



How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain

Lisa Feldman Barrett

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A new theory of how the brain constructs emotions that could revolutionize psychology, health care, law enforcement, and our understanding of the human mind.

Emotions feel automatic, like uncontrollable reactions to things we think and experience. Scientists have long supported this assumption by claiming that emotions are hardwired in the body or the brain. Today, however, the science of emotion is in the midst of a revolution on par with the discovery of relativity in physics and natural selection in biology—ans this paradigm shift has far-reaching implications for us all.

Leading the charge is psychologist and neuroscientist Lisa Feldman Barrett, whose theory of emotion is driving a deeper understanding of the mind and brain, and shedding new light on what it means to be human. Her research overturns the widely held belief that emotions are housed in different parts of the brain and are universally expressed and recognized. Instead, she has shown that emotion is constructed in the moment, by core systems that interact across the whole brain, aided by a lifetime of learning. This new theory means that you play a much greater role in your emotional life than you ever thought. Its repercussions are already shaking the foundations not only of psychology but also of medicine, the legal system, child-rearing, meditation, and even airport security.

Why do emotions feel automatic? Does rational thought really control emotion? How does emotion affect disease? How can you make your children more emotionally intelligent? *How Emotions Are Made* answers these questions and many more, revealing the latest research and intriguing practical applications of the new science of emotion, mind, and brain.

How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain Details

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From Reader Review How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain for online ebook

Atila Iamarino says

A Lisa Feldman Barrett introduz um conceito bem radical de emoção neste livro, a emoção construída. Ela questiona muita, muita pesquisa na área, dizendo que emoções inatas como o reconhecimento de medo, raiva e alegria que muitos alegam ser universal é mais artifício do tipo de teste que fazem (que educa os povos isolados antes de perguntar) do que o que realmente acham. Ela dá uma perspectiva de emoção culturalmente construída que nunca tinha lido antes.

O que faz deste livro no mínimo um livro controverso em relação a muito do que já li, incluindo Damásio e afins. Pelo menos são novas ideias e novas hipóteses para testar. Sem dúvida é um campo que quero acompanhar para ver como o que ela questiona se desenrola.

Gary says

Most new pop science books irritate me since they give me nothing I didn't already know. This book is definitely an exception to that rule. I started liking this book from the very beginning, because I have previously read in over 20 books the experiment where they show photos of actors posed with an emotional expression of some kind and showed it to various people from different cultures and then claiming that each group shown the pictures knew what emotion was being invoked by the actor posing in the picture. I always suspected there was something wrong with the results which claimed that there is a universal set of emotions based on unique emotional 'fingerprints'. This author demolishes that finding, and I really hope I never see anyone else site that experiment again without at least first mentioning this author's analysis.

There is a classical view of emotions. It's been wrongly floating around since Plato hypothesized that we were like the charioteer (reason) being led by the horse being pulled apart by our passion and our appetites. Similarly Freud gave us a super ego, ego, or id, and Kahneman has his 'S1' and 'S2' (quick thinking vs thoughtful mind). The author not only tears down the classical emotional models of the mind, but she builds one up in its place that seems to make sense.

The author calls it the constructive emotional model. What she's saying is that emotions are not things. They are instances of previous experiences. They do not have essences or fingerprints. Darwin knocked it out of the park with his "Origins of Species", but his book "Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals" brought back essentialism (the author will say). That is a belief that there are real categories in the world and they exist beyond the concepts within our own mind. Our emotions are always of a particular instance and never from the general because they are always about something particular.

The author's theory takes the best from the Social, Neurological and Psychological constructive theories from the past. In the past, the social theory would have agreed with Beauvoir that girls are not born girls but made into girls, neurological would have said that there are basically unique areas in the brain for different emotions or patterns of neurons, and the Psychological would have been William James' reaction to the bear that we would meet in the woods. The author does not accept any of those premises but does construct her

constructive emotional model from those three areas. She builds her system from holism, emergent properties, and multiple different neuron formations leading to various emotional states.

