



Cognitive Explanations of Emotion

This Factsheet examines explanations of emotion from a cognitive perspective. It should be read in conjunction with Factsheet 202, which examines explanations of emotion from a biological perspective. The factsheet includes examiner comments, and the worksheet gives you the opportunity to apply what you have learned to exam-style questions. Words in bold are explained in the glossary.

The examiner will expect you to be able to:

- Discuss cognitive processes associated with emotion.
- Provide research evidence to support cognitive explanations of emotion.
- Critically evaluate cognitive explanations of emotion.
- Discuss the interaction of biological and cognitive factors in emotion.

A. Introduction



Emotion is a feeling, usually linked to an experience. Emotions are based on individual perceptions and are therefore subjective. You and I might both have a shared experience but the emotional response that each of us has is likely to be different. Cognitive explanations suggest that emotion is based on cognitive processes such as thought, memory, and perception. These cognitive processes are affected by individual experience, therefore influencing the different emotional responses each of us may have.

Exam Hint: Make sure you are familiar with both cognitive and physiological explanations of emotion. Understand their separate influences as well as the ways they interact.

B. Appraisal Theory

An appraisal is a process of judgment and evaluation. Lazarus suggested that we judge and evaluate our experiences based on whether they seem beneficial or harmful. This explanation is therefore known as the **appraisal theory** of emotion. This is a cognitive explanation because our judgments are based on perceptions and memories of previous experiences, both cognitive processes. Interpretations carry a **cognitive bias** because they are the result of individual preferences and previously held beliefs, often regardless of information about the current situation, and therefore may be contradictory. Appraisals may be made consciously or unconsciously and consist of both primary and secondary processes.



Primary appraisal

The significance of the situation is evaluated in terms of its:

- **Motivational relevance** – if the situation is relevant then emotion is triggered. If it is not relevant, no emotion is experienced.
- **Motivational congruence** – favourable situations trigger positive emotion while unfavourable situations trigger negative emotion.

- **Accountability** – appraisal of who is responsible for the situation which may trigger positive or negative emotion accordingly.

Secondary appraisal

The consequences of the situation are evaluated in order to decide on one of the following actions:

- **Problem-focused coping:** involves altering the situation to make it less harmful to the individual and therefore easier to cope with.
- **Emotion-focused coping:** involves changing how an individual feels about the situation (sometimes called **reframing** or **reinterpreting**) in order to make it easier to cope with the situation.
- **Future expectancy:** involves making a prediction about the extent to which an individual expects the situation to change. This may also trigger emotion.



Examiner Comment: Higher band candidates provide details about the different processes involved in primary and secondary appraisal.

C. Supporting Research

Speisman et al. (1964) carried out research with the aim of demonstrating the influence of appraisal on emotion. Participants were shown a film depicting Aboriginal boys undergoing ritual circumcision during puberty. They measured arousal using galvanic skin response and asked participants to report on their experiences of watching the film. Three different conditions were manipulated and compared with a control group.



- Condition 1: trauma. Emphasis was placed on the use of the knife and the pain the boys experienced during circumcision.
- Condition 2: denial. Emphasis was placed on the boy's happiness during the ritual, which signified their transition to adulthood.
- Condition 3: intellectualization. Emphasis was placed on the importance of traditions in aboriginal culture but ignored emotional aspects of circumcision.
- Condition 4: control group. Participants watched the film in silence with no manipulation by the researchers.

Based on **galvanic skin response** and self-reports, participants reacted with more emotion to the trauma condition, where the pain the boys experienced during circumcision was emphasized. Participants reacted with least emotion to the intellectualization and control conditions, where emotional aspects of circumcision were ignored. Researchers concluded that differences in emotional response are based on appraisal of the situation.

Exam Hint: Remember to support your answers with research evidence but stay focused and avoid lengthy descriptions. Outline the study, focusing on its findings and conclusions and state how they link to the themes of the question.

D. Opponent-Process Theory

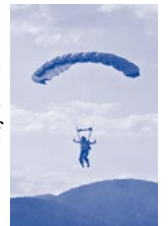
An alternative cognitive explanation of emotion is the **opponent-process theory**. This is based on the idea that our emotions can be categorized in opposing pairs, such as love and hate, pleasure and pain, happy and sad. The theory suggests that when one emotion in a pair is triggered, its opposite is suppressed, because we can't feel happy and sad at the same time. But maybe we can... According to the opponent-process theory, one emotion does trigger its opposite, but rather than suppress it, they exist as an interacting pair. This theory can be used to explain thrill-seeking behaviour. Imagine you are taking a roller-coaster ride. You might experience fear as the ride makes its first ascent, followed by relief as it descends. This might result in feeling scared and relieved at the same time as the opposing emotion is triggered before the first emotion has subsided. Experiencing two opposing emotions simultaneously can be confusing but in the short-term it can feel exciting. The opponent-process theory can be used to explain addiction. Addictive behaviour creates a positive emotion such as elation, which is followed by a negative emotion, such as withdrawal or guilt. To suppress this, the addicted behaviour is repeated in an effort to suppress the negative emotion.



Exam Hint: In order to develop your understanding of opponent-process theory; try applying it to real life examples you are familiar with.

E. Supporting Research

Solomon and Corbit (1974) compared the emotions of skydivers. They found that people taking part in their first skydive experienced high levels of fear followed by enormous relief on landing safely. The more the experience was repeated, the less fear was experienced during the jump and the greater the pleasure on landing. So, there was a relationship between fear of jumping and pleasure on landing which could be viewed as a **negative correlation**. According to the opponent-process model, the skydiver's emotional response is the result of a shift over time from fear to pleasure in the fear-pleasure emotion pair.



F. Conclusion

Research supports a psychological basis of emotion. However, if emotion were purely psychological, there would be no role for biological aspects, which have been suggested by alternative researchers. It is important, therefore, to evaluate each psychological study and theory presented in terms of both its strengths and limitations and to also consider the way that psychological and physiological factors interact to influence emotion.

Glossary

Accountability: process of primary appraisal, which involves appraisal of who is responsible for the experience.

Appraisal theory: cognitive explanation of emotion suggested by Lazarus, which suggests that individuals appraise a situation according to whether it seems beneficial or harmful.

Cognitive bias: basing interpretations on previous experience and beliefs regardless of contrary information.

Emotion-focused coping: changing how an individual feels about the situation to make it easier to cope.

Future expectancy: prediction about how the situation might change.

Galvanic skin response: a test that measures arousal linked with high emotion, such as increased heart rate and perspiration.

Motivational congruence: process of primary appraisal, which involves appraisal of the favourability of the experience.

Motivational relevance: process of primary appraisal, which involves appraisal of the relevance of the experience.

Negative correlation: relationship between two variables; as one increases the other decreases.

Opponent-process theory: cognitive explanation of emotion that suggests one emotion triggers its opposite and the two interact.

Primary appraisal: consists of three processes; motivational relevance, motivational congruence, and accountability.

Problem-focused coping: altering the situation to make it easier to cope.

Reframing: altering the way a situation is perceived (see also reinterpreting).

Reinterpreting: altering the way a situation is perceived (see also reframing).

Secondary appraisal: evaluation of the situation in order to decide what action to take, e.g. problem-focused or emotion-focused coping.

