New Ideas in Psychology 50 (2018) 6–20

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

New Ideas in Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/newideapsych

Emotional strength: A response type, response disposition and organizing principle for emotion experience

Sharon Faye*, Joel Hooper

Sharon Faye Foundation Ltd, 1/420 Bagot Road, Subiaco, Western Australia, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Emotional strength
Feeling
Emotion
Action
Vulnerability
Emotional responsiveness

ABSTRACT

This paper presents 'Emotional Strength' as a response type, a response disposition and an organizing principle for responding to emotional life. Emotional strength is defined as 'the ability to respond in an open and vulnerable way in the face of intense emotional experience, feeling one's way deeper into the emotion which allows access to implicit functional processes driving action'. We present four hallmarks of emotional strength: (i) openness and vulnerability (ii) emotional responsiveness (iii) self-description using vulnerability-related words (iv) continuing engagement in action. Emotional strength is distinguished from psychological constructs such as mindfulness, emotion regulation, emotion-approach coping, resilience, emotional intelligence, emotion-focused therapy and acceptance and commitment therapy. It is not the point of emotional strength to turn a negative into a positive experience. The skill is to feel deeply into all emotion experience, opening up vulnerability and emotional responsiveness and to change the way emotion is understood in everyday life.

1. Introduction

Of the number of fundamental changes that signalled the beginning of the modern period, it has been argued that central among these were an increased sensitivity to suffering and an affirmation of the importance of 'ordinary' life (Taylor, 1989). These two features of modern life combine to place great impetus on some concept that is contrary to suffering and that can be applied in ordinary life — this place usually being occupied by the notions 'happiness', 'flourishing', or 'well-being'. But unfortunately, there are a series of related asymmetries between the negative and the positive in this context, that render the predicate 'contrary to suffering' highly problematic.

While the concept of suffering seems to have clear and relatively unproblematic content, the positive concepts of happiness or well-being do not. Their content, if they have any at all, is vague, elusive and controversial. In its ordinary usage, happiness tends to play the role of what Jonathan Lear has termed an 'enigmatic signifier', to designate whatever it is that people "don't yet have, what they are longing for, that which they have just lost and would like again" (Lear, 2000, p. 23).[1] The lack of content of these terms also connects with the lack of agreed positive psychological outcomes in psychological research — consider for example the major difficulties presented to the coping field by the question of how to assess the effectiveness of different coping strategies (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Somerfield & McCrae, 2000; Weber, 1997). Positive evaluative terms such as happiness have a sense of open-endedness that suffering lacks – there is always a possibility that humans can discover something better or more worthwhile for our lives than what we thought was the best available (or for that matter a possibility that what we thought was the best available has hitherto unseen consequences that render it much less good than we had originally thought).

This lack of determinant content in well-being and related concepts makes them unlikely to be very successful as guides to practical conduct (Haybron, 2008). In fact, one-sided focus on pursuing positive states and feelings is likely to be counterproductive by leading to a range of problematic symptoms resulting from denial, avoidance or suppression of unpleasant emotions (a varied literature explores this idea, see for example Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012; Zautra, 2003).

An alternative to seeking a single concept that is contrary to suffering in the guidance of practical conduct is to look for high-level principles that are genuinely action-guiding. Such a principle should reliably produce outcomes that are consistent with the networks of concerns of the agents themselves as well as the network of concerns of their society at large (at least when those social concerns are just; the

* Corresponding author. Sharon Faye Foundation, Ground Floor, 1/420 Bagot Road, Subiaco, Western Australia 6008, Australia.
E-mail address: sharonf@sharonfayefoundation.com.au (S. Faye).

[1] Psychologists have given happiness as 'subjective well-being' a determinate content but most, if not all, acknowledge that the greatest balance of self-reported frequency of positive affect over negative affect plus self-reported satisfaction with life is not all there is to an ideal life (e.g. Diener, Sapyta, & Suh, 1998; Diener & Scollon, 2003; see also discussions in; Haybron, 2008; Sumner, 1996).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.newideapsych.2018.02.002
Received 23 January 2017; Received in revised form 9 January 2018; Accepted 22 February 2018

Table 1
Factors shaping action.

Action shaping factor	Example
Situational context	A family member comments in front of other family members "you're so serious now, you used to make us laugh, we want the old you back"
Ability to feel and tolerate feelings and sensations and their associations and meanings	The subject feels humiliated and is not able to feel the humiliation fully, resulting in an action tendency to change that feeling
Present to psychological capacity/coexisting stressors	The subject is reminded of past experiences when she felt humiliated in response to her family's comments and felt ostracised. She becomes internally critical and hears the words "you will never be free", "you will never be able to stand up for yourself with your family"
Secondary feelings and attitudes about the primary emotion	The subject doesn't want to feel the humiliation and feels ashamed of it; she wants the humiliation to go away and this leads to thoughts that she will never be able to achieve her goal - using absolute language digs a deeper hole
Established practical dispositions	The subject is used to adhering to family norms to relieve the tension and 'lighten up'. The action produces the expected result and positive reinforcement: the family is relieved but the subject feels disappointed internally and didn't achieve the goal of independence and confidence
Values	A sense of belonging is more important to the subject and adheres to family norms sacrificing a personal goal of independence and developing confidence within the family of origin so she has a voice

same principles should allow unjust and prejudicial concerns within a society to be challenged). In this paper we introduce the notion 'emotional strength' as a contribution to research into principles of this kind in the conduct of practical life.[2]

