

The Emotional Continuum:
Why Sadness and Contentment Are Much Closer Than We May Believe
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Abstract

Emotions are multifaceted and extremely complex, yet simple and awareness-inducing at the same time. Frequently, emotions feel overwhelming, and can be frustrating because sometimes, there is no recognized reason for why people feel the way they do. Emotions are intricate, ever-changing states of being that are often reflective of our situation within the world (Nussbaum, 2004). Does this make affective labeling important to our psychological well-being? In this paper, I argue that affective labeling is, in fact, beneficial, and the best way to do this is by using the emotional continuum. The emotional continuum is currently used as a diagnostic tool but could be a valuable asset when attempting to identify and work through emotional states. Sadness and contentment will be evaluated as part of the emotional continuum as well as how they present in real life. I will argue that contentment and sadness are much more closely related than most might think – contentment provides a certain type of way-station which permits other emotions to be felt more readily, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the emotional continuum. This transition from one emotion to another can be facilitated using a variety of tools like writing, journaling, or meditation (Arch & Craske, 2006). Application of tools like these can be an effective step in emotional self-regulation.

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It seems as if we feel emotions every second of every day. So why is it so hard to describe and name them? Martha Nussbaum and Jesse Prinz synthesize emotions in a way which identifies them as having intentionality (Prinz, 2004; Nussbaum, 2004). Intentionality in this sense can be thought of as emotions that are deliberately aimed at situations, objects, or people. This intentionality helps people interpret things about current situations. While emotions can also serve other functions, such as detection of bodily changes or communication with our environment, every situation involves an internal and external input. The focus of this paper will be the examinations of sadness and contentment, using the emotional continuum as a medium for labeling emotions.

My claim is that this “emotional continuum” could be a useful resource in identifying emotions we may have, thereby allowing us to identify and (if needed) regulate our emotions better. More specifically, I would be examining the relationship between sadness and contentment as a mnemonic learning tool to demonstrate how utilizing the emotional continuum can help individuals examine and comprehend emotions they may find difficult to understand and/or label.

What is Sadness?

Sadness is a very broad emotion that is difficult to define. Shirari and Suzuki (2017) operationalized sadness through a self-reported survey by participants. Specifically, three characteristics were found to be most descriptive of sadness: “tears,” “chest ache,” and “powerlessness.” These three factors are a function of both internal and external measures of

sadness as reported by participants. Sadness is also measured through facial expressions (through the Facial Action Coding System), behavioral patterns, and physiological responses to sad stimuli. Some of the physiological indicators of sadness include increased variation in heart rate and decreased skin conductance. Overall behavioral patterns of sadness mostly include tears, which makes it one of the most easily distinguished emotions from all others. Some studies indicate that there are also certain linguistic factors which encode sadness in different ways (Herbert, Bendig, & Rojas, 2019; Shirari, Soshi, & Suzuki, 2018). Such articles specifically address two types of words that are important: loss-associated words and failure-associated words. Shirari and Suzuki (2017) also found that there are two different psychologically and physiologically reported reactions to two distinctive sadness situations: “the loss of someone” and “failure to achieve a goal.” Failure-associated sadness has a more behaviorally dynamic expression, as shown through vocalization and how strongly a person cried. Loss-associated sadness is characterized by a quieter, solitary mourning because the loss is perceived to be less under our own control. Each of the subtypes of sadness tell us something about how we can deal with the situation at the present moment, allowing us to work through our emotions.

What is Contentment?

Contentment is described in many different ways across a multitude of countries and cultures, though there does seem to be some overlap. Contentment takes the form of life satisfaction (sometimes considered happiness), completeness in the moment, unconditional acceptance, appreciation of the present moment, “well-being of spirit,” and a state of “no desires” (Cordardo et al., 2016). Physiologically, there are relaxation responses when feeling contentment, such as decreased heart rate, decreased skin conductance, and decreased muscle tension.

People often comment that contentment provides them with an unhindered, broad view of life, as well as a relaxed physiological state (Cordardo et al., 2016). A state of contentment allows for easier reflection, so if a person is reflecting on something sad, it may come to the forefront of the mind more easily. Because of the relaxed state, any remembrance of past emotional situations would trigger the same feeling, and in this case, provide an easier transition to sadness. This easy shift can be applied to all emotions. But for the purpose of this paper, the specific transitions between sadness and contentment will be emphasized. This progression from one emotion to another is considered emotional regulation, which can be beneficial in many ways, as will be described in a later section.

