

Visitors' Preconceptions about Emotions and Actions

Joyce Ma

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Mind and Learning - Front-End Evaluation Visitors' Preconceptions about Emotions and Actions

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PURPOSE

This report summarizes one of a set of front-end studies conducted as part of the Mind and Learning Planning Grant. The goal of this particular study was to get a sense of how visitors believe emotions affect their actions. This study provides a list of visitors' ideas about the role of emotions in their lives and may inform the design of new exhibits that explore the connection between thinking and feeling.

METHOD

Data Collection

Visitor responses were collected over a one-week period, from 1/5/02 to 1/12/02. Data were collected through a question and answer table that was placed unattended in the prototype area on the Exploratorium floor. A sign above the table encouraged visitors to complete the following sentences:

If I had no emotions, I would be better at ...

because ...

But, I would be worse at ...

because...

This was placed in a loose-leaf binder on the question and answer desk. We hoped that this format would encourage a range of visitor responses. Alternatively, to provide some guidance for visitor input, we seeded the binder with responses from the Exploratorium staff. Also, two staff responses were posted above the desk to attract attention.

Data Corpus

We collected 44 visitor responses. This count does not include visitor scribbles and other non-task related inputs (e.g., “Tania was here”).

ANALYSIS

In our analysis, we noted 1) the types of emotions visitors wrote about and 2) visitors’ explanations for why emotions affect, either positively or negatively, certain actions.

FINDINGS

Types of emotions

Visitors wrote about the following types of emotions:

- Empathy / Sympathy (caring about what others feel)
- Pain
- Guilt
- Sorrow
- Fear
- Frustration
- Embarrassment
- Anger
- Nostalgia
- Conscience
- Anxiety
- Love
- Compassion
- Trust
- Desire
- Enjoyment
- Pleasure

How emotions affect actions

Table-1 lists the types of explanations visitors gave for why they believe emotions affect their actions, or more generally, what role emotions play in their lives. Examples for each explanation type are also provided to help define each category.

Table 1. How emotions affect actions

Explanation	Example
Emotions are essential for everything	<p>If I had no emotions, I would be better at <i>nothing because Aren't emotions part of doing anything well or badly?</i></p> <p>If I had no emotions, I would be better at <i>Being nonexistent or inanimate because It is part and parcel to being not just a human being but any living creature. Science has shown evidence that even fish may have an emotional side to them</i></p>
Emotions define who I am	<p>If I had no emotions, I would be worse at <i>Being me because I usually let my emotions take me where I am about to go. My emotions are all part of my thoughts, feelings and expressions. which make me who I am and differentiates myself from others.</i></p> <p>If I had no emotions, I would be worse at <i>Being human. Making mistakes- because no emotional angst to make them worthwhile, to give color and texture to one's life</i></p>
Emotions allows me to care about how my actions will affect others	<p>If I had no emotions, I would be better at <i>Telling people what to do because I wouldn't care about their feelings</i></p> <p>If I had no emotions, I would be better at <i>Getting everything I want because I would feel no guilt or embarrassment and could do whatever it takes to get what I want, even if it hurts others or makes me unlikable</i></p> <p>If I had no emotions, I would be worse at <i>Being nice because I wouldn't care about injustice and people being unhappy.</i></p>
Emotions are the bases for relationships	<p>If I had no emotions, I would be worse at <i>Making friends because I would not be emotionally involved (i.e. love, compassion, trust)</i></p>

Explanation	Example
	<p>If I had no emotions, I would be worse at <i>Communicating with others</i> because <i>I won't be able to show the appropriate emotional response when needed. For example: if someone is sad and I couldn't pick that up, I might be so happy about my day and had no idea that I hurt my friend's feelings.</i></p>
Emotions cause social friction	<p>If I had no emotions, I would be better at <i>Being w/family</i>. because <i>Mom would not make me mad.</i></p> <p>If I had no emotions, I would be better at <i>Getting along with people</i> because <i>I don't agree or disagree with them. because Everything that they say or do would not be a problem to me</i></p>
Emotions motivate and inspire	<p>If I had no emotions, I would be better at <i>Hard labor tasks</i> because <i>I could do the work without feeling "put-upon".</i></p> <p>If I had no emotions, I would be worse at <i>Chemistry</i> because <i>It is too difficult if you don't love it</i></p> <p>If I had no emotions, I would be worse at <i>Writing poetry or descriptive literature or appreciating beauty in all of its forms</i> because <i>It's emotions that inspire the words and metaphors!</i></p>
Emotions affect my judgement	<p>If I had no emotions, I would be better at <i>Wandering in circles</i> because <i>I would have nothing to guide my actions</i></p> <p>If I had no emotions, I would be better at <i>Following through with an order or task no matter what the nature of the task at hand was.</i> because <i>I don't have a conscious [conscience]</i></p>
Emotions can make me lose my self-control	<p>If I had no emotions, I would be better at <i>Controlling my composition</i> because <i>I wouldn't let my feelings get in the way, anger, etc.</i></p> <p>If I had no emotions, I would be better at <i>Arguments</i> because <i>I wouldn't burst into tears when trying to make my point thus making my whole point lack authenticity and logic.</i></p>

Explanation	Example
Emotions can make me lose my concentration / focus	<p>If I had no emotions, I would be better at <i>Concentrating on the important stuff that gets you through school (work) because My mind wouldn't be able to wander to things that aren't as important than succeeding</i></p> <p>If I had no emotions, I would be better at <i>Concentrating and accessing information because I wouldn't become distracted by photographs, music, crushes...because I wouldn't feel the need for them.</i></p>
Emotions are associated with creativity and spontaneity	<p>If I had no emotions, I would be better at <i>Learning to use all of my computer programs and options because The computer doesn't work in the creative, spontaneous way my mind does</i></p> <p>If I had no emotions, I would be better at <i>Working at mind-numbing, uncreative jobs because (isn't it obvious?)</i></p>
Emotions make life interesting	<p>If I had no emotions, I would be worse at <i>Enjoying life and appreciating things like a sunset or waves breaking because Watching nature or watching something amazing wouldn't stir any emotions or remind me of good and bad times</i></p> <p>If I had no emotions, I would be worse at <i>Life because Emotions create empathy and richness</i></p>

OVERALL COMMENTS

This set of comments suggests that visitors believe emotions affect their lives in various ways. In many cases, emotions are tied to social interactions, but they also impact the individual in the guise of motivation, creativity and judgement. Contrary to the view long held in cognitive science, these data do not clearly indicate that visitors hold a strict dichotomy between emotions and thought. Although some visitors equate emotions with creativity, spontaneity, and less 'rational' thought, there were also visitors who mentioned how emotions are necessary for everything that we do.

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