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How Can One Piece Together Emotion when a Crucial Piece Is Missing?

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Abstract

Attempts to explain emotion typically emphasize the interaction of evolutionary and socialization processes. However, in describing this interplay the role of the person is typically underemphasized or unaccounted for. This paper lays out empirical and theoretical rationale for considering the person as a major contributor to emotion generation and development.

Keywords
bidirectional influences, emotion, emotional development, evolution, socialization

We applaud Parkinson's depiction of a reciprocal interweaving of phylogenesis and socialization in the construction of emotion; however, his thesis excludes a central piece necessary for "piecing together emotion." That piece is the role that the person himself or herself plays in constructing emotions.

The Individual in Nonsocial Contexts of Emotional Development

Consider the social smile. It is an example, par excellence, of how the smile is more than the outcome of biology interweaving with social experience. Such smiles are crucial in the formation of reciprocal bonds between baby and caregiver. Typically emerging at 4–8 weeks of age, the social smile comes about by perceptual differentiation wherein the infant discriminates a face-like gestalt from surrounding perceptual noise by exposure of the face when the child is held while feeding (Watson, 1973). Further development of the social smile is multiply determined as the infant and caregiver engage in reciprocal social interactions. Consistent with Parkinson's view of an intrinsic interweaving of biology and socialization, biological factors play an important role in the social smile. The onset of the social smile is partially under genetic control, being more similar in age of onset in monozygotic than dizygotic twins (Freedman, 1974), and is also a function of gestational age, emerging at around 44–45 weeks postconception (Anisfeld, 1982); thus, maturation creates a susceptibility which experiential processes then help to complete. In accordance with Parkinson's thesis, biological and socialization factors play the role of warp and woof of the social smile.

However, "social smiling" might not be social at all! It might result, as Kagan and Hershkowitz (2005) have argued, from growing familiarity to certain stimuli (social or not) and "effortful assimilation" of such stimuli to memory stores. Numerous experiments in the literature document the onset of smiling to stimuli that become increasingly familiar. For instance, at the same time as infants smile to faces, they also smile to other familiar stimuli, such as the sight of their own hands, bull's-eye patterns, indeed, anything that is familiar but not too much so. Moreover, infants smile as the result of contingencies between their actions and effects on physical objects, raising the possibility that stimuli are smile-producing not because they are social, but because social events are often the outcomes of contingent actions by the infant on the world. A classic study by Watson (1973) found that infants: (a) smiled when their head turning caused a (nonsocial) mobile to move, and (b) reacted negatively when the contingency was disrupted. We do not see how Parkinson's thesis can account for these nonsocial phenomena.

The Child as "Agent Provocateur": An Instigator of Interpersonal Emotion Experiences

Parkinson's lack of consideration of the role of the individual extends beyond origins of emotions. Specifically, the individual

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plays an active role in creating his or her own "socialization." Parkinson (2012) describes early development as a process of molding raw material into a "fully socialized" child (p. xxx), through "caregiver encouragement or discouragement during emotion socialization" (p. xxx), to bring the child "in line with societal prescriptions" (p. xxx). In so characterizing the process of socioemotional development, Parkinson downplays how individuals, from infancy to adulthood, generate emotional contexts and help shape (and reshape) the socializing mold.

One developmental milestone spurring socioemotional development is the acquisition of walking. Walking results in increased "testing of wills" between parent and child (Biringen, Emde, Campos, & Appelbaum, 1995) as the child more independently explores the environment. As increased infant independence and exploration of the environment emerges, Parkinson rightly notes the important role of social referencing in allowing caregivers to communicate social and emotional information to the infant. However, the crucial point that infants *actively* seek and use such information to appreciate the relations of significance seems to be missed. Recent research on how infants utilize first-hand experience to develop social understandings (e.g., Meltzoff & Brooks, 2008) illustrates the importance of the active infant as a driving force in discovering meaningful relations in the environment and encouraging emotional development.

Furthermore, Parkinson ignores how interactions between caregivers and young children include conflict, negotiation, and "coconstructed mutual adjustment" (Parkinson, 2012, p. xxx), similar to the interactions of adults. The back-and-forth social engagement of walking infants with their caregivers described by Biringen et al. (1995) highlights the important role infants play in constructing emotional contexts. Indeed, young children actively test and challenge the imposed limits of permissible behavior from early on: 18-month-old infants engage in prohibitive behaviors while looking to the parent or the observer and smiling (Dunn & Munn, 1985), and somewhat older children rely increasingly on negotiation with parents in instances of conflict (Kuczynski & Kochanska, 1990). These acts of resistance and negotiation do not fit well with the idea that socioemotional development is primarily a process of adopting culturally approved behaviors through modeling, reward, and punishment. Children may know very well what is culturally expected of them, and yet act in direct opposition to those expectations.

Most human interactions contain tension between the concerns of the interactants (see Campos, Walle, Dahl, & Main, 2011). Parkinson neglects the meaningful conflicts between young children and their parents because he seems to consider the child as a piece of raw material waiting to be shaped by the cultural mold. In our view, there is no *raw* material and there is no *mold*: there is an organism trying to adapt to multifaceted and changing social and nonsocial environments.

What Gives Cloth Its Color?

In examining emotion development, Parkinson explores the vertical and horizontal interweaving of biological and social factors. However, his theoretical perspective misses the individuating color of the fabric, provided by the individual, that gives the material significance over and above its warp and woof. This is not to say that the individual's role in emotion development is more important than the biological and social factors that Parkinson attempts to cohere. Rather, we emphasize that the role of the individual is a distinct, yet complementary, piece of the emotional puzzle Parkinson wrestles to fit together.

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