Emotional strength is a way of responding to emotion experience that differs from other emotion-related terms in the affect literature. Its primary difference is that it refers to feeling one's way deeper into the emotion during an emotion episode that is imbued with an experience of emotional vulnerability rather than being grounded in attention or cognitions about emotions. Emotional strength can also be used in a dispositional sense, as a stable tendency to this type of response to emotion experience. Finally, as well as naming a type of actual response and response disposition, emotional strength can also assume the role of an organizing principle for practical conduct. This is well illustrated by Schore:

> Instead of rationalising the pain or avoiding the risk … I became aware that I just needed to allow myself to deflate and sink deeper into the momentary defeat. That became helpful to me. In other words, I allowed myself to experience not only the accelerating high arousal play states, but also the decelerating low arousal painful deflations. And I found that implicit processes, other than my conscious mind would operate down there, and when they had run their course I'd come back up and continue forward. These experiences highlighted the fact that the ability to tolerate both positive and negative emotions was a fundamental aspect of emotional growth and development (2014, p.14).

But before we begin our discussion of emotional strength, we briefly signpost a few fixed points in emotion theory that contemporary researchers have found compelling. This we hope will clear the conceptual space for seeing the importance of a research focus on *active response* to emotion experience, and for the discussion of emotional strength that follows.

2. Clearing the conceptual space for emotional strength

In this work we will refer predominantly to emotion episodes, among the numerous other types of affect, for a number of reasons.[3] Emotion episodes are, to many, the paradigm cases of emotion experience. Emotion episodes are the most phenomenally salient of emotion-related phenomena, and thus have the greatest potential for influence on action. Emotion episodes provide a workable unit (however variable and at times difficult to delimit) of emotion experience, which is important for theoretical and empirical research, as well as ordinary understanding of emotions. Furthermore, emotion dispositions are manifest, and thus known, by the actual emotion episodes from which dispositions are inferred.

The term 'emotion episodes' can be somewhat misleading because it carries with it suggestion of the classical view of emotion that we are hard-wired to react in certain ways (a defining 'fingerprint' of emotion) to specific kinds of situations through particular circuits in the brain that correspond with our everyday emotion words (Feldman Barrett, 2017). There is considerable evidence that emotions are much more complex than this and are made up of a mix of basic feelings or sensations together with cultural and personal meaning patterns in situational context that have been learned since birth and that commonly differ between cultures (Feldman Barrett, 2017). Emotion episodes represent our learned, split-second and usually non-reflexive associations of meaning to complex constellations of feelings with situational context, social patterns and our personal histories. Sometimes we have everyday words for these constellations, sometimes we don't and in those moments we struggle to put our feelings into words. Accordingly, we apply a model of emotion episodes as dynamic 'emotion constellations' that arise in specific interactions of people and situations as they move through their environment. Emotion dispositions are tendencies of a person to enter into a specific constellation in a specific kind of situation.

These factors that make up the constellation in an emotion episode include (a) the social and other features of the situational context (e.g. learnt meaning associations to situation archetypes, affordances for action) in which the emotion arises, (b) the tolerance of the subject of the emotion to feelings and sensations, (c) the presence of other co-existing psychological stressors such as momentary cognitive load, (d) the secondary attitudes and emotions of the subject *about* the primary emotion, (e) the practical dispositions such as learned habitual behaviors, abilities and action patterns, and (f) concerns, commitments, and values of the subject of the emotion (see Table 1; cf. Frijda, 2009, Scherer, 2009). This account of emotion shares many features of the model described by Feldman Barrett (2017), however the practical consequences drawn from it in the concept of emotional strength are quite different.

While this account of emotion differs from the classical view of emotion in its explanation of what emotions are, it nevertheless respects the three key experiential features of emotion episodes that contemporary researchers have found compelling. We will briefly outline (a) their involuntariness in the moment; (b) their intentionality (meaning, 'object-directedness') and, related, their functionality; and

[2] This description of 'organizing principles' will sound to some readers like 'a virtue' (for a contemporary account, see Peterson & Seligman, 2004). But there are some differences between organizing principles as we used them and virtues, so we will stick with the terms 'organizing principle' and 'organizing heuristic' here.

[3] For a summary of emotion terms, we refer the reader to an appendix to this paper available for download at www.sharonfayefoundation.com.au; see also Hooper and Faye (2009).