The author really focuses on our body budget as to how we construct our emotional makeup. Also, she speaks about how our mind is constantly predicting, and when we create our 'now' we are also predicting it since we don't always understand everything and we are constantly making our best guess about our world and our current emotional states. We are statisticians from an early age (she'll say) and we often must take all of our previous best guesses of the world (an average) and interpolate (or even extrapolate) what we think we know and use that as our guide even though we know there is an error because we're forcing averages on to a particular. Since she's a scientist in the field she will provide some experiments and data to back up her beliefs.

A lot of the book I didn't like in particular the last third. That's just me. She did a little bit of self help type book and that always bores me, but basically her advice was along the lines of do more exercise and eat broccoli (okay, she doesn't say 'broccoli' but she does say eat healthier). She mentioned Spinoza and that he falls in to the classical school of emotional theory and he does, but within his book "Ethics" he too gave advice for living a healthy emotional life and I think he did a better job than this book did.

Though, I don't recommend skipping the last third. She did a really good job on speculating on the nature of autism. She theorized that the autistic person under predicts their body budget needs since they are not always attuned to the local environment correctly and therefore are often out of sync with what is really going around in their local environment. It seemed reasonable to me. I just never seem to come across any good books on autism, and her section seemed to be better than most that I have seen.

There is a real Phenomenological bent to her theory (think Husserl, some Heidegger, the Existentialist and in particular Gadamer in his book "Truth and Method", a book that no one reads today, but I would rate it as one of my all time favorites). Gadamer did say all "understanding is interpretation, being that can be understood is language". The author makes the point that if we don't have the word for the emotion we can't fully understand the emotion. Not everyone has a rich vocabulary to understand all of their perceived emotional states, and so therefore might not always be fully aware of their emotional state (she'll say). In addition, Gadamer ends his book by emphasizing that it's not the pieces that matter, and it's not the whole it's how they fit together. Similarly, the author is saying that's how we experience our emotions.

I really enjoyed this book. The author has a theory that goes against common wisdom, and builds a system that can explain a better way to understand our emotional world. I don't always agree with everything she says, but I always like to see the world differently and am open to new ways of thinking about old problems.

William says

Lisa Feldman Barrett has written an ambitious book on the construction of emotions by presenting an old theory that she claims is new. She postulates in her theory that emotions are not a simple reaction to external stimulation that provokes a response from modules in the brain that are dedicated to mediating an appropriate emotive behavior. She calls this the classical theory that has been the standard for our understanding brain function for numerous years. She points out that her research and that of others do not support the classical theory and that theory is completely wrong. She instead promotes a constructivist theory that postulates that emotions are generated by each of us through concepts we develop as a result of our unique experiences and the culture we live in. She bases this position on her own research which is

concerned with the mistaken notion that there are common facial expressions that reflect the different emotions among all people regardless of the circumstances. I actually support her approach but must point out that the constructivist approach to brain function is not new and won't likely change how we understand human behavior, Frederick Bartlett wrote a book on remembering that was based on a constructivist point of view in 1932. John Bransford in 1972 wrote in the journal "Cognitive Psychology" regarding the memory of sentences that, "The constructivist approach argues against the tacit assumption that sentences 'carry meaning'. People carry meanings, and linguistic inputs merely act as cues which people can use to recreate and modify their previous knowledge of the world." Barrett, I feel, is right to argue for the constructivist approach to brain function but you won't be learning something new and revolutionary by reading her book. In her concluding chapters she gives advice on how to master your emotions. The advice is good but certainly not new and unique.

Amir Tesla says

Such a delicate and painful book!

Laura says

"A new theory of how the brain constructs emotions..." Wait, new?

The writer is amazing (and very persuasive), she carries her theory all the way until the end, in an engaging and amusing way. The idea is that emotions don't have biological fingerprints, they are socially constructed. Therefore, people all over the world, experience different type of emotions (some of them unknown for others). She calls this "the theory of constructed emotion." Though she doesn't talk much about the neuroscience behind it, this is supposed to be a neuroscientific theory.

I have to be honest, I was forewarned that I wouldn't like this book so much, so I read it thinking about critiquing it. I do have objections, but I prefer to keep them for myself (I am just an ordinary student). Moreover, this type of books aren't very much focused on the data, so it wouldn't be correct to criticize it according to the little information that's in here, and though she talked about some of her findings as facts, that depends on the characteristics and the amount of research that has been done, so I'll better read articles about the topic. I just hope there is more research about this in the future, it's undeniably interesting.

