



Rethinking emotion science: new theory section for *Cognition & Emotion*

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ABSTRACT

A cumulative emotion science requires sustained investments in theory development. To encourage such investments, a new section will be added to *Cognition & Emotion* that is specifically devoted to theory. In this Editorial, we first lay out the rationale for the new Theory section. Next, we consider the added value of theory for research on cognition and emotion. Building on these notions, we outline the kinds of articles that are to be published in the new Theory section, with Klaus Scherer being the inaugural Editor of the Theory section.

KEYWORDS

Cognition and emotion;
cognitive theories of
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development

New theory section for *Cognition & Emotion*

The timing of this Editorial is unusual in more ways than one. As a rule, Editorials are published in the first issue of the year. This year, however, we decided to publish our Editorial in a later issue to make room for the first Special Issue that appeared during our editorship, addressing the question of “Automatic processes in evaluative learning” (Hütter & Rothermund, 2020). In the ensuing months, we witnessed the emergence of a worldwide crisis from the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides large-scale loss of human life, the crisis has led to major restrictions of social contact in all areas of society (e.g. Ayalon et al., 2020), including scientific research. The resulting personal and professional challenges are severe. Nevertheless, these very challenges may contain the seeds of growth. The everyday treadmill of planning and conducting experiments, analyzing and publishing data has been interrupted. This allows us as emotion researchers to take a step back and look at the bigger picture of what we are doing, where we are coming from, and where we want to go.

As a scholarly journal, *Cognition & Emotion* has always recognised the vital role of reflection, and the resulting development of theories, concepts, and ideas that serve as essential guides of scientific research. Yet, in recent times, theory papers have become increasingly scarce within the pages of our

journal. To reverse this trend, and to warrant the theoretical tradition of *Cognition & Emotion*, a new section will be added to the journal that is uniquely devoted to theory. In what follows, we start by outlining the rationale for creating the new Theory section. Next, we consider how theory development serves as an essential complement to the focus on methodology that – understandably and often justifiably – has come to predominate present-day scientific research. We then describe in general terms the kinds of articles that the new Theory section will be aiming for. Finally, in a brief concluding section, we review main changes in the editorial team of *Cognition & Emotion* that have occurred since last year.

Cognition & Emotion as the cradle of theory development

In our first Editorial, we reflected broadly on the first three decades of *Cognition & Emotion* (Rothermund & Koole, 2018). One conclusion that we took away from this exercise was how the development of bold, new, and integrative ideas has always been foundational to the journal. During the pioneering years of *Cognition & Emotion* (1987–1999), the journal had roughly an equal number of theoretical and empirical articles. Articles in *Cognition & Emotion* actively debated the status of emotion as a scientific construct

and put forward integrative theories that cut across traditional disciplinary boundaries.

From the 2000s onward, the balance shifted more and more in favour of empirical papers. This shift may reflect a natural progression from general ideas that are gradually being broken down into smaller, more empirically tractable questions. Empirical paradigms were established and successively refined, which led to articles with increasing complexity and technical sophistication. From 2012 onward, the existing trend toward empiricism was further reinforced by emerging concerns about the reproducibility of experimental paradigms. One tangible outcome of these discussions was the creation of a new section of Registered Replication Reports (RRR) in *Cognition & Emotion*. The RRR section, and its immediate successor the Registered Reports (RR) section, marked a new era in which articles could be published in *Cognition & Emotion* almost exclusively on the basis of their methodological merits.

The present Zeitgeist thus clearly favours empiricism. In spite of this, however, *Cognition & Emotion* remains committed to theory development. A case in point is the Special Issue on *Horizons of Cognition & Emotion* research (Koole & Rothermund, 2019). In the *Horizons* issue, twelve distinguished emotion researchers were invited to take a bird's eye view of the field, reflecting on what they saw as its main developments from the past thirty years and into the future. The interplay between cognition and emotion is notoriously complex, and so research over the last decades has known many pitfalls and dead ends. Nevertheless, each contribution to *Horizons* relates how researchers have managed to advance insight into the cognition-emotion interface, often slowly but nonetheless steadily, over the years.

