

Throughout my life I have been able to control my emotions. In hysterical situations, I have had the ability keep calm. Sometimes I wonder if this emotional control borders on suppression. In many situations, I usually don't succumb to great waves of sadness as others might. There are many instances when most around me are tearing and crying, and I'm not. I fear that I am also rarely ecstatic. For example, when I had learned that I had been accepted to the school of my dreams, I was really happy but I didn't express many signs of cheerfulness. Internally, I was joyful, but externally I appeared indifferent. Even though I don't have many highs and lows, I tend to be a positive person, often trying to avoid negativity.

Due to my history and confusion with emotion, I wanted to understand the importance of how these emotions control our decisions, and what the effects of each emotion are on people and those around them. I also wanted to find out the benefits of experiencing positive emotions and the detriments of feeling 'bad' emotions on health, mind, and body. I began this paper by asking myself the following questions: what is the difference between innate, or primary, emotions and learned, or secondary, emotions? What are 'good' and 'bad' emotions? Is it healthy to feel sadness, anger, and fear? What emotions dominate human minds? What power does emotion hold over us?

Emotion is a very broad topic, and from afar can seem like an intangible entity. What actually is emotion? After asking a group of people, an argument erupted; no one could create a clear definition. When most people think about emotions, they think of them simply as a reaction to something sensory.

Emotions are way more important than people think. Society often diminishes emotion as an obstacle to avoid in life and trivializes emotion to something that only women and children express. Movies, for example, often portray strong men as those who have successfully rid themselves of it. Emotion is quite dominant in our every day lives and in everything we do, regardless of gender.

Psychological discourse on emotions begets questions that are central to understanding all psychological phenomena. There are many theories regarding the origin of emotions, claiming they are either biological or constructed socially. Scientists know very little of what an emotion is, but do know a lot about what happens in the body and brain when an emotion is experienced (Kalat 415). The theoretical and empirical academic research into emotion has fallen into two positions: social constructionism and naturalism, an idea built by evolutionary psychology (Prinz 5). There is a large feud between the two sides. Dr. Carl Ratner, a supporter of social constructionism, believes that the establishment of the origins and functions of emotion is very important because it will in turn illuminate the nature of psychological phenomena (Ratner 1).

There is much fuss over whether emotions are formed from nature or nurture, and which emotions are innate. In the early 70's Paul Ekman found evidence that humans have six basic emotions: happiness, sadness, fear, surprise, anger, and disgust<sup>1</sup> (Prinz 2). These six emotions have been coined as "The Big Six" (Prinz 1). Both groups, Evolutionary Psychologists and social constructionists, seem to pull from this foundation. Evolutionary psychology is an approach that believes that human nature and the mind are the aftermath of thousands of years of evolution.

William James and Carl Lange, supporters of evolutionary psychology, often referred to as "naturalists", bring the evolutionary psychologist theory to emotion and claim that emotions are biologically based, grown and cultivated from evolution (Prinz 3). William James also

---

<sup>1</sup> When I first saw this, I wondered how surprise fit in this list, but after further research I can see the validation of it. Surprise being the brief emotional state experienced as the result of an unexpected event.

describes emotions as perceptions of a patterned change in the body (Prinz 3). An example given is that the heart racing, and the pores sweating, can be perceived as fear (Kalat 417). In this view, emotions result from hormones, neuro-muscular feedback from facial expressions, and genetic mechanisms. A great quote, synthesizes this theory:

"When driving a car, you have an accelerator to increase speed. Emotions are a little like that... Some emotional states speed up your actions to deal with an emergency; others slow you down to be cautious or to conserve energy" (Kalat 416).

There are some extremists who take this view to the core without any compromise, as in the case of Carroll Izard,<sup>2</sup> and there are others who are less one-sided and connect a little bit of social facets with the natural, an example being Carl Lange. Most evolutionary psychologists agree that a few basic emotions underlie all emotions. The Big Six or similar lists of emotions are widely agreed to be those basic emotions. The Big Six combine to produce more complex emotions like smugness or jealousy, smugness being a composite of happiness and anger, while jealousy is a combination of anger and fear (Prinz 5).

The claims of evolutionary psychologists are backed by many truths. If we think about many of the main emotions that we experience, we will soon find that they all serve important purposes. Fear, for example, has evolved in order for us to cope with dangers. It gives us the adrenaline for fight or flight. As we look closer into our emotions we start to see how important they really are. If we lacked fear and took every obstacle head first, we would most likely be dead in our first year of life.

