



Pitfalls of Homogeneity

If there is a theme or leitmotiv running through this issue of our newsletter, it is the question of the homogeneity or otherwise of populations studied by the human sciences – when is it a factitious homogeneity?

Psychologists and sociologists study groups of people. They conduct experiments and administer questionnaires. The results are supposed to have validity for the population at large, for *homo sapiens*. But is it always so?

In an interview in this issue, Gisela Labouvie-Vief, who studies the life span, remarks how earlier psychological studies of cognitive development were always done with college students – young people who have by no means done all their maturing. Aneta Pavlenko, whose book on emotions and multilingualism is reviewed in this issue, proposes to “rewrite monolingual linguistics”, because field work in linguistics, psychology, sociology and anthropology has focussed on the native speaker of one language - which happens to exclude the majority of humanity.



Who's hiding under all those electrodes?

This brings up the whole question of experimental subjects. Too often the basis for sweeping generalizations about human nature turns out to have been a hundred college students in Milwaukee. There is even a detectable bias in favour of the right-handed male. Just to keep things simple and reduce the number of variables...



Hmmm. Did I extrapolate too much?

The experiment and the questionnaire can yield a kind of despotism of the standard in which it is implied “this hypothesis is true for everybody”, when it just can't be so because the sample is so restricted.

This problem could, if you like, be called “Freud's problem” because in a way it all started with that great Father Figure. As George Steiner and others have remarked, Freud constructed the claims of psychoanalysis on the basis of a group of people forming a subset of Viennese society at the turn of the last century. Culturally, linguistically, educationally, they were almost ludicrously homogeneous. However interesting the conclusions, whether they applied to the rest of humanity was - and remains - a moot point.

The Ages of Emotion

Prof. Gisela Labouvie-Vief heads the program in life-span psychology at the University of Geneva, and she is a member of the NCCR Affective Sciences. She spoke to Terence MacNamee about her work and its broader significance for the understanding of human emotion.



Gisela Labouvie-Vief

TMcN: What was it that got you, a psychologist of life-span, interested in emotions?

GLV: Actually, I began by being interested in cognitive development in later life. The prevalent assumption up till that time had been that older people just went into cognitive decline, but I had found that older people can be trained to do better on psychological tasks. So early in my research career I started to take an interest in intellectual development in adulthood. I began by using a Piagetian approach, which was then the “gold standard” of cognitive development. Piaget had proposed that mature thinking emerged in youth and was characterized by formal and logical thought. But a group of young researchers, I among them, had begun to talk about “post-formal thinking”, where the subject goes beyond formal operations and takes subjective experience, social contexts and changing circumstances into account. Already philosophers had suggested that it is not possible to develop a logical worldview without making unverifiable assumptions. So, while we had always hoped for ‘objectivity’, we could only reach it by encompassing ‘subjectivity’! I proposed that mature individuals forge a balance of objectivity and subjectivity in their thinking, and surely emotions are part of that. That is how I got interested in the topic of emotion, and particularly the emotions of people after early adulthood.

TMcN: How do the emotions differ in the various ages and stages of the life span?

GLV: With increasing age one learns to regulate one’s emotions better. But when we are young, this learning is directed by conventional cultural rules—Jung said early development is a form of entrenchment in culture! So, subjectivity is eclipsed by fixed rules. But mature adults begin to explore how they have come to develop emotionally the way they have. So paradoxically, by opening oneself to one’s subjectivity, one becomes more objective. One shares emotions with others, not like adolescents who want to just to get support and to feel they are “all in the same boat”, but rather to look for another perspective. One asks oneself “am I really justified in feeling this way?” Also, mature adults are better able to accept that there are negative aspects to oneself as well as positive aspects. One starts to integrate the Shadow, in Jung’s terms.

So overall, emotions become more complex. A good example of a complex emotion is empathy. Empathy means understanding another’s emotion without necessarily feeling it to the full oneself. One learns to differentiate between self and other. People get particularly good at this in middle age. After the age of 60, on the other hand, this ability tends to go into decline, according to the studies I have done. It looks as though a large

portion of older individuals become more “dismissive” or “self-protective”. The capacity to feel empathy appears to diminish, at least for a good portion of older people.

TMcN: Is aging – and emotion, for that matter – not just a culturally conditioned phenomenon?

GLV: Erikson once said that in traditional societies, old people used to be “elders”. They were the hardy ones who had survived hardship and disease. But in modern societies medicine and hygiene are there to protect people, and now they are just “elderly”. The status and position of older people in our society is undoubtedly changing. The nuclear family is declining, and young people are becoming more individualistic. In one of our studies we found that such cultural change is going on in many places where the elderly once reigned supreme – China is a case in point.

