

Developing Emotion Research: Insights From Emotional Development

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Abstract

A full understanding of emotion necessitates the bridging of disciplinary perspectives and methodological approaches. This special section uses emotional development as a foil to illustrate how such a bridge may be constructed and how studying emotional development can benefit the field as a whole. In doing so, this collection of articles points to three key principles for the study of emotion, specifically that emotions are relational, flexible, and temporally dynamic.

Keywords

emotional development, multidisciplinary, multimethodological

Toward a Multidisciplinary and Multimethodological Study of Emotion

The importance of converging research operations was impressed upon me early and often in my graduate training. The maxim was that the reliance on a single measure risks missing important nuance and counterfactuals of the construct of interest. At the time, I viewed this adage as applying to the use of different measurement tools. However, it has become clear to me that the necessity of empirical flexibility also applies to one's disciplinary perspective, level of analysis, and population of study. Such is the case for the study of emotion.

Encouragingly, the articles and comments presented in this special section demonstrate the utility of a multidisciplinary and multimethodological perspective across four distinct topics of emotion: emotion theory, emotion understanding, prosocial emotions, and empathy. In keeping with the spirit of the International Society for Research on Emotion, the articles cut across disciplinary, methodological, and geographic boundaries. Rather than being a collection only read by researchers of emotional development (who tend to focus on infants and children), it was emphasized that each contribution should be applicable to the broader field of emotion. Authors were also asked to identify researchers outside the field of emotional

development with whom they would want to discuss the topic, akin to stepping out for coffee or drinks after a stimulating conference day. Thus, each target article is buttressed by two commentaries from researchers outside of developmental research and a corresponding response to facilitate an exchange of ideas on the topic of interest. From this collection, three broad points for the study of emotion emerge, on which I elaborate briefly below.

Emotions Are Relational

Although emotional experiences are personal, they are not necessarily private; they are shared, understood, and engaged with by the self and others. Mascolo (2020) uses a relational perspective to integrate constancy and change in how humans relate and engage with their world. Di Paolo (2020) underscores this point by emphasizing that emotional experiences contribute to the ongoing process of becoming oneself. In this way, an emotion is not absent and then present; rather, it takes different forms as a function of how the individual relates to and engages with the world.

Social interactions are an important context within which emotions are experienced and function. Di Paolo (2020) and Sander (2020) each highlight the important coregulatory

nature of emotion in interpersonal contexts, be it between quarreling friends, parent and child, or teacher and student. Likewise, a relational view of empathy, operationalized as engaging and relating with another individual, sets aside static notions of perspective taking, affective matching, and so forth, and instead embraces a noisy interpersonal process (see Main & Kho, 2020). Perhaps it is time for research to shift from studying empathy to studying *empathizing*; from the experience of emotion to the *experiencing* of emotion.

Emotions Are Flexible

Defining and operationalizing emotion evokes a tension between precision and flexibility. Developmental, contextual, and individual variability necessitate that definitions of emotion allow for operational flexibility. Vaish and Hepach (2020) provide an excellent perspective of how emotions, such as gratitude and guilt, manifest in different ways in different populations, but cohere in their social functions. Thus, determining the function of a behavior, rather than its form, is likely to be most useful for identifying an emotion. This is also the case when considering how individuals may form emotion concepts using the statistical regularities of emotional events, expressions, and outcomes. If one's definition of emotion emphasizes the expression of emotion (e.g., the face, actions, events), then the lack of statistical regularity in the signal is problematic (see Shablack et al., 2020). However, a more flexible conceptualization of emotions as relations with one's environment on matters of personal significance allows for consistency across what could otherwise be viewed as noisy and discrepant incidents (see Hoemann et al., 2020).

Although researchers of emotional development deploy a range of research methodologies and measures, too often this diversity results in discrepancy rather than convergence, thereby making interpretations of how infants and young children understand emotion incoherent (Ruba & Repacholi, 2020). Synthesizing research from distinct approaches and disciplines is an important step towards reconciling the findings in the literature. Of greater importance, however, will be for future empirical research (developmental or otherwise) to employ converging methodologies, measures, and samples to study emotion (see Tsang, 2020; Vaish & Hepach, 2020). Algoe (2020) extends this point, urging that researchers take to heart the variable and flexible contexts within which emotions develop, to construct broader theories of the construct itself, rather than imposing adult conceptualizations onto what must develop.

Emotions Are Temporally Dynamic

When considering emotional development, the issue of varying timescales offers an exciting, albeit potentially complex area of study. Development can refer to aspects relating to process and change, ranging from a single experience to an ongoing exchange; from the lifespan of the individual, a historical period, or the evolution of a species. For example,

empathy viewed as a process, rather than a static event or trait, underscores its developmental unfolding over the course of interpersonal interactions (Main & Kho, 2020). In this way, empathy unfolds as the emotional dynamics “on the ground” ebb and flow, requiring sustained interest and attention by the empathizer to follow the flow (Hollan, 2020; Kupetz, 2020). Kupetz (2020) deftly illustrates such unfolding using conversational analytics.

The temporal dynamics of emotion are also clear at broader timescales. This can be seen in changes across the lifespan in how the individual appraises (see Sander, 2020) and engages with the physical and social world (see Mascolo, 2020; Vaish & Hepach, 2020). Moreover, emotions developed to serve specific adaptive functions and enhance survival of the species. Prosocial emotions, such as gratitude and guilt, illustrate the adaptive functions that emotions serve to enhance the survival of our species (see Vaish & Hepach, 2020). Hollan (2020) extends this point by encouraging researchers to look not for the presence or absence of emotions, but rather for the various forms emotions may take and the functions they serve across the lifespan, cultures, or historical periods.

Developing Emotion Research

What makes the study of emotional development important is the fundamental need to consider the multitude of manifestations, timescales, and levels of analysis. A concern for the study of emotion is that theoretical and empirical research with adults will fail to integrate findings from developmental research or, perhaps worse, dictate how the construct should be examined. While researchers may attempt to pinpoint a singular instance of emotion, emotions do not exist as static entities in the real world; there is no rarified whole or final product. This conclusion clearly applies to the study of human development. However, it also can be extended when examining the temporal unfolding of the emotion process, comparing periods of human history, and understanding the evolutionary origins of our species. In this way, considering how emotions develop and change can elucidate our understanding of emotion more broadly.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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