
Basic Emotions, Flexible Aggression, and Angry Motivation

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Abstract

There is a widespread view that the evolved mechanisms responsible for basic emotions like anger can only explain certain dimensions of an emotional response. The mechanisms for coordinating basic emotional responses, affect programs, are thought to explain only reflexlike behavior sequences, such as involuntary facial expressions of emotions like anger, and not goal-directed motivations like Frijda's action-tendencies. This hypothesized limitation on the mechanisms for basic emotions cannot accommodate the empirical evidence. I introduce a set of innate behavioral adaptations for conspecific aggression in rats that nonetheless include flexible, goal-directed forms of behavior adjustment. I argue that this undermines the claim that affect programs cannot include goal-directed behavior sequences. I point out further experimental data on human anger, which shows that anger includes a corresponding form of aggressive motivation. In conclusion, I consider how basic emotion theory fares if basic emotions are to include goal-directed motivations. Such a possibility comports well with its commitment to universal emotion antecedents and its focus on fundamental life tasks such as those involving conspecific aggression and modelled by game theoretic analyses of resource competition.

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