Mehrsa says

This book kind of blew my mind. Barrett is pushing a pretty revolutionary theory of emotion--that it is context-driven and culturally bound. She rejects the idea that all humans share emotions. Rather, she says emotions are learned through our culture and our language. I imagine that other academics in this area will push back on her bold theories, but it was fascinating to read this.

Charlene says

There is so much to like in this book but even more to dislike.

- Universal emotions - Barrett carried out a savage and satisfying attack on the assumption that emotions are universal. When trying to replicate findings from Ekman and other universal emotion researchers, Barrett uncovered severe flaws in the studies. When it comes to ripping apart the work of other scientists, Barrett's critical thinking skills are sharp and useful. This is not necessarily the case when understanding findings from her own work. She should take a lesson from pop-sci writers like Sapolsky or Damasio and use phrases such as, "We found that (finding inserted here) but the effects were small," or "It *might* be the case that," (fill in her finding). Instead, she is extremely preachy, over confident, and has essentially written a self-help book.

- Emotions affect the physical body - Barrett wrote about one of my favorite studies in which the authors looked at the effects of emotions on cytokine production. She also went into detail about how emotions can account for various illnesses. Who knows, she might end up being right. The evidence does suggest emotions play a role. I would even agree to the characterization that they play a key role. However, there is zero balance in her discussion of emotions and illness. She is far too over confident with far too little data to back what amounts to not much more than hunches. You might get the impression that all illness is emotion gone awry. So much of this book is a severe overshoot.

- This author LOVES to brag about her parenting. Nothing is more satisfying to her than bragging about her daughter. Yet, you get the distinct impression that she merely uses her daughter to demonstrate that she is the best parent in the world. If you take her advice (the book is filled to the absolute brim with parenting advice), you too can be the superior parent she is.

When I reached the end of the book, I was so happy to never again have to experience one more word from this author. From now on, if I want to find out about her work, I will stick to scientific articles.

Sarah says

Quite irritating...primarily because it purports to be a book about how the brain creates emotions, but it contains remarkably little neuroscience or detail about the brain. She makes lots of sweeping statements without showing sufficient evidence for them. It's not even really a book about emotions, but about categorization and prediction. So this book annoyed me a fair bit and I don't recommend it.

Finally...I'm sorry, but there IS a difference between a muffin and a cupcake beyond the time of day during which you eat it. (I was saying this to my boyfriend on a train while reading the book, and a stranger came over and exclaimed "Cake flour!!!")

Morgan Blackledge says

I have to give this book 5 stars based on its audacity and ambition alone.

The author fearlessly challenges some of the fields (affective psychology/neuroscience) most revered and respected theorists and researchers, including Jack Panksap, Antonio Damassio, Joseph LeDoux, Paul Ekman and even Charles Darwin.

That's mad ballsy.

The book is a virtual slaughterhouse of sacred cows.

I have reservations about much of the authors assertions. It's hard not to, because she challenges so much the current gospel.

That being said, I have the strong intuition that this work represents a legitimate challenge to the old paradigm.

It will be interesting to read the inevitable pushback..

Alexander says

How Emotions Are Made was a breakthrough book for me. I have not read neuroscience and so her ideas were all new to my naïve self. In High School, I was strongly interested in Taoism. And one of the concepts that had the most impact upon me was the idea of the integrated life, the idea that one should not cut one's life into pieces but instead should strive for a single authentic identity. Perhaps the strangest example of the inauthentic life was Freudian theory with its emphasis on the conflict between the individual and society and the conflict within the individual. But Freud's edifice was just the gasp of the romantic emphasis upon feelings and emotions as a challenge to and superior to reason. Barrett's book emphasizes the role of cognition in the development of feelings. As such it seems to me that promises a superior integration (rather than conflict) between thinking and feeling.