The Emotional Continuum

The emotional continuum is used in the U.S. as a diagnostic tool for young children and anyone with trouble conveying how they feel. The emotional continuum can also be helpful for older children and adults in high stress situations or individuals with intellectual disabilities. This tool usually takes the form of a poster on the wall of a doctor's office, with an array of smiley faces on it (depicting varying degrees of emotionality), with the caption: "How are you feeling today?" The idea is that the visual representation of the varying degrees of the emotional spectrum could help people identify how they are feeling in the moment.

The emotional continuum is an effective way of identifying how people feel, so it could be advantageous for individuals to utilize this technique when talking about their emotions (with themselves or to others). It could also aid in further identifying the subtle changes within the emotional continuum. Being able to internally self-identify subtler emotional changes could lead to more empathy, as evidenced when children begin to be able to put themselves in another's place. It might also show benefits for people with alexithymia, which is defined as having an

impoverished emotion vocabulary. Because this condition leads to greater emotional regulation problems, frequent use of the emotional continuum and journaling would be advantageous in order to increase emotion vocabulary. Just being able to label emotions seems to have the effect of creating some perceived control over the emotion. Having strong emotion language skills encourages better expression of emotions and therefore better emotional regulation.

Contentment on the Emotional Continuum

While contentment is considered its own emotion, I would like to argue that it also serves as more of a midpoint for other emotions on the emotional continuum. This means that contentment is where all of your emotions are felt at the same intensity, so no one emotion is felt more strongly than the others. This, in turn, presents with a feeling of unconditional acceptance and appreciation of the present as mentioned earlier (Cordardo et al., 2016). When people are in situations that cause them to change affective states, the transition to another emotion is usually smooth. But starting to change affective states while content allows for us to experience other emotions more purely, or without feeling like every emotion is flooding us at the same time. Contentment takes the form of a more discreet, neutral emotion as opposed to more positive or negative states of feeling.

When imagining the emotional continuum, it is easiest to think about it as a linear progression, although this is not strictly accurate as individuals can feel multiple emotions simultaneously. On the left side of the line, there are the positive emotions, such as happiness, gratitude, and hope. On the right side of the line, there are the negative emotions, such as sadness, doubt, and shame. Contentment is squarely in the middle, where the entire existence of an individual is perceived to be whole and complete, not wanting any more or less (Cordardo et al., 2016). In other words, it feels like you know your place in the world and are where you want

to be in life. Rojas and Veenhoven (2013) contend that happiness consists of a judgement of balance: whether or not your life lives up to your own expectations. But I would argue that this is the definition of contentment: it is the feeling of being where you want to be in life. Happiness, I would contend, is going above and beyond your own expectations. Similarly, sadness is dependent upon expectations even though it is further down the emotional continuum. Sadness happens to focus on unmet expectations instead of exceeded expectations. In reality, there is only a small movement in either direction from contentment to achieve either happiness or contentment.

Sadness on the Emotional Continuum

Sadness is towards the right side of the emotional continuum because it is considered a negative affective state. Generalized sadness is not, however, at the very end of the continuum because it is not felt as strongly as grief or anguish. There is a sociocultural perspective that sadness is something we cannot show because it is a “bad” emotion (Bastian et al., 2012). A person knowing that they feel an emotion they perceive they are unable to physically express takes a toll on the body. In short, knowing that sadness is somehow socially inappropriate, makes us even more upset about experiencing that particular emotion, thereby making the situation worse. But experiencing and embracing sadness may be beneficial for us cognitively, motivationally, and interpersonally.

Forgas (2016) suggests that memory recall, attention, motivation, and understanding of language (among other things) were all improved by the presence of a negative affect. Participants in the negative affect group actually experienced a high emotional fluency score. Emotional fluency is described as the ease of processing emotions. In other words, being sad allowed participants to ignore irrelevant information when processing data. Sadness not only

helps us focus attention, but also serves a prosocial purpose. Evolutionary psychologists believe that this is due to the arousal of interpersonal sympathy, whereby every interaction would be cautious and polite (Forgas, 2016). Any interaction with a sad person would be tentative, making sure that their emotions feel validated and provide social support. Emotional fluency can be improved when sadness is separated from the surrounding negativity.

