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QUESTION 8. UNCONSCIOUS EMOTIONS

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CAN EMOTIONS BE NON-CONSCIOUS?

If so, which general characteristics are retained for nonconscious emotions and which are lost?

Defining Emotions as Conscious

Cognitive appraisals need not be conscious. Hence, it is quite possible to be surprised by one's own emotions. The emotions that result from such appraisals, however, must be conscious. In agreement with Freud, I would argue that it is not possible to have an unconscious emotion because emotion involves an experience, and one cannot have an experience that is not experienced. Freud (1915) indicated that he would still speak of unconscious emotion, but he made it clear that this was a shorthand for unconscious beliefs with emotional implications. I am inclined to think that if Freud, who relied so much on unconscious processes, did not require a concept of unconscious emotion, then modern emotion theorists may not either. On the other hand, Freud did assume that the processes underlying emotions were unconscious, and he also had a concept of unconscious libidinal or psychic energy which he called "affect." This instinctual energy was unconscious, although it could leak out as unbound energy, which was then experienced as anxiety. Affect was believed to be the quantitative aspect of ideas and to be responsible for driving them into consciousness (Freud, 1894).

From my point of view, emotion is mainly concerned with internal communication and motivation. The momentary experience of emotion informs the individual of the nature and importance of events, and the urgency of feeling motivates one to give priority in cognitive processing to emotion-relevant considerations. While the cognitive processing that causes emotion is unconscious, the informational and motivational effects of emotion depend on conscious experience in order to capture the attention of the experiencer.

According to the above argument emotions that are felt cannot be unconscious by definition. Does it then make sense to talk about emotions that are not felt? I am inclined toward a negative answer. If there are necessary features of emotions, feeling is a good candidate. Of all of the features that emotions have in common, feeling seems the least dispensable. It is

perfectly reasonable to say about one's anger, for example, "I was angry but I didn't do anything," but it would be odd to say, "I was angry but I didn't feel anything." As indicated in response to Question 5, feeling is not a sufficient condition for emotion, but, I would argue, it may be a necessary condition.

The feelings-as-information model (Clore, 1992; Schwarz & Clore, 1983; 1988) is based on the assumption that experience is an important mediator of the effects of mood and emotion on judgment and decision-making (see Question 3). The general idea is that people routinely use affective feedback in moment-to-moment judgments and decisions. For these processes to be as powerful and pervasive as we think they are would require there to be a consistent mapping between emotional processing and the experiential readout of that processing. Otherwise the person could not be expected to use this feedback effectively.

Unconscious Fear

One counter-argument to the idea that emotions must be felt (and hence must be conscious) can be found in the considerations raised by Lang (e.g., Lang, 1988) in his three systems view. He argues that emotion can be manifest in behavior, verbal report, or physiology, and that the level of the emotional response apparent in these systems is often not consistent. It should be noted that Lang is concerned with verbal report, while I am concerned with experience itself. Nevertheless, he provides evidence implying that emotion can be apparent in behavior or physiology without its having an experiential component.

To make this argument more concrete, consider the case of a particular assistant professor who was worried about getting tenure. The person in question had a good record, was generally assumed to be on a safe ground, and did not report being worried. Nevertheless, she repeatedly awoke during the night with heart attack-like symptoms. Extensive medical tests pursuing even the most exotic possibilities produced consistent evidence of good health. In addition, changes in diet and in the consumption of alcohol and caffeine had no effect. The problem was eventually solved by a positive outcome of the tenure review process.

From one perspective, this example is problematic for our assumption that conscious experience of emotion is essential. This assistant professor reported no fears and no rumination about tenure or other conscious mental content indicating such fear. She also engaged in no behavior that suggested fear, unless one interprets the absence of thought itself as avoidance. But despite the lack of relevant experience and behavior, the accompanying physiological activity suggests that unconsciously she was afraid. Stated more properly, fear-producing beliefs were unconsciously activated, or she unconsciously appraised her situation as one involving threat.

What seems to be missing at first glance is the experiential component, the thoughts and feelings of fear. (In my view, the absence of behavior and behavior tendencies is not a problem, since behavior is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for emotion). Of course, in one sense the experiential component is not missing. She did have explicit fearful thoughts and feelings, but they were about having a heart attack. But how did fear of failure become fear of a heart attack? As it happened, she experienced the symptoms only at night. During the day, she was well defended against her fears and thought little about the upcoming threat of tenure review.

