

Complex Emotions

Jessica Choe, Lisa K. Lashley, Charles J. Golden

Nova Southeastern University

Complex emotions are ways in which an individual reacts and respond to complex social situations when encountering people and situations in the social world. Thus, complex emotions are ways of coping and adapting to complex social situations. Complex emotions are mental representations that have been studied on a three-level analysis surrounding the body, mind, and society, which translates to the biological and the evolutionary, the mental and the psychological, and the social and the cultural. This approach has been referred to as the neurocognitive sociology of emotions.

Beyond the basic emotions, including sadness, anger, disgust, joy, surprise, and fear, are complex emotions. While basic emotions happen instinctively without much cognitive processing, complex emotions involve cognitive processing that are specified by self-reflection and self-evaluation. Therefore, the self-conscious or complex emotions are elicited by cognitions or thoughts about the self. For instance, one may experience shame following an evaluation that leads one to conclude that one has failed at certain tasks. The complex emotions identified here are shame, guilt, embarrassment, love, pride, jealousy, and envy.

Much of the earlier studies revealed that while basic emotions are characteristics of animals, complex emotions are characteristics of mature humans. The functions of complex emotions have been described as an extension of basic emotions that result in the activation of neuronal patterns in the brain, specifically in the cortical association areas, that causes glands to secrete, which in turn stimulate other glands and muscles to bring a greater consciousness to complex emotions. The neural explanation has been termed the “Avalanche Conduction,” which represents the neural patterns involved in the expression of complex emotions that are shaped by

complex experiences. For instance, a situation that arouses fear, combined with a situation that would arouse disgust, would then lead to arousing loathing, a specific complex emotion.

According to the differential emotions theory of Tomkins (1962, 1963), Izard (1977), and TenHouten, there are two stages in the acquisition of complex emotions. The cognitive processing of complex emotions depends upon the interaction and mixed relationships of basic or primary emotions and its underlying biological structures in the limbic system. In the first stage of the differentiation of complex emotions, primary emotions are developed, which are either present at birth or emerge earlier in life. Then, in the second stage differentiation, secondary or tertiary emotions (i.e., complex emotions) are formed by a mental association of two or three combinations of primary emotions, such that smugness might be considered as a mix of the two basic emotions, happiness and contempt. Complex emotions emerge later in life when a cognitive capability to experience one's self-conscious is further developed. Further, the understanding of interpersonal relationships can be shaped by a socialization experience with others, including parents, teachers, and peers, and help to form the foundation of experiencing complex emotions, such as shame, guilt, pride, and embarrassment.

Developmental studies show that at about three-to-six years of age, a child is exposed to a variety of situations that lead them to experience simple emotions, and progressively more complex emotions, such as embarrassment, while their interpersonal connections and self-recognition emerge. Children initially show behavioral signs of embarrassment (e.g., touching the face) at a very young age, but develop to display an understanding of embarrassment as they gain self-awareness. The understanding of guilt and remorse, and feelings of responsibility emerge from ages five to nine. Throughout the maturation and mental development process, the basic problems of life and social relations are integrated in complex ways, and emotions, such as shame, guilt,

envy, and jealousy, develop from a distress response. Other complex emotions, such as ambition, confidence, and love, develop out of contentment or pleasurable responses. Therefore, the developmental aspect of complex emotions is a lifelong process and develops across a wide spectrum of ages into older adulthood. As cognitive complexity increases with age due to demanding life situations, complex emotion processes similarly develop with mature, complex, and differentiated social experiences and life circumstances. Specifically, current literature reveals that older adults faced with emotional interpersonal situations appear to use different expressions of complex emotions than do younger adults.

Although there is a common theme shared by researchers and psychologists regarding the developmental and cognitive processes that underlie complex emotions, separate literature has emerged indicating differences within complex emotions, such as shame, guilt, and embarrassment. Research studies suggest that shame results from more serious failures and mortal transgressions and assumes more intense emotions than embarrassment or guilt, whereas embarrassment results from social transgressions and situation-specific failures. According to Helen Lewis, shame involves a negative evaluation of the global self, whereas guilt involves a negative evaluation of specific behavior.

Complex emotions depend upon basic emotions, which go beyond the simple interaction of biology, cognitive, and social elements in which self-consciousness and interpersonal relationships becomes crucial components of complex emotions.

Further Reading

Dalgleish, T., & Power, M. (Eds.). (2000). *Handbook of cognition and emotion*. John Wiley & Sons.

Goddard, H. H. (2013). Complex Emotions. *Psychology of the Normal and the Subnormal* (pp. 140-157). Routledge.

TenHouten, W. D. (2006). *A general theory of emotions and social life*. Routledge.