Ekman’s Paradox and a Naturalistic Strategy to Escape From It

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ABSTRACT

The purposes of this paper are two: first of all, to show that blind-following of a oversimplistic model of emotions like happens with Ekman’s one is a bad situation for contemporary researchers from different disciplines. The author has called this situation, the Ekman’s paradox; at the same time, the complexity and divergence of ideas, concepts, methodologies and evidences among emotion researchers makes difficult to obtain the necessary agreement to facilitate future researches. Consequently, and this is the second purpose of this text is to define an unique and very specific emotion, pain, as a fulcrum from which to start to define a clear map of emotions. Pain has been chosen due to its specific and unique hardwired body mechanisms as well as a universal agreement among experts about its primordiality. Changing a word to make this explicit, one can have a new start point for the understanding of emotions: dolet, ergo sum.

Keywords: Basic Emotions, Ekman, Hardwired, Mechanism, Naturalization, Noxious, Pain, Paradox

1. EKMAN’S PARADOX AS “MONKEY SEE, MONKEY DO EFFECT”

As expert in the natural or artificial cognitive aspects of emotions I am continuously involved into research duties like reading, editing or reviewing other colleagues work. Last years I’ve been exposed to a great number of studies that suffer from the same problem: something I’ve called the Ekman’s paradox. This implies two things: first of all, a complete disinterest on to explain which do are basic emotions and how they interact (their syntax); secondly, to accept uncritically Ekman’s six basic emotions model (Ekman, 1992): happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise and disgust. Nevertheless, this model could be replaced by some others not so fashionable within research community and it would follow the same rules. The cause of this paradox is very simple: the debate among experts on emotions is intense and most of people who apply this oversimplified model are engineers, programmers or applied scientists who need an easy model to work with. (Some of) Ekman’s ideas make easy any approach to

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the implementation of emotional models into computers, robots or even to study human behavior. This is used without critical understanding about the delicacies of cross-cultural and physio neurological aspects of emotions, which are extremely relevant for the contextual and limited validity of Ekman’s model as well as of other famous researcher’s models (Tracy & Randles, 2011; Vallverdú, 2013).

Because of these reasons, and it is nothing related to the necessary principle or parsimony, Ekman’s paradox is extremely disseminated among people who work with emotions, in a homeostatic process close to the notion of “monkey see, monkey do”, without anything of the critic spirit that could be expected from university or industry researchers. In the next section I’ll make an overview on the problems on emotion classifications.

2. CONCEPTUAL AND TAXONOMICAL DISAGREEMENTS ON EMOTIONS

Despite of the overall extended, positive reinstated and updated use of the notion of “emotion” into scientific and humanistic studies, there is still an unconceivable lack of agreement about its meaning as well as their conceptual contents. Do basic emotions exist? If so, how many do we can identify? Are some of them primary, secondary or tertiary? That should be a core set of natural emotions from which other more complex and social evolved, can be easily accepted…but which ones?

Something probable, from an evolutionary point of view and existing evidences is that some basic emotions should be at the basis of the complex set of emotions. But even in this case...what is an emotion? A feeling, some special kind of body or brain information, one black box qualia?

If we look to Ortony and Turner (1990) we can look at the several suggestions of basic emotions (updated by Vallverdú, 2013) as seen in Table 1.

There is is an open battlefield with no clear solution. Hedmaji et al (2000) indicate that the oldest treatise on performing arts ans document in which is established a theory of emotions is the Hindu Natyasastra, from 1st to 2nd Century A.D. There were listed) primary emotions, despite of the fact that some of them could not be included into ‘emotions’ by Western theories. If we consider more possible details going beyond the idea of “basic emotions”, then the debate is huge and fuzzy, and more when we introduce the notions of primary/secondary/tertiary emotions (Parrot, 2011) as seen in Table 2.

It is also true that some evolutionary, or psycho-evolutionary approaches have been done, like see Plutchik 1980, for example, that has offered evidences towards several levels of emotion activity/modulation, like Figure 1.

Emotions can be also considered not only affective states but also dimensional states with valence/arousal/intensity variables, being some of them multidimensional (“pleasurable versus unpleasurable”, “arousing or subduing” and “strain or relaxation” (Wundt); “pleasantness–unpleasantness”, “attention–rejection” and “level of activation” (Schlosberg)) or two-dimensional (circumplex model, the vector model, and the Positive Activation – Negative Activation (PANA) model).

Finally, their cultural meaning and mechanism interference/guide is completely demonstrated. As Nesse (2009:129) points: “emotions are modes of functioning, shaped by natural selection, that coordinate physiological, cognitive, motivational, behavioural and subjective responses in patterns that increase the ability to meet the adaptive challenges of situations”. After her anthropological studies of Ifaluk (Southwest Pacific), Lutz (1988), p. 5 added: “emotional experience is not pre-cultural but preeminently cultural”. Emotions such as Tocka (Russian: great spiritual anguish, often without any specific cause; ache of soul, a longing with nothing to long for), the Schadenfreude (German: the pleasure derived from someone else’s pain), saudade (Portuguese: somewhat melancholic feeling of incompleteness; longing for something that might never return), aware
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