But when asleep and unable to maintain the same vigilance, these concerns were activated and produced the emotional symptoms that awoke her. But since the mental preoccupations occurred only in her sleep, she remained unaware of them. As a result, the racing heart became itself the focus of attention, and the feelings of fear became a fear that she was having a heart attack rather than fear of professional failure. Thus, the emotion did involve both physiology and verbal report of feelings, and since the emotion was experienced, it was also conscious. The curious nature of the example lies in the fact that she was unaware of what we presume to have been the real cause of her experience and hence the meaning of her emotion.

Whether one decides that one can or cannot have unconscious emotion, then, depends on what one decides about the necessary conditions for emotion. One can take this case as an example of unconscious emotion, or one can define emotion as necessarily involving experience and then classify the unconscious threatening beliefs and the accompanying physiology as "fear potential" (Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988). Whether one chooses to refer to the unexperienced phenomena as "unconscious fear" or as "fear potential" is less important than being clear and consistent about how one uses the terms. Taking the position that emotions must be felt, and hence conscious, does not imply that people necessarily know what they are emotional about.

This example illustrates the functional nature of the usual sequence of emotion coping. Ordinarily, emotional experience directs one's attention both internally and externally to emotion-relevant considerations. But since the fear-eliciting thoughts remained unconscious, the feedback cycle was broken, and it was therefore unclear what concerns should be attended to. Deprived of the mental content that would have helped her perceive her emotion accurately, the assistant professor did none of the cognitive coping that might have stemmed the rising tide of anxiety (e.g., making favorable comparisons with those previously promoted). As a consequence she was seized by the symptoms of runaway fear unchecked by the reality testing that awareness of the presumed source of her fear would otherwise have triggered.

Being Unconscious of the Cause of Emotion

Some of the most important effects of emotion are mediated by the information conveyed by conscious experience (Clore, Schwarz, & Conway, in press). The experience of emotion can include thoughts, feelings, and the feedback from emotional expressions and behavior. Whether these effects are narrow and specific or broad and general, however, depends on one's consciousness of the source of the emotions. If the source of an emotion remains unconscious, the emotion may be experienced as part of one's reaction to almost anything, and hence may color one's judgment of almost anything. If the source of an emotion is conscious, then its meaning will be constrained, and the range of judgments it colors will be limited. Hence, not only is the conscious experience of emotion important, but also consciousness of its cause and hence its meaning. Indeed, the convergence of a great deal of evidence from many different domains involving feelings (see Clore, 1992) show this to be a very general principle.

In this regard, one of the primary differences between moods and emotions is the greater likelihood that one will be conscious of the cause and hence the significance or relevance of emotions as opposed to moods. Emotions tend to have a faster rise time and shorter durations than moods. Since moods last longer, their causes are likely to be more remote in time and

hence less salient. As indicated in Question 3, moods are also typically less intense than emotions and therefore less likely to stand out as discrete events that are situated in time and place. The significance of these facts is simply that emotions per se are less likely to be problematic with respect to biasing irrelevant judgments and decisions. Again, a key to the effects of affective states on judgment lies in the degree to which the cause is salient in consciousness.

Freud . The problem addressed by research on mood and judgment is similar to the problem about which Freud was preoccupied. Freud was also concerned with the potential of emotion to have inappropriate effects on judgment. He was concerned with effects of intense emotion or trauma. Through his talking cure, he got people to remember the circumstances surrounding the original emotional experience, and this process of becoming aware of the cause often dramatically limited subsequent unwanted emotional effects on judgment. As a consequence, Freud developed a theory of unconscious mental processes and focused on the curative effects of making conscious what was unconscious.

Jacoby . Currently, psychologists are rediscovering some of these principles in a more mundane context. For example, Jacoby and his colleagues (Jacoby, Kelley, Brown, & Jasechko, 1989) report a series of experiments in which subjects are asked to pronounce a list of names. At a later time they participate in an ostensibly different experiment in which their task is to identify which names in a list are famous and which are nonfamous. There is a slight but reliable tendency for subjects to perceive the nonfamous names they had pronounced in the first study as famous. When they see them later in the second study, the sense of familiarity that these previously seen names engender is misinterpreted as an indication that the names are famous. The effect is obtained, however, only if subjects forget that these are some of the names they had seen earlier in the experiment. Jacoby concludes that he has shown the effects of unconscious experience on later judgment, and he shows that if he makes the experience conscious (i.e., if subjects remember seeing the names) the effect goes away.

This story seems adequate as far as it goes, but the implied model of unconscious processes is probably false. Freud's original model, for example, went something like this. Affect was seen as the energy in the mental system, and its aim was to be expressed. Being expressed generally required being attached to an idea, which it could then propel into consciousness. In the process of repression, an unacceptable idea would be kept from consciousness by having the energy stripped away. The aim of the energy to be expressed could then be achieved by attaching itself to an associated but harmless idea. Having been originally associated with an important idea, however, the repressed energy would sometimes be large in quantity, so that it would drive the harmless idea into consciousness with inappropriate force. This can be seen, said Freud, in obsessive-compulsive disorders, when a person becomes intensely preoccupied with a seemingly meaningless idea or action. Through such techniques as hypnosis or free association, the goal of therapy was to trace the symbolic link to the unconscious idea so that it could be expressed and the patient could be relieved of his symptoms.