Similarly, love gives us a reason to bond and care for one another. Doing this grants us a better chance of existing longer than if we chose to live on our own (Robert H. Frank). Love blinds us from commitment risks, and allows us to dive into a relationship without deep contemplation (Prinz 4). A relationship is important because it shares the burden of raising a child, which in turn allows the two to be more effective in providing food and resources. Humans work best in packs. Guilt lowers the chance of cheating another. After a wrongful deed, guilt puts us in an undesirable mood that makes us feel bad about our wrongdoings. It encourages cooperation with others, and promotes the kind of behavior that maximizes collaborative work (Prinz 5). Evolutionary psychologists would argue that emotions are like sneezing; they cannot be learned. They are feelings built into us from birth.

Social constructionists, as suggested by their title, argue that emotions are socially constructed. James Averill presents the theory that emotions are "constructed as cognitive appraisals rested in behavioral scripts" (Prinz 6). Dr. Carl Ratner gives a more understandable definition when he states that "Social constructionists maintain that emotions depend on social consciousness concerning when, where, and what to feel as well as when, where, and how to act... they derive from and support legal, moral and social codes" (Ratner 1).

According to social constructionism, there are two general classes of human emotion. One being natural animalistic emotions that infants feel, and the other being emotions that have no natural analogue (Ratner 1). The class of natural emotions is very similar to the Big Six presented by Ekman. Dr. Ratner argues that even these "natural" emotions lose their natural spontaneous behavior as humans grow to adulthood. Ratner believes that our 'natural' emotions become mediated by social consciousness. As an example, jealousy, an emotion shared by animals and infants, usually is the desire to obtain a wanted object, which, Ratner explains is rooted by the animalistic desire to survive. As we grow, our jealousy advances to the concept of

---

<sup>2</sup> Believes that emotion had no cognitive component and derives directly from the activity of the neurochemical substrates.

exclusive ownership. We lose the desire of an object for survival and that desire becomes materialistic and more for pleasure.

Ratner argues that shame and anger are examples of socially constructed emotions that have no natural analog. Shame presupposes an ethical notion of right and wrong. Ratner claims that anger is a notion of intentional responsibility for a misdeed, a person must believe that another has acted out in order to experience it. If one lives in a society where misdeeds were non-existent, then one would not feel anger. Ratner later states that dogs and other animals do not feel shame, but certain reactions we observe from them, like hugging their tail in-between their legs while whimpering are rooted in fear. The emotions we believe to see in other animals are projections of the feelings we know projected onto them.

Whether you are a social constructionist or an evolutionary psychologist (naturalist), there can be no arguing the overlap in views. Both groups appear to believe that there are innate emotions that humans are born with. Both also seem to agree that emotions grow to become more complex as we ourselves grow.

I believe that both views share many truths. Animals, including humans, appear to share the same “innate” emotions: “The Big Six.” When a dog is given a treat, his spirit lightens and appears to be experiencing happiness and joy. If in the next moment the owner decides to raise his hand and attempt to beat the dog, fear will visibly overwhelm the creature. I, similar to Ratner, believe that more complex emotions like guilt and shame are not experienced by other animals, and are brought on by society.

I also believe that different social groups experience emotions for different reasons. This idea further welds the two views of social constructionism and naturalism together. A person in America might experience disgust for eating quail, while the people of Nepal would thoroughly enjoy the thought. I believe in a nice mixture. Humans are innately emotional, and through our societies we may adopt new emotions and reasons for feeling them.

## The Dark Divide

Many including myself, would easily throw our known emotions into the “good” or “bad” bucket. Sadness, anger, and guilt are always labeled “bad” and happiness receives a gold star for being a 'good' emotion. Making the large divide of “good” and “bad” distances us from what these emotions are trying to inform us about. We like to forget that emotions are responding to our interactions with the world. Dan Newby, a journalist of Newfield News, argues that humans value not the emotions themselves but the level on which they make us comfortable (Newby 1). Through this mentality of having good and bad emotions, we lose the chance to learn from them.

Dividing emotion into two black and white zones distances us from what these emotions are trying to tell us about how we interact with the world. Newby suggests that the emotions function as mental and physical reactions to situations (Newby 1). If they truly are just reactions to situations then each and every one is equally important.