The book is not without flaws. It seems to treat emotion as a logical primitive, a relatively undefined concept. She does seem to be building on real research though out the first half of the book. In the second half of the book, she suggests that you can learn to control your emotions. Here she seems to be going beyond the science. Her concept of the role of cognition requires her to critique the idea of universal human emotions. Here Paul Ekman is her target and I think He is that easy to criticize. Ekman is known for writing about universal ways of expressing particular emotions which implies the universality of emotions across individuals and cultures. Perhaps if we were able to develop a true taxonomy of emotions, we might find that both theories are valid for different elements.

Barrett has written and edited a number of serious studies. How Emotions Are Made is a popularization of her work. Perhaps her scientific work would will answer some of the questions I have had about her book. The idea that emotions are partially cognitive is new to me. The book suggests that thinking and feeling are not two separate streams but interacting bodies that together can create a single authentic self. Furthermore, I take it that even though I am seventy-five, I still have the opportunity for further emotional growth. I prefer to continue to look to the future.

I hope to look at one or two of her academic works in the future. Are there any other books I should look at?

Bob Nichols says

Barrett believes that past theories of emotions are wrong. In that classical view, emotions are “essences,” with mental circuitry in place, waiting to be triggered. Based on brain science, this view is no longer tenable, she says. Rather, we construct emotions. From culture, we form a concept of emotion; without a concept, we have no emotion. Culture lays down new wiring to reflect “social realities,” including how each culture defines what it means to be happy, sad, angry, etc. This explains the wide cultural differences in how an emotion is defined. The author says that her “theory of constructed emotions” also transforms our understanding of human nature itself. In the old view, we are filled with biological essence. In her view, we reflect culture’s content and draw from it to create who we are and who we want to be.

Barrett states that her theory is neither biological nor cultural determinism. It’s a third way. It combines biology and culture, yet moves beyond, based on neuroscience. We’re obviously biological, she says, in the sense that we are wired to form concepts. Then it’s the concepts from culture that take it from there. But this, it seems, is only the latest edition of the blank slate version of human nature that goes back to Lewontin-Gould, the behaviorists, Sartre, Marx, and the empiricists before. The only difference I could detect is that Barrett brings in brain science. Other than maintenance functions, certain affects and the basic biological wiring, biology is not relevant to who we are. We’re born with minimal biological direction, ready to receive culture’s imprint and, later, our reasoned response to it so that we can be fully autonomous, undetermined beings. The author also refers to Buddhist thought to, say, in effect, that there’s no true self. We are architects of our own being in what now might be called her theory of the constructed self.

Where to go with this? Her main argument I suppose is that if we don’t have the concept, we can’t feel the emotion. As an example, Barrett uses schadenfreude (“pleasure from someone else’s misfortune”) and a few other foreign-culture emotion concepts. She says we do not have these emotions because we have no word (concept) for it. But, regarding schadenfreude, who has not hoped that someone might fall flat on their face and fail, even if, as in our culture, there’s no word for it? Barrett doesn’t buy that counter argument.

Barrett states that emotions have no connection with biology and survival, which bolsters her claim that emotions are not biological in origin. To make that statement Barrett has to take on Darwin. She states that in “The Origin of Species,” Darwin denies the very idea of biological essences with his theory of variability. In that book, a species does not exist per se. Rather, it is a population-wide concept (a statistical average). Then she writes that, in “The Expression of the Emotions,” Darwin does an about face and reinstates several basic emotions as inborn essences that are universal across humankind. (1) In “Expressions,” Darwin was not only wrong, she says, but he was “profoundly” wrong. Really? Darwin’s point is that variability is always in relation to a fixed structure. (2) It’s a variation from the mean, from an essence. That’s why we are humans, not dogs. That’s why we don’t have sex with dogs.

Then Barrett states that emotions cannot be biological because they are “fixed.” To be built-in that way is instinctual determinism, but that can’t be because in our case we obviously have free choice. We can even choose suicide and override evolution’s central imperative. But, to counter, we still have emotional tendencies or dispositions that serve our needs. With a few exceptions, “fixity” in Barrett’s sense in our emotional life is non-existent. Even Freud, Mr. Id himself, said that, except for hunger and thirst, most of our emotional-instinctual being is essentially plastic (i.e., flexible. Hence, transference and projection).

