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A DOSE OF DICTION

The Language of Emotion

When people describe feeling “angry” or “distressed” or “dejected,” what do they really mean? Psychologists vigorously debate whether the words individuals use to describe their emotions actually reflect fixed states in the brain, or are merely convenient fictions for talking about feelings. “Are anger, sadness, and disgust really distinct, universal emotions, asks Erik Nook, a fourth-year doctoral student in clinical psychology, “or is it the case that, because we have learned different concepts for different emotions, we produce those emotions?” Nook particularly wants to understand why some people seem to have more precise, granular emotional concepts—they distinguish among feeling disappointed, frustrated, or discouraged, for example—while others describe a general, undifferentiated negativity.

Disentangling what emotional concepts mean, and how people understand them, is part of Nook’s work with Leah Somerville, an associate professor of psychology whose lab focuses on how the mind develops in adolescence. A forthcoming paper in Psychological Science by Nook, Somerville, and colleagues at the University of Washington examines how emotional differentiation (people’s ability to separate emotional experiences into different types) changes from childhood into early adulthood.

Their subjects, 143 recruits ranging in age from five to 25, were each shown a set of images designed to elicit negative emotions, such as a baby crying or a cemetery, and asked to rate on a scale from 0 to 100 how strongly they experienced five different feelings—angry, scared, disgusted, sad, and upset. Measuring emotion is a tricky business, Nook concedes, and image prompts are probably not a perfect way to evoke emotions. But the photographs come from a standard repertoire of images used in psychological research (so the results can be compared to other work in the field), and, he adds, there’s “a lot of good evidence that showing people pictures makes them feel things.”

The team was interested in testing two competing hypotheses about emotional differentiation: that it increases straightforwardly as children age, or that it follows a U-shaped trajectory throughout the lifespan, decreasing during adolescence and increasing again in adulthood. They used an intraclass correlation (ICC)—a correlation among more than two variables—to measure each participant’s ratings. A high ICC suggested that a subject had similar ratings for each of the five states, and thus differentiated little among different emotions; a low ICC reflected more finely tuned control over emotional concepts. The result, a U-shaped curve graphing emotional differentiation as a function of age,