Why would such an emotion such as dissatisfaction be important? Dan Newby eloquently answers this question: Satisfaction comes from the Latin root *satis*, meaning "enough," this dissatisfaction, the feeling, is telling us we don't have enough, we are dissatisfied. If you choose to ignore this dissatisfaction, then chances are it will come right back because you will continue to not have enough (Newby 1). Newby states, "We cannot learn from our emotions, if we do not spend the time with them and bring curiosity [to our emotions]" (Newby 1). In this example of

dissatisfaction, the dissatisfied person should recognize that this emotion is a reaction and fix that “problem”. We must find a change to shift our dissatisfaction into satisfaction.

It’s the people that allow their negative emotions to cultivate, who end up with long lasting problems like depression, and increased stress. Depression is a wide spread problem in America. In 2011, The Center for Disease Control and Prevention recorded that 1 in 10 adults in the U.S reported being depressed (*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 1*). Many people who try to solve emotional problems attempt to solve it with emotional suppression. This is an ineffective method. Emotional suppression is damaging and can lead to many unhealthy physical and mental problems (mySahana 1).

Suppression of emotion can be so subtle that people don’t notice that they’re doing it. A lot of people suppress emotions unconsciously because they believe they cannot deal with them. I often find myself avoiding thoughts in my head that make me upset. I used to constantly battle with thoughts in my head. When I was younger I used to be chubby, and I would feel upset whenever I looked at myself in the mirror. From then on I would avoid any reflection because I knew it would make me feel bad, and experience sadness. This is a classic sign of emotional suppression. Other signs are avoiding places, people or objects that remind you of the emotion you don’t want to feel, using substances, such as alcohol or other drugs, to numb the pain, and avoiding talking about the situation because you don’t want to feel negative emotion (mySahana 1).

Emotional suppression is never a true solution (Shpancer 1). These “uncomfortable” emotions never truly go away when they are suppressed. In fact it can lead to a greater problem. Dr. Noam Shpancer writes that “avoidance lengthens the period of anticipation, and anticipatory anxiety is usually a much more noxious condition than the actual situation” (1). Suppression makes it more difficult to manage a similar situation in the future. In addition, it increases stress, high blood pressure, and incidences of diabetes and heart disease. It also can cause bone weakness and more illnesses due to a weakened immune system (mySahana1).

If we can’t run from emotions what can we do? The early idea that bad emotions are perceived as the ones that makes us uncomfortable is very important. Dan Newby suggests that we should accept the emotions we feel, as they give us important observations about our lives. If each emotion is a reaction to what is occurring around us, we should trace the patterns and seek the activities and things that make us feel happy or positive. Emotions should not be avoided or dismissed, but heard and attended to. My negative feelings towards my weight were obviously telling me that I wasn’t satisfied with my appearance. I listened to that observation and started working out and eating more healthily. From then on, I’ve experienced increased comfort with my body.

## The Pursuit of Positivity

Every theory over good and bad emotions seems to point in the same direction; “bad” emotions are important because, once conquered, one can regain positivity. But why is positivity so important?

In 1942, Walter Canon published a well-documented collection of reports of voodoo deaths. Most cases follow this simple guideline: a woman receives a meal and is later told that the meal was poisoned. Within a day she dies, unknowing that she had actually eaten a perfectly normal un-poisoned meal (Kalat 421). Curt Richer looked into this phenomenon and, found an answer to this mystery. Richer conducted experiments where he placed rats into a pool of water

under different circumstances. Rats can swim in warm water for more than 48 hours straight (Kalat 421). However, when Richer placed a rat into a pool and cut off the rat's sense of direction, by using a large pool, each time, the rat died within an hour. The rats would swim frantically for a minute and suddenly sink into the bottom of the pool, dead. Autopsies showed that the rats had not drowned but their hearts had stopped beating (Kalat 422). Richer conducted another test where he would place a rat in the water and then save him by carrying the rat back to land. He repeated this with the same rat a couple of times. The next time he placed the rat into the water, Richer did not try to save the rat (Kalat 421). The rat swam successfully for many hours. The rescues had apparently immunized the rat against any extreme terrors in the water. Richer's results suggest that voodoo deaths and any other similar tragedy, are caused by parasympathetic activity.<sup>3</sup>

The other cause of this phenomenon appears to be the power of the mind; this is classic "mind over body" in action. When the rat knew that he could be saved he swam successfully for a prolonged time, without worry, however the rat who had no idea what was happening nor where to go in order to escape his damp terrors, his body shut down and the rat died. This tells me that if the mind believes that it can prevail, the body will in turn remain calm and do whatever it can to overcome the obstacle. Conversely, if the mind does not have any reason for believing it can survive, the body will also respond to that feeling and shut down. I'm hoping that this helps impress the importance of a positive mindset.