Barrett opens one of her chapters with a story about a friend’s dog, Rowdy. She notes that when a stranger or

a dog comes near, Rowdy growls. “In other words,” she says, “he’s a dog.” With that essentialist classification (all dogs do X), she misses an important point: dogs vary by biological disposition and temperament (see Darwin’s opening arguments on domestic breeding in “Origins”). A dog is not only a dog, but a particular dog (even individuals within a breed), a point that is reflected, for example, in breeding practices for certain (non-cultural) traits. For that matter, crows have personality. But Barrett suggests that “emotions in animals” are an illusion. Rowdy and animals can’t have emotions because by definition emotions are mental constructs, and that’s something animals don’t have, despite pet owners seeing their “dogs growl in anger, droop in sadness, and hide their heads in shame.” Barrett, not a dog owner herself, passes animal responses off by saying that they “might experience pleasure, pain, arousal, or other varieties of affect, but he [Rowdy in this case] does not have the mental machinery to experience more than that.” (3) Barrett is operating within a paradigm that can’t allow her to see otherwise.

Barrett writes that “Particular concepts like ‘anger’ and ‘disgust’ are not genetically predetermined (fixed impulse tied to a fixed object?) and that fear is not coded in “the human genome.” Rather, we construct what is meant by these concepts. It’s the same for other emotion concepts like happiness, sadness, etc. Clearly, Barrett is right, to a point. We fear guns today because of what we know about them, and the source of fear in the hunger-gather day (no guns) was different. In other words, there’s still fear, in both timeframes and cultural settings, though the content is different. The source of happiness for a NASCAR fan is different than the source of happiness for an urbanized artist and the source of beauty varies by culture, per Darwin’s theory of sexual selection. But what Barrett leaves unstated is the motive force – why we fear (to protect our self, regardless of the specific threat), why we get happy or sad (because our underlying needs are met or not met – more on this below) and why we seem to have an appreciation for beauty (musical rhythm, poetic cadence, and bodily adornment – needs, but without an obvious evolutionary benefit). Underlying specific content (experience, reason, culture) is some form of built-in biological capacity, essences in effect, that Barrett sees instead as her emotion concepts. She opts for the latter without dealing with the former. Or, maybe it’s more accurate to say that she conflates underlying form with cultural content.

In eliminating emotion as an essence, Barrett overlooks what might be emotion’s central component – the motivation source which is internal, not external; it is “pain” in Schopenhauer’s sense. We seek from the world what we need and we resist what we don’t need. Many of our emotions are built in (surprise); others are more long-term (love); and still others are about self-interest, generally and specifically. Whether all of this is emotion depends for sure on the definition used, but certainly, there’s a value-filled, emotion-like core at the center of all we do (akin to Hume’s comment that reason is a slave to passion).

The absence of motive force in Barrett is striking, and perhaps can be illustrated in Appendix A (Brain Basics) where she says that a neuron “fires” and that the “neurotransmitters excite or inhibit each neuron on the other end of a synapse.” It’s a basic and standard description, yet while Barrett describes the what and how, she leaves the motive force hanging -- the “why” behind “exciting” or “inhibiting,” or “firing in general.” I suppose that in her “interoception” concept, she has a generalized motive force -- we do what is pleasant and avoid the unpleasant (and she may have an intensity range to such feelings, ranging from “calmness to agitation”). But an argument can be made that far more specific motive forces are involved. We are driven by in-born, core needs within the categories of nurture, security, sex and defense, with a full-suite of specific emotions (seen more as value-laden tendencies) that are designed to get what we need from the world and to protect against what we don’t need. Experience builds upon and reinforces these dispositions, which collectively constitutes more general character traits. (4)

For most of our evolutionary history (pre-hominid, animal-mammal time), we probably were quite fully instinctual beings whose integrated emotional structures supplied the internal motivation (the need for nurture, protection, sex; and fear of threats to these needs); an appraisal mechanism for determining object

assessment, and behavior (more or less “fixed”) that tied need and relevant object together. With humans, though, object relevance and behavior separated out, giving us new tools for adaptation. This is what Barrett focuses on. Choices about relevant objects and behavior became unfixed, enabling them to be extensively molded by culture. But, importantly, the motive for why we act remains fixed, embedded within our emotional core. This is the motive force that existed way back when and exists now. It’s the reason we act.

