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From Appraisal to Emotion

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Abstract

For appraisal to be a likely cause of automatically elicited emotions, we not only need to account for how appraisals can occur automatically, but also how emotional experience can follow from appraised meaning in an automatic fashion. The simplest way to construe this is to assume that emotional feeling directly reflects the appraised meaning and its implications. Emotional feeling should be distinguished from verbally categorizing and labeling the experience, however, for understanding the relationship between appraisals and emotion terms.

Keywords
appraisal, appraisal–emotion relationships, individual differences

Moors' analysis provides both a conceptually solid and empirically-based argument that appraisal can occur automatically and is therefore a likely cause of (automatically elicited) emotion. As a complement to this analysis, I argue it is equally important to devote our thinking to how appraisal information in turn is combined to determine the emotion. As Moors' summary of appraisal theories' purpose and contribution emphasizes, appraisal theories assume two "steps" in the generation of emotions: the appraisal of the stimulus or situation on a number of appraisal dimensions and the mapping of combinations of such appraised meanings to the experience of particular emotions (see also, Kuppens, Van Mechelen, & Rijmen, 2008; Moors, 2009). In essence, Moors' analysis concerns only the first process: how appraisal themselves can be constructed automatically (e.g., Moors, 2010, p. 152 below; although it is in the text sometimes confounded with the second step, e.g., p. 149; also the empirical overview only targets the automatic construction of appraisal). By the same token, for appraisals to be likely causes of automatically elicited emotions, it is additionally necessary to consider how appraisals are combined or integrated automatically, resulting in a particular emotional feeling to arise and be experienced.

One possible proposal would be to conjecture processes that somehow "calculate" the emotion from the available appraisal information, based on intricate mapping rules or functions between appraisal (combinations) and particular emotions which then have to be proven to also be possible in an automatic fashion. A more elegant, and far simpler, solution, however, lies in proposing that experienced feelings directly reflect the experienced pattern of appraised meaning, and the associated core affect, motivational and autonomous changes it implies. What else is feeling angry than feeling frustrated, blaming someone or something for it, and feeling energy to retaliate? From this perspective, emotional experience is viewed as a monitoring system that alerts the organism of relevant changes in appraised meaning, and guides associated changes in other systems that are required to take action in response to them (Frijda, 2007; Scherer, 2009).

However, how people feel should be distinguished from how people verbally label their experiences into categories such as fear, anger, and happiness. Appraisals can be combined into an almost infinite number of ways to produce finely nuanced differently experienced feeling states, yet we only use a comparatively small number of verbal labels to communicate them. Labeling emotional feelings can, in principle, result from the two kinds of processes also proposed by Moors: a constructive one performed on the input of multiple emotion components that results in a label to be attached to the experience, or a non-constructive retrieval process in which the pattern of emotion components (as a single input) is associated in memory with a certain emotion label. We can assume that initially a constructive process must be engaged or learned (through experience, cultural learning, etc.) to attach a certain emotional label to a particular appraisal combination and its associated feeling quality. At later stages, these associations may, however, become automatically associated with certain verbal categorizations, at least for experiences that are prevalent or salient in a person's life (thus giving rise to each individual's unique way of verbally construing their emotional life). Often, however, in the socially ambiguous life that we live, the person is required to make emotional sense from how he or she appraises an event, and construct the categorization from the available external and

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internal information (Barrett, Mesquita, Ochsner, & Gross, 2007). People make up personal decision rules about how to label and communicate their feelings in response to certain events, rely on what they see in others' responses to similar events, or sometimes even do not know at all what to call their feeling ("I don't know what I should feel in response to this"; when, for instance, confronted with an unfair situation that is advantageous, should one feel guilt, anger, or happiness?). This explains why individuals differ in the emotion labels that are reported in combination with certain appraisal patterns. There are no one-to-one mapping rules between appraisal patterns and reported emotions (Kuppens, Van Mechelen, Smits, De Boeck, & Ceulemans, 2007; Parkinson, 1999). This flexibility may vary, however. Some, mostly highly prototypical appraisal profiles may be associated with the same emotion label in everyone (e.g., Van Mechelen & Hennes, 2009), but for most of the appraisal sense we make of our world, there may be far less consistency in terms of what emotion term is being associated with it.

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