Aren't all our desires just based on the pursuit of happiness? Many different sources present similar ways of becoming happier. The movie *Happy*, suggest that each night you should come up with three things that made you happy that day, and ask yourself why did it make you happy? By doing this you can start to see the patterns of what makes your mind experience happiness, then do more of it. This is tightly linked to the idea that emotions are observations of what is happening, so if you observe that talking to Stacy makes you happy, then make that happen more. *Happy* states that human interaction makes people happy, this is evident in how babies are much healthier when they are touched by their mothers. Research shows that happiness also spreads through third degree social network connections. For example if I'm happy, then my friend Bob will experience happiness, and when he meets his friend Carl, and tells a joke, Carl will be happier, and when Carl goes out with his girlfriend, she will be happier. In summary, *Happy* is claiming that your mood affects everyone from a third degree social connection, you have more power than you think, and all that power is sourced from emotion.

I want to end this section with a powerful quote I read in the book *The Power Of Kindness*, by Piero Ferrucci:

"The gifts of kindness and its qualities are various. Why are grateful people more efficient? Why are those who feel a sense of belonging less depressed? Why do altruistic people enjoy better health, and trusting individuals live longer? Why is it that if you smile, you are perceived as more attractive? Why is it advantageous to take care of a pet? Why do those elderly who can talk more with others have less probability of contracting Alzheimer's disease? and why do children who receive more love and attention grow healthier and more intelligent? Because all these attitudes and behaviors, which are all

---

<sup>3</sup> parasympathetic activity decreases the heart rate, increases digestive rate, and in general promotes energy-conserving, non emergency functions (BPK).

aspects of kindness, bring us closer to what we are meant to do and to be. It is so elementary: If we relate better with others, we feel better" (Ferrucci 12).

It all circles back to positivity.

No matter how powerful emotions are, you have power over your own emotions. You are the wielder of your own power. People usually let their emotions run over their lives or treat their emotions as inferiors and beat into submission (Harford 1). There needs to be a balance. Let your emotions flow, but make sure that you are listening and not just experiencing.

## Works Cited

- "An Estimated 1 in 10 U.S. Adults Report Depression." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 31 Mar. 2011. Web. 28 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.cdc.gov/features/dsdepression/>>.
- "Emotion Suppression: Effects on Mental and Physical Health." *MySahana*. N.p., 16 May 2012. Web. 18 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.mysahana.org/2011/05/emotion-suppression-effects-on-mental-and-physical-health/>>.
- Ferrucci, Piero, PF. *The Power of Kindness*. New York: Penguin Group, 2006. Print.
- Harford, Fabienne. "The Good and Bad of Emotions." *Relevant*. N.p., 11 Jan. 2012. Web. 15 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.relevantmagazine.com/life/relationship/blog/27874-emotional-errors>>.
- Kalat, James W. *Biological Psychology*. 5th ed. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Pub., 1998. Print.
- Newby, Dan. "The Art of Ontological Learning: "Good" vs. "Bad" Emotions." *Newfield Network*. N.p., Feb. 2012. Web. 17 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.newfieldnetwork.com/New2/News/0212/Art/index.cfm>>.
- Prinz, Jesse. *Which Emotions Are Basic? Subcortex*. N.p., 2004. Web. 2 Nov. 2012. <<http://subcortex.com/WhichEmotionsAreBasicPrinz.pdf>>.
- Ratner, Carl. "A Social Constructionist Critique of Naturalistic Theories of Emotion." *Sonic*. Institute for Cultural Research and Education, 1989. Web. 15 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.sonic.net/~cr2/emotions.htm>>.
- Shpancer, Noam, Ph.D. "Psychology Today." *Emotional Acceptance: Why Feeling Bad Is Good*. N.p., 8 Sept. 2010. Web. 26 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/insight-therapy/201009/emotional-acceptance-why-feeling-bad-is-good>>.