There’s ample room for neuroscience to inform the age-old debate between biology-emotion and culture-mind without, as Barrett does, relegating biology to a minimalist structural (bones, fluids, organs and wiring) role. The relationship between nature and nurture is hierarchical. The biological part is foundational, constitutional, particularly in regard to the bottom-line motivation sources supplied by our emotional life. The culture part acts within this framework to operate, in effect, legislatively. It covers the “what” (object) and the “how” (behavior), and Barrett’s work is certainly relevant to laying out the “new wiring” in the brain that has been prompted by culture. That this is a rich and attractive area of research is not a surprise. It’s like muscle memory, but more. We adapt to our environment by incorporating new information and beliefs. (5) But the “why” part, the motive force, the reason we act or react vis-à-vis a particular object, stays home. Though its presence and intensity varies among individuals, this is the true self. And because of the variability, we can and do make poor choices.

There is also a need to parse out the differential roles that emotion plays in our interactions with the world. Happiness and sadness are not just part of a long list of emotions. They are states of being, not actions or reactions *per se*, that are the end result of successful or unsuccessful interaction with the world (possibly related to Barrett’s interoception notion of pleasant-like, unpleasant-don’t like, combined with gradations of intensity). Per Schopenhauer, we act from pain (in general) and when successful (in seeking, in resisting) there is pleasure (in general). Fear is also not just another emotion. It is the mirror of a seeking emotion. It is the primary resisting emotion. It’s the first line of defense.

The mystery that also surrounds life as a need-driven being (again, “pain” in Schopenhauer’s sense), requires more general attention as it is this, life’s motive force in general and in its specific, manifestations, that not only unites us with the rest of life but distinguishes us from non-life. We know it’s “survival” but is there a central brain core that pulls these all together (current research suggests not)? Bergson gets a lot of flack for his “*elan vital*” and of course we no longer believe in homunculi, but if the life force as embodied in the emotions is not this, what is it?

As a final note there are problems with the definition of emotion. Barrett is correct about that. But she pins it down and doesn’t let it get up. There could be value in tossing out all preconceptions and beginning anew, with a fresh definition of emotion that has a valence and motive force as the foundation and that is expressed in a range of ways, from automatic, built-in actions and reactions, all the way to rational decision-making that is based, ultimately, on a value source that is biological in nature. (6)

(1) For other reasons, there are problems with “Expressions.” Darwin emphasizes the visible facial and bodily expressions of certain emotions, but he does not get into the fuller suite of our emotional life that he covers in “*The Descent of Man*,” a book that Barrett does not discuss.

(2) “Fixed” is a tricky word in evolutionary theory. Fix has an essence, but that essence has a range within which variability is expressed (see Piaget’s “*Biology and Knowledge*”). Also, there’s more variability with traits that are less crucial for survival.

(3) In this quoted Barrett sentence, why does she use the term “might”? And her use of “affect” comes across as an emotion-like term that means “not emotion.”

(4) "Essentialism," Barrett writes, "lays out not just a view of human nature but a worldview....a belief in a genetically just world, backed by a scientific-sounding ideology." Barrett characterizes that worldview as "affective realism," which leads people to "an extreme version of 'getting ahead' in a survival of the fittest way over 'getting along,' with the latter being a product of cultural construction. She states that our capacity for culture arises from natural selection, and that's biology's only role. But, just as animals have personalities and temperaments (individual/breed), isn't it possible that humans can be seen in a similar way at their foundation, which culture then builds upon? Might the two poles (getting ahead vs. getting along) that Barrett highlights be biological in origin because they have both been valid survival strategies that have withstood the rigors of natural selection?

(5) Barrett states that racial stereotypes are a social reality that changes the brain's wiring illustrate her point. But to classify it only as a social reality misses the underlying "tribal" motivation that push us into "we-they" categorizations, and why racism, a powerful form of tribalism, (it's an interesting question whether Barrett's argument that we are wired to form concepts feeds right into the "we-they" stereotypes) is so intractable. With many, self-correction is possible once it's learned that the "other" is really OK (not a threat). But for many others, reflecting human variability, that motivation is not there.

