

Invited Symposium: Emotion and Psychopathology

August 27, 2004

Emotion and Psychopathology
Ann M. Kring, chair
University of California, Berkeley
Presenters
Sheri Johnson
University of Miami
Jon Rottenberg
University of South Florida
Jon Kassel
University of Illinois-Chicago
James J. Gross, discussant
Stanford University

Some of the most meaningful research in psychological science can be translated to benefit real-world problems. The APS Annual Convention symposium “Emotion and Psychopathology” highlighted examples of how basic research from affective science can be applied to the study of psychopathology.

This symposium featured presentations by four distinguished researchers, Ann M. Kring, University of California, Berkeley; Jon Rottenberg, University of South Florida; Sheri Johnson, University of Miami; and Jon Kassel, University of Illinois, Chicago, followed by a discussion by one of the leading experts in the field of emotion, APS Fellow and Charter Member James J. Gross, Stanford University. The panel discussed why gaining a firm grasp on emotional functioning is important to fully understand psychopathology.

“Most Axis I [clinical] disorders and all of the Axis II [personality] disorders in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders revolve around problems with emotion,” Gross said. “If we want to have better diagnoses and to more effectively treat psychopathology, we have to come to grips with what is wrong in these disorders in terms of emotional functioning. The best way to get a handle on that is through translational research.”

Schizophrenia

Kring, chair of the symposium, presented her work on emotion dysfunction in schizophrenia. There is a consensus in the field that schizophrenia involves symptoms of flat affect and anhedonia. When Kring looked more closely and examined emotion in the context of the everyday lives of schizophrenic patients, she found a much more interesting story. Using experience sampling methods, emotional experience seemed to be relatively less affected than behavior.

“On a day-to-day basis, schizophrenic patients reported little positive emotion from social interaction. Yet, when asked to think about what makes them happy, they were likely to report social experiences,” Kring said. “This suggests a disconnect between recollections of social interactions in schizophrenics

and how they experience them in the moment.” Kring also noted the importance of conducting research on women with schizophrenia and presented findings from her own work suggesting that the conclusions researchers have made about emotion and schizophrenia may be specific to men with schizophrenia.

Depression

Rottenberg addressed the need for affective science in the study of depression. “Unlike schizophrenia, depression has a painfully familiar quality,” he said. “Ironically, our strong intuitions about what emotions are like in depression may slow down scientific investigation.” Rottenberg noted that many scientists routinely state that depression involves cognitive, somatic, and affective disturbances, but rarely spell out what exactly is disturbed.

Intuitive accounts of depression suggest that this disorder involves low reactivity to positive cues and high reactivity to negative cues. However, when Rottenberg took a closer look, he found that depressed individuals are unresponsive to changes in stimulus valence, a phenomenon he termed Emotion Context Insensitivity. ECI correlated with level of impairment and generalized across different stimuli (e.g., generic/idiographic films), but not clinical states of depression (e.g., previously/currently depressed individuals).

Bipolar Disorder

Johnson spoke about the importance of conducting research on psychological processes in bipolar disorder. “While genetic models predict who will get this disorder, they do very little to help us understand why episodes occur when they do, why some episodes are worse than others, and why some episodes last a year and others for only a few days,” she said.

Johnson noted that mania is associated with traits such as elevated reward responsivity, very high expectations and goals, and unrealistic life ambitions. When examining the role of context, Johnson’s laboratory found that life events involving incentive or goal attainment predicted increases in manic symptoms. Johnson also examined cognitive processes in bipolar disorder using a simple behavioral task in which subjects were instructed to press a button after a light comes on. She found associations between bipolar disorder and increased positive affect, goal setting, and success expectancy after success. Based on her research findings, Johnson said, “It appears that ambition and reward sensitivity remain high throughout the life course whether mania is present or not. Confidence on the other hand comes and goes. One of the big triggers for this shift seems to be a success in life that involves a major accomplishment.”

Nicotine Dependence

Kassel addressed the complex question of why people smoke despite its harmful effects. The predominant argument in the literature is that people smoke to reduce negative affect. However, Kassel noted that this assertion consists of three independent suppositions: people who experience heightened negative affect are more likely to smoke than those who didn’t; smokers smoke in response to negative affect; and smoking alleviates negative affect. Kassel found that each of these questions gives different answers when looking at initiation, maintenance, and relapse of smoking.

“As a field, we need to reframe our question from whether or not nicotine alleviates negative affect to for whom, under what conditions, and for which specific emotional states does smoking alleviate negative affect,” Kassel said.

In discussing the talks, Gross noted the difficulty in conducting translational research in emotion and psychopathology. Building bridges between basic emotion research and psychopathology, deciding who to put in the active and control groups, and thinking we know everything already are among the challenges faced by this work. Gross encouraged researchers to take the lead of the panel and “dispense of cartoon simplifications in order to get to the really interesting questions about how emotions are disrupted in clinical disorders.”