Importance of Identifying Emotions and Emotional Self-Regulation

Research suggests that testing emotional regulation can reveal how we interact with our peer groups (Lopes et al., 2005). Individuals who scored high on emotion regulation abilities (through the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test) viewed themselves as more interpersonally sensitive and prosocial than their colleagues. They were also rated more favorably by their peers, as indicated by peer nominations for interpersonal sensitivity and prosocial tendencies. Being able to emotionally regulate yourself has prosocial tendencies as well as personal benefits. One potential shortcoming of this study was that participants could have previously developed emotion regulation capabilities in response to dispositional affect. Dispositional affect is how people emotionally respond to situations in predictable ways. As a result, this study may be a measure of agreeableness instead of interpersonal relationships. Nevertheless, these findings indicate that there could be a prosocial role in identifying emotions.

Identifying emotions lead to less emotional lability (Hill & Updegraff, 2012). Emotional lability “refers to rapid, often exaggerated changes in mood, where strong emotions or feelings occur,” which could contribute to feelings of loss of control (ABIOS, 2017). Essentially, people with greater fluctuations in mood intensity rate higher on the emotional lability scale, and people with lesser fluctuations in mood intensity scored lower (showing emotional stability).

Participants with low emotional lability were able to view emotions as mental states that do not

demand an immediate reaction (Hill & Updegraff, 2012). Being able to process how a person is feeling before reacting allows them to better monitor how they respond. There are other benefits to emotional stability; those who earned an emotionally stable score were also highly likely to practice mindfulness.

Acknowledgement of contentment could contribute to mindfulness practices, which in turn can improve quality of life through a kind of behavioral intervention (Cordardo et al., 2016). Studies have found that following a focused breathing task, participants were able to respond moderately positively when shown 'neutral' slides, whereas the unfocused attention and worry test groups responded significantly more negatively to the neutral slides (Arch & Craske, 2006). Focused breathing and other mindfulness practices are helpful for focusing attention and being more positive. The focused-breathing group also reported the most stable, least emotional volatility across slide types. Not only does focused breathing help you concentrate, but it also helps stabilize your emotions. Mindfulness practices are often used in treated bipolar disorder because it helps decrease variability of both positive and negative emotions over time (Hill & Updegraff, 2012). Thus, mindfulness can be a useful tool in self-regulating on the emotional continuum.

Emotional efficacy is another important device in emotional self-regulation. Self-efficacy is having the ability and skills to attain a chosen outcome, so emotional self-efficacy would be demonstrated by a person being able to manipulate their own emotional state. Low levels of emotional efficacy and higher levels of emotional efficacy correspond to social transactions (Saarni, 1997). Individuals demonstrating greater emotional efficacy are able to negotiate their way through social transactions, interpersonal exchanges, and regulate their emotional experience more effectively. "In short, one is optimally self-regulating when one has a rich and

varied emotional life that is shared with others and when one meets the inevitable challenges of living with a broad repertoire of effective coping strategies” (Saarni, 1997). Emotion-related capacities are not only enriched by our relationships with others and our environment, but they also teach us about ourselves and help us cope in similar future situations.

Future Implications

There are various ways to utilize the idea that emotions are something over which you have control. But first having indicators of how people feel along the emotional continuum might be helpful. Herbert et al. (2019) examined the idea of certain linguistic markers that could indicate how individuals are feeling. Specifically, when writing about positive, negative, and neutral life events, certain linguistic markers could point to how one views themselves as well as their well-being on the emotional continuum. People can now identify some of the specific linguistic markers for more typically depressed individuals, because it reveals a few ways in which sadness can be portrayed through writing. Emotion writing by depressed individuals show a high presence of negative emotional words and less use of cognitive function words, so frequent emotional writing could be another type of diagnostic tool for people with depression. Cognitive function words are those that demonstrate knowledge of emotional causality or insight into the emotions felt. It could also help anyone to identify ways to consciously shift to and from emotional states (on the emotional continuum).

Emotions are often complicated feelings that seemingly take over our lives. But this does not mean that what we feel is at odds with what is rational. Rather, emotion and rationality inform and complement each other when necessary for making decisions (Prinz, 2004). Most people feel discomfort knowing they made an emotional decision, creating cognitive dissonance. But knowing your emotions and feeling like you know how to control them will most often give

people a feeling of peace. This aspect of control would lessen the cognitive dissonance of knowing that emotions are just as important as rationality when it comes to making decisions. Emotions are an indicator that you, as a person, care about things. Emotion and reason both equally inform every decision we make, based on what we care about. It is important to make decisions with both emotions and reason. But it is most important to remember that while all feelings are valid, not all actions are. Considering sadness, contentment, and the emotional continuum allow for people to accept and work through their emotions more easily by increasing emotional regulation and mindfulness.

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