

RESEARCH ACTIVITY: Appraisal–emotion relationships in daily life

Appraisal theories have widespread acceptance in the field of emotion research. In these theories, it is assumed that a situation elicits in the individual a set of appraisals, and that the distinct patterns of these appraisals are associated with the experience of specific emotions. The majority of research on cognitive appraisals has been conducted using hypothetical vignettes or autobiographical recall. These have shortcomings as vignettes lack immediacy and personal importance, and autobiographical memories are prone to bias. The purpose of this activity is to examine the extent to which people’s daily emotional experiences follow patterns predicted by the cognitive appraisal theory of emotions.

The task

You will need a wristwatch with an alarm, a pencil and a recording booklet. You will need to record nine observations in the course of a day at the exact moment when your wristwatch alarm goes off. For the first observation, set your wristwatch alarm to a time in the morning shortly after you normally wake up (e.g., 8:30 am). For subsequent observations, set the alarm at intervals approximately 90 minutes from the last observation. At each observation, complete the following questionnaire by rating each sentence on an 11-point scale from 0 (*not applicable at all*) to 10 (*completely applicable*). In total, you will complete the questionnaire nine times.

Questionnaire

Sentence to rate	Rating (0 to 10)
1. At this moment, I feel content.	_____
2. At this moment, I feel nervous.	_____
3. At this moment, I experience a positive encounter.	_____
4. At this moment, I feel guilty.	_____
5. At this moment, I feel sorrowful.	_____
6. At this moment, I experience a success.	_____
7. At this moment, I feel sad.	_____
8. At this moment, I feel fear.	_____
9. At this moment, I blame someone else.	_____
10. At this moment, I feel angry.	_____
11. At this moment, I feel affection.	_____
12. At this moment, I feel threatened.	_____
13. At this moment, I feel irritation.	_____
14. At this moment, I feel ashamed.	_____
15. At this moment, I feel sympathy.	_____
16. At this moment, I experience a loss.	_____
17. At this moment, I feel happy.	_____
18. At this moment, I blame myself.	_____

Current time: _____

Dealing with the data

Calculate your mean rating scores across the nine observations for each of the following sentences. Where there are two sentences, take the average of the 18 observations.

Emotions	Sentence number(s)	Your mean rating	Mean ratings in Nezlek et al.'s (2008) study
Anger	10, 13		1.10
Guilt	4, 14		0.43
Fear	2, 8		0.97
Sadness	5, 7		0.88
Joy	1, 17		5.11
Love	11, 15		3.58
Appraisals	Sentence number	Your mean rating	
Other-blame	9		1.34
Self-blame	18		0.86
Threat	12		0.46
Loss	16		0.55
Success	6		1.45
Positive encounter	3		3.16

Predictions

According to the cognitive appraisal theory (Smith & Lazarus, 1993), daily emotional experiences are associated with core relational themes and follow the following patterns:

1. Other blame – Anger
2. Self-blame – Guilt
3. Danger/threat – Fear
4. Loss/helplessness – Sadness
5. Achievement/success – Joy
6. Positive encounters – Love

Hence, if you scored higher on a particular emotion at each time point, you should also have scored higher on the relevant appraisal pattern.

Ask yourself

1. What were the most dominant emotions you experienced throughout the day? Were they more positive or more negative?

2. At each time point, was your cognitive appraisal consistent with your experienced emotions, as predicted by the cognitive appraisal theory?
3. How did your scores compare to those in the Nezlek et al. (2008) study?
4. Ask a friend to complete the same activity. How did his/her scores compare with yours?

References

- Nezlek, J.B., Vansteelandt, K., Van Machelen, I. & Kuppens, P. (2008). Appraisal–emotion relationships in daily life. *Emotion*, 8(1): 145–50 [doi: 10.1037/1528-3542.8.1.145].
- Smith, C.A. & Lazarus, R.S. (1993). Appraisal components, core relational themes, and the emotions. *Cognition and Emotion*, 7: 233–69 [doi: 10.1080/02699939308409189].