the nature of emotions, one must look for answers to the "Five Perennial Questions of Emotion" that was formulated by John Marshall Reeve (2009).

The "Five Perennial Questions" must be addressed to improve one's knowledge of the nature of emotions. These include:

1. What is an emotion?
2. What causes an emotion?
3. How many emotions are there?
4. What is good with the emotions?
5. What is the difference between emotion and mood?

Let's discuss them one by one.

1. What is an Emotion?

Merriam-Webster ^[3] defines emotion as a conscious and subjective mental reaction toward a particular event and is usually accompanied by changes in the physiologic and behavioural aspects of a person. From this definition, we can deduce that an emotion has four components, namely: cognitive ^[4] reactions, physiological reactions, behavioural reactions and affect. Cognitive reactions refer to a person's memory, thinking and perception of an event. Physiological reactions are primarily caused by changes in the hormonal levels in the body. On the other hand, behavioural reactions comprise the active expression of the emotion. Lastly, affect includes the positive or negative state of the emotion and is what makes an emotion a conscious and subjective experience.

Let's use a scenario to clearly discuss these aspects of emotion. Suppose you are watching a scary television show alone late at night. You see the physical form of the antagonist and you think he is so scary and spooky (cognitive reaction). Because of this thinking, your face shows fear towards the character (affect). The character runs after the protagonist, and you feel your heart beating fast (physiological reaction) and you cover your eyes with your hands in fear (behavioural reaction).

2. What Causes an Emotion?

There are several theories that provide explanations regarding the origin and process of emotions and what causes them. These theories use the concepts of emotional arousal, physiological responses and/or the subjective perception/interpretation of the event in formulating hypotheses on emotions and their causes. In the early theories of emotion, there is a distinction between cognition and biological responses as the causes of emotions, as explained in the James-Lange Theory [5] and the Cannon-Bard Theory [6]. On the other hand, there are theories that use two-systems view approach, such as the Schachter-Singer Theory [7]. Having a sound knowledge of these theories provides a better understanding of the theoretical causes of emotions.

3. How Many Emotions are There?

As defined, emotion is a subjective experience. There are over 7 billion humans on Earth, and each one of us experiences different kinds of emotions. For this reason, there is no clear answer as to the exact number of emotions and its types. Robert Plutchik (1980) states that there are eight basic emotions, which include: anger, fear, sadness, disgust, surprise, anticipation, trust and joy. Many theorists also believe that the mixture of two or more emotions yields another kind of emotion, also known as a secondary emotion. For instance, anger and disgust might lead to contempt. There is probably no "correct" answer to how many emotions there are: It depends on how you think about emotions.

4. What is Good with Emotions?

The fourth perennial question inquires about the function of emotions. According to Kennedy, Moore & Watson, emotions play three important roles in the lives of humans. First, emotions are needed for adaptation and survival. Happiness and trust motivate a person to perform at his best, while fear and disgust make a person vigilant to danger. Second, emotions influence a person on how he perceives the world. Thus, emotions have a regulatory function. Third, emotions help people communicate their needs, wants and feelings to others.

5. What is the Difference Between Emotion and Mood?

"Emotion" and "mood" are two words that are mistakenly used interchangeably. One of the differences between the two lies on their time course. Emotions are generally short-lived, whereas moods are often long-lived. Another difference is that emotions may be expressed (and are easier to express) while moods may not be expressed due to the lack of perception/understanding of the stimulus.

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[3] <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/emotion>

[4] <https://staging.explorables.com/cognitive-learning-theory>

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