By tracing the field's development over the last thirty years, the *Horizons* issue inevitably brings the spotlight back on theory. Theory organises a collection of facts into a coherent whole. The integrative function of theory seems especially important in the study of cognition and emotion, which is conducted across many scientific disciplines simultaneously. Hence,

we need more efforts devoted to the clarification, explication, reconstruction, comparison and integration of theories and hypotheses in the field of emotion, as well to the systematization of empirical and theoretical arguments in favour of and against these theories and hypotheses. (Reisenzein, 2019, p. 114)

These and related considerations led Rainer Reisenzein (2019) to propose a section of *Cognition &*

Emotion that is exclusively devoted to theory. We gratefully acknowledge Rainer for this proposal, which is now being implemented in our journal.

The value of theory

Emotion science, along with psychology at large, has long had a deeply ambivalent relationship with theory. Ideally (or dare we say: in theory?) testing theory is taken to be the central goal of research. According to this ideal, researchers achieve scientific progress by formulating theories and testing them empirically, using sophisticated methods. As such, it is generally acknowledged that theories are essential vehicles of scientific progress and carriers of scientific knowledge.

However, there is another side to theory, a side that is highly contested. Methodological considerations sometimes promoted a skeptical stance toward theory: After all, no theory can be proven true by empirical data. Indeed, several authors have suggested that theory may sometimes obstruct scientific progress. For instance, Greenwald et al. (1986) proposed that “theory obstructs progress when the researcher is an ego-involved advocate of the theory and may be willing to persevere indefinitely in the face of prediction-disconfirming results” (p. 227). The latter point has been echoed by proponents of the reproducibility movement, who have expressed concerns about researchers' degrees of freedom in confirming their favourite theories (e.g. Simmons et al., 2011).

A rough measure of the beleaguered status of theory can be obtained by noting how little attention is allocated to the development of theoretical skills in the training of academic psychologists. It is rare for academic psychologists to receive any training that is specifically devoted to comparing, improving, and developing psychological theories. Theories are mostly considered to consist in a set of assumptions or hypotheses that are then put to an empirical test, resting on a simple understanding of empirical science as consisting in attempts to falsify daring – but otherwise more or less arbitrarily chosen – theoretical conjectures by evidence that contradicts these claims (Popper, 1963). Little, if any, mention is made of conceptual precision, consistency, or distinctions between testable empirical propositions and an untestable logical or structural core of a theory (for exceptions, see, e.g. Brandtstädter, 1982, 1984, 1993; Smedslund, 1991; Westermann, 1987). This mostly

agnostic stance with regard to theory stands in stark contrast to the extensive training in methods that psychologists normally receive at academic institutions, where methodological training typically takes up multiple years and continues throughout psychologists' career.

What, then, is the value of theory? A potentially useful starting point for addressing this question is provided by the TAPAS model (Van Lange, 2013). The model suggests that Truth, Abstraction, Progress, and Applicability are Standards (TAPAS) for evaluating the value of a theory. The Truth standard means that a valuable theory should be oriented toward explaining reality, and that the validity of the theory should be empirically testable. The Abstraction standard means that a valuable theory should explain particular phenomena in terms of basic principles and causal mechanisms, whose generality transcend that of particular observations. The Progress standard means that a valuable theory should improve or expand the understanding of phenomena, for instance, by leading researchers to develop new approaches or perspectives. Finally, the Applicability standard means that a valuable theory should speak to real-world concerns and afford interventions to change events for the better.

Whereas the TAPAS model (Van Lange, 2013) provides a general framework for assessing the value of a theory, there are additional considerations when it comes to theories of cognition and emotion. From our perspective, theories of cognition and emotion have to be rooted in the understanding of emotion concepts that are part of everyday language. These everyday emotion words provide the basis of self-reports of emotion and emotion communication in social interactions. Without a proper understanding of the usage of everyday emotion words, no theory of emotion and cognition will be able to capture the phenomenon we are interested in (e.g. Brandtstädter, 2000; Keltner, 2019; Montada, 1989; Müller, 2013).