TMcN: What do life-span studies contribute to the understanding of emotion?

GLV: In psychology there are two major competing theories of emotion: on the one hand, that there are basic emotions, hard-wired, corresponding to certain facial expressions and so on; and on the other hand, that emotion is a process that is infinitely variable. The studies that I have engaged in suggest to me that emotion is not *just* hard-wired. I favour a complex view of human beings, involving more individual responsibility but also more potentiality. To use the terms of S. J. Gould, there are biological programs, but these programs are “open” rather than “closed”. Human development is very dynamic, and mature adulthood and aging shows us the contours of the process. What are the absolute limits of emotional maturity? We don’t know. Life-span psychology can make us optimistic without being naïve about this question.

I would point out that Carroll Izard, who has been known as a theorist proposing the existence of hard-wired basic emotions, has recently done work involving training youngsters in regulating their emotions. He and his colleagues found that youngsters can learn to handle their emotions better. So education can contribute to emotion regulation.

TMcN: Let me now invert the previous question. What do theories of emotion contribute to life-span psychology?

GLV: The psychological theory of emotion and the questions it raises are a stimulus to life-span research and vice versa. To give an example, Scherer talks about emotional appraisal involving complex evaluations including moral norms we learn from society. Yes, but, morality changes in adulthood, it becomes more complex, as Kohlberg found. It becomes less culture-centric and more global. This means that mature individuals, individuals at midlife, can have a profound effect on society and especially on the young. Erikson talked about “the generational bond” between youth and the middle-aged. He said that youth need models of wisdom and ideology, just as the middle-aged have a need to be the admired teachers and providers of ideology. So later life deserves to be explored and studied. In the past, all the studies of mental development in the psychological literature seemed to involve college students. But college students in their early twenties are not fully mature yet. They do not embody the highest levels of cognitive and emotional development. So to get a fuller picture, we need to study the development of middle-aged and older people.

Youth is a lot more dominated by ideology. Of course, young people learn ideologies from the teaching of their elders. So, we need to know what makes older people tick who have so much influence on the young. Not all ideologies affirm tolerance and complex thinking, many foster fundamentalism and polarization. In the world today, there are great clashes of cultures and beliefs and ideologies going on. Surely these things are very powerful! We need to understand where they are coming from, and how to live together in a globalized world.

Someone once asked me after I had given a lecture on the psychology of the life span: "What difference does all this make?" I told him: "It's a matter of the survival of the planet". In the final analysis, I don't think that's much of an exaggeration.

Annual Research Forum Showcases Research Work in Progress

On April 11 and 12, the Swiss Centre for Affective Sciences held its Annual Research Forum in Geneva. This event provides an opportunity for members of the various projects to present their latest research findings to the Centre as a whole. Twenty scholars from a wide range of disciplines took part. They spoke to an interested, informed and sympathetic audience of colleagues and professors drawn from the various universities participating in the Affective Sciences NCCR. There was great variety in the topics explored each day, varying from stress and gender roles in the world of work to the emotions felt by victims of crime, from emotions elicited by smells to the wrath of the Mesopotamian gods at noisy humanity, and from the bases of trust in economic game-playing to the evolution of shame from social animals to man.



Gerhard Stemmler

Visiting the Centre on this occasion as a representative of our International Scientific Council (ISC), an independent group of scholars that advises the Centre on research and policy, was Dr Gerhard Stemmler. Dr Stemmler is Professor of Differential and Personality Psychology at the University of Marburg in Germany. He listened to all the presentations and had many questions on a wide range of topics. He provided the Centre with an overall evaluation of the presentations on behalf of the ISC. The members of the ISC who were not able to attend in person made their own evaluation on the basis of the abstracts of the presentations.

As part of the Forum, Dr Stemmler gave a talk on his own research entitled "*Frontal asymmetry: What does it tell us?*" He is known as an exemplary methodologist, and showed us samples of this from recent work by himself and his team. He described EEG measurements from both hemispheres as subjects imagined a scenario involving an inner conflict to be resolved. The subjects were right-handed. The BIS/BAS (behavioural inhibition vs. approach systems) model clearly accounted best for the results. This suggests that the "conflict" interpretation of brain asymmetry is the right one. In reply to questions from the floor about handedness, he said that he and his team would soon seek to replicate the experiments with left-handed subjects.

Book Review: “Emotions and Multilingualism”

This is the first book about its topic that has appeared. It might be described as a work of critical synthesis. Highly critical synthesis! Aneta Pavlenko takes determined swipes at existing research models involving emotion and language. While so doing, she gives a complete review of the literature in English on this topic in psychology, linguistics and related areas. This synthesis is regularly summed up in helpful tables that may extend over a couple of pages of text.