Schwarz and Clore. Contemporary research on mood-biased judgment also seeks to explain how an initially modest idea can become inappropriately extreme by inheriting objectless affect. In this case too, the problem stems from the fact that one can be unaware of the true source of

one's affective state, so that the affective value of an object becomes inflated by affective experience from a different source. As in the Freudian case, the cure for such distortion is to re-establish awareness of the true cause of the affective experience. Note that this affect-as-information explanation (Schwarz & Clore, 1983), is different than the analysis offered by Freud or by Jacoby. In this view, the unconscious mental content does not influence judgment directly but only indirectly by reducing the informativeness of affective feedback. What is unconscious are the circumstances from which the affect arises; and the reason that is important is that without such episodic constraints of time, place, and circumstance, the affective experience is unconstrained, without meaning, and hence potentially relevant to anything. In the previously cited research by Jacoby, and probably also in the cases cited by Freud, it is what is conscious, not what is unconscious that contaminates judgment. What is conscious is the experience of feeling happy, angry, fearful, or guilty. When this experience is one of free floating affect (e.g., moods and diffuse states of irritability or anxiety) the experience can have wide-ranging influence. But when the experience is of "bound affect" (affect attached to a specific object), such influences are less likely to occur.

Displacement. The contrast between explanations of mood effects that focus on conscious versus unconscious processes can further be seen in cases of what Freud would have called "displaced aggression." If one were to kick one's dog instead of one's boss, a Freudian analysis would focus on the role of unconscious affect. It would maintain that the unconscious energy from repressed anger had accomplished its aim of being expressed by attaching itself to a safer, substitute object (the idea of the dog) somewhere in the unconscious. Our own view focuses not on the misdirection of unconscious affect, but on the misdirection of conscious affect. Without the constraints imposed by awareness of the source, the consciously experienced affect of anger is free to be attributed to (or experienced as a reaction to) some other event with anger potential.

This "displacement" process is a very common occurrence. Consider a tired parent whose child knocks his milk over, for example. In the experience of the parent, the background feelings of irritation left from a long day at work and the focal irritation of the split milk may become one irritation. The felt intensity of irritation informs the parent (inappropriately) that the spilt milk is a serious offense. This implicit judgment of extreme blameworthiness in turn elicits an outburst of anger and punitiveness. Later, when the parent is no longer in the same state, he may feel guilty for the outburst. Considered without the same baseline of irritation from work, the spilt milk is no longer experienced as so blameworthy. Then a punitive reaction no longer seems justifiable and indeed seems itself blameworthy. These things can then be cyclical, in that the irritation at one's own action raises the base rate of irritation, increasing the likelihood of a new outburst at some new infraction. This example thus illustrates the principle that what is lost when the source of an emotion is unconscious are the limits on the potential relevance of the associated cues. Without such limits, the information that the cues usually provide can easily become misinformation.

If a psychotherapist were to enter the situation just described, a prime goal would be to try to reduce the level of expressed anger. This could best be done by reducing the person's blameful orientation to himself. This should help to the extent that it reduces the total background experience of irritation available for misattribution, so that the child's misdeeds would be less likely to be experienced as serious and hence less likely to elicit inappropriate outbursts.

Summary

In agreement with Freud (1915), the position was taken that emotions cannot be unconscious because they must be felt, and feelings are by definition conscious. The possibility of emotions that are not felt, and hence are not conscious, was entertained and rejected. Feeling was considered a necessary (although not a sufficient) condition for emotion. From the perspective of the affect-as-information hypothesis (Schwarz & Clore, 1983), a primary function of emotion is to provide feedback in the form of emotional experience. The realization of such an informational function requires that people be conscious of their emotions, otherwise the feedback loop would be broken.

Despite the fact that emotions themselves are conscious, the appraisals that elicit them often are not. Thus people can be puzzled or surprised by their own emotions. When the cause is insufficiently salient in consciousness, emotions can bias judgments and decisions by being misattributed. This is more common for moods than for emotions, because the causes of emotions are generally more salient than the causes of moods. The affect-as-information model was contrasted to the model implicit in Freud's account and to a similar model implied in recent research by Jacoby and his colleagues. In each of these models a therapeutic effect is achieved by making conscious the cause of feelings that might otherwise become attached to an irrelevant idea.

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