

Descriptive and Prescriptive Definitions of Emotion

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Abstract

Izard (2010) did not seek a descriptive definition of emotion—one that describes the concept as it is used by ordinary folk. Instead, he surveyed scientists' prescriptive definitions—ones that prescribe how the concept should be used in theories of emotion. That survey showed a lack of agreement today and thus raised doubts about emotion as a useful scientific concept.

Keywords

definition, emotion

Izard (2010) revisited the perennial question of the definition of the word *emotion*. The word *emotion* names both an everyday concept and a scientific one. The distinction between these two uses of the same word leads us to distinguish a descriptive definition from a prescriptive one. By “descriptive definition,” we mean a definition of the word *emotion* as it is used in everyday life. By “prescriptive definition,” we mean a definition of the scientific concept that is used to pick out the set of events that a scientific theory of emotion purports to explain. This distinction raises three questions about the definition of emotion.

First, what is a good descriptive definition of the everyday concept of emotion? Having the concept of emotion—like the concept of soul, will, or mind—guides a person's thoughts, actions, and experiences. Discovering a good descriptive definition is an important goal. Lexicographers, linguists, historians, anthropologists, philosophers, and social and developmental psychologists have contributed to achieving that goal. Their job is to figure out how ordinary folk—adults and children—in various societies understand the concept of emotion or its closest equivalent in another language. Wierzbicka's (1999) extensive work illustrates this quest. This was not Izard's goal.

Second, what is a good prescriptive definition for a scientific concept of emotion? When scientists propose hypotheses about the set of events they call emotion, we need to know what

events those are. What's included and what's excluded? Is that set the most useful way scientists can divide nature? Science is a social enterprise, and we need a prescriptive definition that is consensual. Izard surveyed current prescriptive definitions, but did not find a consensus.

Third, what is the relation between the everyday concept and the scientific concept of emotion? There are at least three possible relations: (1) ordinary folk come to alter their concepts to align with science, as when the folk concept of fish formerly included but later excluded whales and dolphins; (2) folk concepts may play a causal role in the experience of emotion and must therefore be taken into account in the scientific concept; (3) scientists began their study of emotion with the folk concept used as their scientific concept, and many continue to do so. This last relation is the central issue raised by Izard's study and the one we pursue in the remainder of our comment.

Science often begins with everyday concepts and assumptions (plane geometry was based on the assumption that the earth is flat). As science progresses, however, the original concepts and assumptions can change or even disappear. For example, when ancient people exerted force, they felt muscular strain as they pushed or pulled. This feeling of strain was central to the concept of force in ancient physics. Jammer (1957) described the slow and jagged path that the concept of force traveled from its origin in everyday thought through a series of scientific proposals and then to its role in modern physics. Over that history, the word *force* covered a variety of phenomena, and some theorists called for abandoning the concept. In modern science, *force* remains, but is understood in a way qualitatively different from its origin. A different fate is seen in the concept of constellation. When ancient people in different parts of the world looked at the night sky, they saw constellations of stars. Early astronomers studied constellations, and the concept of a constellation remained central to astronomy for centuries. But, constellation is not a scientific concept in modern astronomy.

Emotion researchers disagree about the proper relation of the everyday concept to the scientific concept of emotion. At

one end of a continuum is Harré's (1986) argument that the scientist should, or even must, adopt the everyday concept. In the middle are emotion researchers who suppose that the scientist can stray from the everyday concept, but not too far. At the opposite end of this continuum is Duffy's (1941) position that the science of emotion should no longer use *emotion* as a scientific term. Echoing Duffy, Russell (1991) argued that the everyday concept of emotion is a culture-specific, fuzzy, heterogeneous, family resemblance cluster. Thus, a descriptive definition does not provide a good prescriptive definition. *Emotion* can be treated as a non-technical chapter title, but given no serious scientific work to do. Scientists need not, and should not, be restricted to the boundaries and assumptions implied in folk psychology.

Where does the scientific community stand today on this issue? Izard's (2010) interaction with a small set of emotion researchers led him to conclude that the word *emotion* "has no generally accepted definition" (p. 370) within science. Asked about the future of the concept of emotion, 26 scientists disagreed with one another, but on average agreed more than disagreed with statements that the concept of emotion is

ambiguous, that it has no status in science, and that it should be abandoned. The tide is rising on Duffy's position.

On one point, we disagree with Izard. He proposed using the concepts of "interest, joy, sadness, anger, fear, shame, guilt" (p. 370) and other specific emotions as scientific concepts. We anticipate that these concepts too will share a similar scientific fate to that of force or constellation.

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