Aneta Pavlenko

Aneta Pavlenko is a Russian who emigrated to the U.S.A. in the days of the Soviet Union, and who lives and works in Philadelphia. She is a professor at Temple University, working in the area of Teaching English as a Second or Other Language (TESOL).

In her book, she talks about the inconvenient fact of people who speak more than one language – bilinguals or multilinguals like herself – in emotion research, and indeed in just about any sort of research involving language. Her declared project is to “rewrite monolingual linguistics”. The study of bilingualism and multilingualism has long existed within linguistics, she says, but it is always the recipient of theory, never the source. It is about time it got to contribute in its own right. Most research in psycholinguistics and related areas avoids bilinguals, just to avoid the possibility of languages contaminating each other and messing up tidy experimental designs. But monolingual bias is like gender bias, insists Pavlenko. The Chomskyan “native speaker” with idealized linguistic “competence” obscures reality. The majority of humanity lives with more than one language or language variety. Similarly, she observes, lack of adequate knowledge of local languages often vitiates cross-cultural research on emotion in anthropology; this issue goes back at least to Margaret Mead in Samoa, and remains a lot thornier than many researchers would have us believe.

The stated aims of Pavlenko’s book are threefold:

- (a) to point to new and interesting questions we can ask about the relationship between language and emotions if we extend this study to bi- and multilingual subjects
- (b) to show that understanding of emotions helps us understand bi- and multilingualism
- (c) to show that reliability, validity and true interdisciplinarity in cross-linguistic research require insights from the study of bi- and multilingualism.

People who are bilingual or multilingual often seem to have two or more “affective repertoires”; have they one universal set of emotions? she asks. It has generally been assumed that affect is coded in the first language, and that the second language just enables people to distance themselves from their emotions. This has been known to affect all sorts of situations, from the language married couples quarrel in to the language chosen as a medium for psychotherapy! But it is also true that there can be an “affective re-socialization” in the second language. It may be possible to express emotions in the second language that one cannot easily express in the first. Pavlenko gives the example

of her own acquisition of political passions in the American context: these belong in her second language English, whereas in Russian they are still stifled by the political apathy inherited from Soviet days.

The book extensively documents research on the meaning of emotion terms and their transferability between languages. This seems particularly relevant to our own endeavours in the NCCR, such as the Grid Study. Pavlenko also talks about the emotional significance of languages for their speakers. Far from being interchangeable vehicles of communication, languages turn out to be loaded with emotions such as shame and guilt as well as pride.

The book is comprehensive, but there are some things missing. The author does not talk about dialect, which is nonetheless very important for affective coding, as is apparent to us in the case of *Schwyzerdütsch* and indeed all German dialects. She hardly talks about culture either, independent of language – even though affective styles may differ within the same language, and phenomena like prosody and intonation may be associated with affective styles, the great example being the difference between British and American English. Finally, she does not talk about the particular problems of minority languages, where these are “the language of the heart” but have not enough resources to equal the expressive range and power of the second language.

There is another odd lack about this book. The author spends her time castigating North American academia for its monolingual bias, yet the book is written in English, for that very academic audience, as she makes clear when she mentions the book’s “ideal readers”. She never considers that it would have been possible to write such a book in another language for a different audience – *and that it would have been a different book*. Again, all the literature she cites in her text and bibliography (with a few exceptions, seemingly added purely for historical interest) is in English. This is neither explained nor commented on. Are we to believe that there is no modern academic or other literature relevant to this topic in any language other than English? This is hard to swallow. It is particular hard to swallow coming from this author.

To sum up, the book opens up the topic and makes many good points which are relevant to what a research organization like ours is doing as regards language, but it does not deal with everything. Nor can it be fairly expected to. As always, “further research is required”.

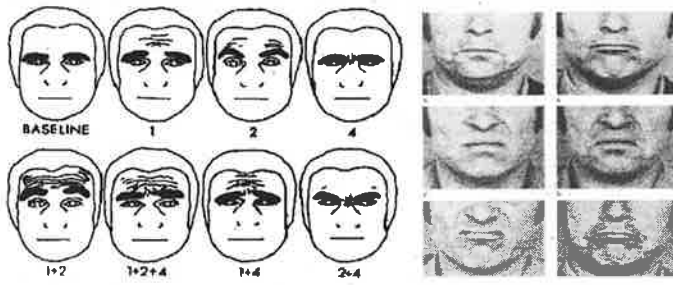
Pavlenko, Aneta. *Emotions and Multilingualism*. Studies in Emotion and Social Interaction. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. 2005

(A copy of this book has been acquired by the NCCR Library)

Paul Ekman to Receive Honorary Degree in Geneva

Human facial expression is one of the phenomena most intensively studied by the psychology of emotions today. This is due in no small measure to the work of the American scholar Paul Ekman, who will soon be in Geneva to receive an honorary degree.