Still, theories of cognition and emotion should move beyond the level of everyday language. It is not sufficient for theoretical formulations to consist wholly or mostly of redefinitions of established terms and concepts. To aim higher, theories should identify cognitive processes and mechanisms that are involved in shaping and modifying our emotional experience. This means that theories should add a functional or sub-personal level of explanation to the everyday understanding of emotions (e.g. De Houwer & Hughes, 2019; Gyurak et al., 2011; Koole &

Rothermund, 2011; Reisenzein, 2009; Rothermund et al., *in press*; Scherer & Moors, 2019; Wentura, 2019).

Which articles are suitable for the theory section?

The Theory section in *Cognition and Emotion* seeks to provide an enduring forum where core questions of the field can be addressed on a regular basis. Thus, we are looking for articles that aim at integrating theoretical and conceptual frameworks with existing empirical data, bringing together research areas that have hitherto been unconnected and separate. Articles for the Theory Section will often have the form of a review that evaluates and refines (or rejects) theoretical models of cognition and emotion on the basis of existing research.

To jumpstart the Theory section, we will actively solicit contributions from different scholars in the field, and we will also invite other authors to comment on these papers. Papers for the Theory section can be submitted without invitation via the regular submission portal of the journal. In case of an original theory submission, authors should contact the editor of the Theory section first, sending an outline of the planned contribution. The proposal should be no more than three pages, including a list of probable references for the paper. Proposals should be submitted via the web portal (<https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/pcem>) under the manuscript type Unsolicited Proposal. These proposals should also include the names of 4–5 possible reviewers without a conflict of interest and their email addresses. The Theory section editor will then decide whether the submission is a good fit for the section.

The following submission guidelines will hold for submissions to the theory section: Original theoretical papers and reviews can be submitted as Full Articles (i.e. with a word limit of 8,000 words, including all text and references). Commentaries will have to be submitted in a short format (word limit 2,500 words). Papers submitted to the theory section should be explicitly highlighted as Theory papers in the cover letter, so that they can be assigned properly.

Changes in the editorial team and words of gratitude

The inaugural editor of the Theory section is Klaus Scherer. Klaus Scherer has been one of the major

scholars in modern emotion science, who has shaped theory development in the field of cognition and emotion since its very beginning and during the last decades (e.g. Leventhal & Scherer, 1987; Scherer, 2009, 2019; Scherer & Moors, 2019). The appointment of Klaus Scherer as the editor of the Theory section is especially fitting given that the first article that appeared in the journal was a theoretical article that was co-authored by him (Leventhal & Scherer, 1987). Given his groundbreaking contributions to the field and his extensive editorial experience (e.g. as one of the founding editors of *Emotion*), we cannot think of a better choice for the editor of the new Theory section.

There have also been other changes in the team of Associate Editors. Of the previous team, five are leaving the journal because of other pressing obligations. These are in alphabetical order: Linda Camras, Natalie Ebner, Thomas Ehring, Jonathan Rottenberg, and Christian Waugh. On behalf of *Cognition & Emotion*, we thank these Associate Editors for countless hours of hard work and commitment to excellence for the journal over the years, sometimes even decades.

Five excellent new people were willing to join the ranks of Associate Editors: Phoebe Bailey, Hedwig Eisenbarth, Gerben van Kleef, Renee Thompson, and Yulia Chentsova have agreed to serve as Associate Editors of the journal during the next years. The incoming Associate Editors add new fields of expertise to the journal, which allows us to handle a broader range of submissions in the field of cognition and emotion. On behalf of *Cognition & Emotion*, we welcome our new Associate Editors to the editorial team.

Finally, we thank our authors, readers, reviewers, editors, and the publishers at Taylor & Francis for their continued support of *Cognition & Emotion*. These are challenging times for everyone. Nevertheless, when we work together, we can face the upcoming challenges with confidence.

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