(6) Many of the laudatory statements on the book covers refer to emotions as essences, seem to miss Barrett's central point that emotions are "concepts of emotion," not essences. Even LeDoux, who has been good on the topic of emotions, says that Barrett "writes with great clarity on how your emotions are not merely about what you're born with...," suggesting that at least some emotions have essences of some sort.

Dan Graser says

This has been a great year for books on the workings of the brain with the release of Robert Sapolsky's latest work and now this groundbreaking contribution from Lisa Feldman Barrett. What Barrett has achieved here is a wonderful introduction, thorough description, and cogent examination of an alternative theory to the classical theory of emotion: "The Theory of Constructed Emotion." While some may already be familiar with the concept, this is the finest it has ever been posited. She deftly sums up the theory early on:

"In short, we find that your emotions are not built-in but made from more basic parts. They are not universal but vary from culture to culture. They are not triggered; you create them. They emerge as a combination of the physical properties of your body, a flexible brain that wires itself to whatever environment it develops in, and your culture and upbringing, which provide that environment."

After the best explanation and discussion of interoception I've ever heard, she continues to describe in great detail why several of the experimental data that supports classical theories of emotion are fundamentally flawed and what the future study of constructivist theories of emotion might sound like:

"Now you know how emotions are made in the brain. We predict and categorize. We regulate our body budgets, as any animal does, but wrap this regulation in purely mental concepts like Happiness and Fear that we construct in the moment. We share these purely mental concepts with other adults, and we teach them to our children. We make a new kind of reality and live in it every day, mostly unaware that we are doing so."

While her later discussion of Emotion and the Law is somewhat superficial regarding actual implementation

of theory into legal practice, her concluding chapter, "From Brain to Mind: The New Frontier," is a tour de force of revolutionary thinking and crystal clear description.

This is a landmark work and will function as a fantastic introduction to an important theory of our development of emotions. Highly Recommended!

Owen says

Disclaimer: As of yet, I have not entirely finished the book. In principle, if I do decide to write a review, it is after I finished the entire book. However, Dr. Barrett's way of arguing for the theory of constructed emotions feels more promotional and she does not quite prove her theory as the only valid option, and as such I am not as inclined to finish the book to the end, though I will try.

In summary, the book argues against the idea that there is an innate sense of emotion; all our concepts surrounding emotion are constructed. What we think we feel, what we see in others, etc. is ultimately based upon inference based upon previous experience. Barrett rejects the idea of an "emotional fingerprint" in facial expression or physiology by which we can definitively know what emotion a person is feeling. The antithesis to constructed emotional is the classical theory of emotion that treats the different emotions such as happiness, anger, fear, etc. as universal and innate; emotions are concepts that we form and use. To make this point, there are references to multiple studies that suggest emotions are not as universal as other psychologists (such as Ekman) supposed their own research showed. At this level, the book presents an interesting alternative that does a good job explaining much of the variability that is seen in emotional expression and interpretation.

However, the way the author argues suggests she is more than simply trying to argue for her theory, but for her own brilliance. She indirectly compares her own research to high profile paradigm shifts in scientific history, such as Newton or Albert Einstein to explain how her theory relates to the previous consensus regarding emotions. At times, I feel like I am being told more about how brilliant the theory and the research is rather than a solid exposition on the scientific findings.

To which I move to my most serious criticism of the book. Her argument focuses on arguing against the classical theory of emotions. But she does a poor job addressing other possible explanations for the scientific findings. At one point, she raises the idea of prototypes based upon Eleanor Rosch's alternative to classical conceptions. Prototypes are essentially images we create of the best example of any category we have; based upon the prototype, we evaluate our experiences in comparison to these prototypes, but there can be divergence and variability between the prototype and what we actually perceive in a way that classical definitions do not allow for. A prototype theory of emotion would explain much of the evidence that Barrett references. However, her rejection of prototypes being stored in the brain is based upon two premises:

- 1) The prototypical facial expressions are rarely found in life
- 2) Laboratory studies have shown that prototypes can be constructed on the fly without previous experience.