For Ekman, there are universal categories of emotions, which are expressed by unique facial expressions. Ekman and his colleague Wallace Friesen put together a comprehensive inventory of photographs that they tested with different populations around the world. They used this inventory to develop the now-famous FACS (*Facial Action Coding System*). Paul Ekman has written or co-authored some of the classic works in the field of facial expression, from *Unmasking the Face* (1975) to *Emotions Revealed*, (2003). He has also published more than 100 articles.



The Facial Action Coding System (FACS)

Ekman is thus a major representative of “discrete emotion theory”, which holds that emotions are fixed biological programs, acquired in the course of the evolution of species, and that these are signalled by fixed facial movements which are universal to mankind, although “display rules” for emotion may vary from culture to culture. This theoretical approach has been enormously influential both inside and outside psychology in recent decades, though there are, of course, competing theories.

Paul Ekman received his Ph.D. in clinical psychology at Adelphi University (1958), after a one year internship at the Langley Porter Neuro-psychiatric Institute. After two years as a Clinical Psychology Officer in the U.S. Army, he returned to Langley Porter where he worked from 1960 to 2004.

His research on facial expression and body movement began in 1954, as the subject of his Master's thesis in 1955 and his first publication in 1957. In his early work, his approach to nonverbal behavior showed his training in personality. Over the next decade, a social psychological and cross-cultural emphasis characterized his work, with a growing interest in an evolutionary and semiotic frame of reference. In addition to his basic research on emotion and its expression, he has, for the last thirty years, also been studying deceit.

Since 2004, when he retired with the title of professor emeritus from the University of California in San Francisco, Paul Ekman has remained very active in research. The American Psychological Association has recognized him as being one of the most influential psychologists of the 20th century in terms of his publications, their frequency of citation, and the awards he has received.

The University of Geneva, its Faculty of Psychology, and the Swiss Centre for Affective Sciences have decided to honour this eminent specialist in the psychology of emotion for his pioneering role in the development of the discipline and his major contributions to research. In June of this year, Paul Ekman will come to Geneva to receive an honorary doctorate.



Paul Ekman,
acknowledged master of
the human face and its
secrets

NCCR Websites in Constant Development

The only constant is change, economic gurus tell us, and that pretty much sums up the situation as regards the web presence of NCCR Affective Sciences. The main internet website (www.affective-sciences.org) has now migrated to the Drupal environment. This was accomplished by Yvan Sanchez just before he left the NCCR to become head of support at the University of Geneva Psychology Faculty.

Drupal is an open source content management platform. Developed at university of Antwerp in 2000 by a group of computing students, Drupal is a free software package that allows an individual or a community of users to easily publish, manage and organize a wide variety of content on a website. Today, it is used by many high-traffic websites. It is particularly popular for building online communities. People and organizations have used Drupal to power all kinds of different web sites, including community web portals, discussion sites, corporate web sites, Intranet applications, personal web sites and blogs. You can find out more about it at www.drupal.org

The NCCR Intranet (affectco.unige.ch) is already a Drupal-based site. Now that the intranet and the internet site are in the same format, they can interact in new ways. NCCR staff can upload their information not only to the Intranet but also to the Internet site. The members of the NCCR management team can now edit the Internet site directly. This is a far cry from the days of having to be proficient in HTML or Java before you could go tinker with a page of a website! Okay, so it's not going to be picture-perfect in the sense of always professional-looking and error-free, but it should be a lot more dynamic.

There's also a version of the Internet website in French under construction (at asclub.unige.ch); it will be a subset of the material on the English website. This should serve to satisfy the considerable public and media interest in our Centre from Suisse Romande and the French-speaking world in general.

Upcoming Events

Salon de l'étudiant on May 2-6 at Palexpo in Geneva. This year the University of Geneva's stand will showcase the NCCR Affective Sciences. The event will open May 2 at 11 a.m. with a round table discussion featuring the Rector of the University of Geneva and representatives of other institutions of learning in Suisse Romande, including Prof. Klaus Scherer of our Centre.

Dies academicus at the University of Geneva June 5, 2007. Paul Ekman to receive an honorary doctorate.

For all upcoming events, log on to the NCCR Intranet at <http://affectco.unige.ch>.

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