The problem with Barret's argument for rejection of emotional prototypes is, firstly, the argument doesn't understand how prototypes work. Good examples of prototypes rarely are seen themselves. The lack of observation of the prototypes does not mean the prototypes do not exist in the brain. IF anything, the fact that the prototypes of emotional expression is rarely found while we have these intuitions about what emotions look like argues against past experience being the sole contributor to how we conceptualize emotion; there seems to be some framework we intuitively have and makes unconscious adjustments to as we use.

Secondly, the fact that prototypes can be constructed spontaneously does mean that prototypes only occur

spontaneously. In the end, I feel her reasoning leaves much to be desired.

While this is a popular level book and not intended to be a thorough presentation, the rather short and problematic dismissal of emotional prototypes being stored in the brain demonstrates my ultimate criticism of this book: it is higher on self-promotion and lower on sound arguments. To be clear, I think there is a lot to be said in favor of the constructed emotions if one qualifies the extent that we construct our sense of emotions. After considering some of the findings that were presented, I favor a blend of genetically-formed prototypes and construction to explain emotions. However, this book frustrates me as much as it makes me think, as it seems like Barrett has fallen victim to confirmation bias and inadequately understanding other potential theories.

Anders Brabaek says

The basic message of this book is that emotions are subjective and constructed, and that neuro science proves it so. This message is in line with the frequently quoted Shakespeares' (Hamlet) "...there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so".

(Barrett do not make use of this quote).

I will suggest instead reading the article "The theory of constructed emotion: an active inference account of interoception and categorization" by the author; <http://www.affective-science.org/pubs...>

The article is more concise than the book, while avoiding some of the 'misdirections' the book delivers.

The book is not deep enough for those who has prior knowledge in cognitive psychology/neuro biology. Those who do not will likely to be misled as Barrett is annoyingly imprecise.

Fx Barrett put her perspective in contrast to what she calls "the classical view of emotions". However, there isn't as such a clear classical view of emotions. There are certain theories which over the years has gradually evolved - it is not like you either have a classical view of emotions or a non classical view (she doesn't term the alternative to what she calls classical).

Barrett emphasize the importance of "her" theory; "the Theory of Constructed Emotions" by pointing to how this will lead to different approaches for handling various challenges (depression etc.), but all the solutions she provides, are solutions which has existed for a very long time, and has been developed by people who believed in fx "basic emotions" which belongs to her category "the classical view of emotions".

In that vein she spend chapters on methods and techniques which owe 100% to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Dialectical behavior therapy (DBT).

Likevise she explains the impact of her theory with an abundance of examples. However anyone who has studied social psychology in general, and attribution theory and appraisal theory in particular will know they thoroughly predates her theory, and that they are in no way is reliant up on it.

Barrett does this without ever mentioning eg. DBT, attribution theory nor appraisal theory. (If I remember correctly she only once mentions CBT).

For the moment I will chose to assume I have overlooked the references because I would otherwise find it borderlining to dishonesty not to make the references to these ideas which she is so clearly, and substantially leveraging.

Even so; as the theories and practices she is borrowing so heavily from, predates her theory by decades, and

has for all these years not been seen as being in contrast to the theories she coins "the classical view of emotions" it substantially subtracts from the impact of her theory, and hence she is overemphasizing the conflict.

It is sad because in all the noise, she has an interesting addition to the existing theories, and message which hide potentially deeper understanding.

It is also sad as her message, that in non academic settings (including legal and cultural) the nature of emotions are misunderstood, and these misunderstandings can lead to problematic outcomes, is an important message.

Paul Ekman has responded earlier to a couple of the claims which Barrett repeats in this book surrounding both his own theory and Barrett's understanding of Darwins' perspective on emotions:

<http://www.paulekman.com/tag/lisa-fel...>

Related Books :

"Not Passion's Slave" by Robert Solomon, a philosopher, delivers a much better view on the history of emotions.

"The Feeling Brain" by Johnston and Olson, is, while a scholorary book, more concise. Unfortunately, while referencing Barrett, it doesn't really cover Barrets ideas.

"Handbook of Emotion Regulation, 2nd Edt" is for the real curious, real academic - before heading to the article databases.

"Emotion Measurement" Herbert L. Meiselman edt. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-100...> (Chap 2 is by Barrett and is much more concise than this book as well

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