Defining Affect in Relation to Cognition: A Response to Susan McLeod

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In “The Affective Domain and the Writing Process: Working Definitions,” Susan McLeod undertakes the difficult task of defining affect. McLeod offers definitions for various facets of affective experience and suggests classifying these facets on the basis of their intensity and stability. While a continuum founded on intensity-stability renders affective experiences manageable, like any taxonomy it conceals and highlights simultaneously. For instance, although McLeod acknowledges the interpenetration of cognition and affect, her taxonomy tends to obscure this fundamental characteristic of all thought. I would like to suggest an alternate way to define affect, one based on the interweaving of affect and cognition. Defining affect in this fashion highlights the crucial role affect plays in all thought and stresses the need to expand our research agenda to embrace affect.

Affect is not an adjunct to thought or a supernumerary in meaning making. It is an integral, if not the initiating, part of all knowledge construction. As Vygotsky points out, “A true and full understanding of another’s thought is possible only when we understand its affective-volitional basis” (150). Nor is Vygotsky the only researcher to cite the primacy of affect. For instance, two years before the first appearance of Vygotsky’s Thought and Language, Frederic Bartlett, the father of schema theory, noted the essential role affect plays in cognition. Bartlett claims that affect serves as the basis for thinking and remembering. It is also the major way we have of “turning around” on our schemata and obtaining conscious understanding. More recently, Susan Fiske, with her concept of schema-triggered affect, builds on Bartlett’s work. According to Fiske, affect is inextricably woven into our knowledge domains as we construct them. The intensity of any affective reaction is an outgrowth of the degree to which a particular schema, and its attendant affective elements, is instantiated. Finally, Robert Plutchik emphasizes the fundamental role of affect in the evolution of the species and in the development of the individual. Plutchik asserts that affect phylogenetically and ontogenetically precedes cognition.

What this research serves to highlight is that cognition does not occur bereft of affect. Nor is affect, contrary to the claims of Rom Harré and
Richard Lazarus, solely a product of cognition, resulting from some analytical assessment of a situation. Instead, affect is an inextricable element of cognition. This interpenetration is the primary reason we need to extend our research agenda to include affect. Failure to do so leaves us with impoverished descriptions of the phenomenon that fascinates us all: the process of constructing order out of chaos.

The Cognitive-Affective Dance

I would like to suggest a way of modeling affect which emphasizes this cognitive-affective dance. This model is not meant to replace McLeod's valuable classification scheme; in fact, it draws on her work. Instead, it is meant to provide another lens through which to view this very bewitching affective-cognitive pas de deux. Before going any further, however, let me differentiate between cognition and affect.

Associated with the formation of knowledge structures, cognition involves reasoning processes that focus primarily on information transformations (Zajonc) and employ analytic and integrative strategies (Singer). Identified almost synonymously with problem-solving, cognitive activities synthesize incoming stimuli into active or fluid data structures (Bartlett). Affect, as McLeod points out, is more difficult to define, in part because explanations tend to shift between or conflate conation and emotions (Mathewson). Perhaps the most workable solution is to use affect as an umbrella term to include emotions, feelings, moods, preferences, beliefs, attitudes, motivations, and evaluations—that "loose aggregate of phenomena which psychologists normally class as 'affective'" (Aylwin 4). The next step, then, is to differentiate among members of this "loose aggregate."

Figure 1 illustrates a conceptualization of affective experiences in relation to cognition. Such a continuum resembles Louise Rosenblatt's efforts to describe the difference between efferent and aesthetic reading. According to Rosenblatt, no reading event is ever purely aesthetic (for the pleasure of the experience) or efferent (for the purpose of obtaining information), but an interweaving of both. As the reader's focus concentrates more on the aesthetic stance, less attention is paid to the efferent stance. Likewise, when the focus is on efferent reading, less heed is given to aesthetic concerns. Figure 1 suggests a similar play among affective and cognitive experiences. The degree of shading indicates the extent to which we attend to affective experiences. At the top of the continuum, where the shading is darkest, the affective focus is most powerful, with less attention given to cognitive activities. As a result of that focus, emotions, feelings, moods, and preferences are clustered here.

Although McLeod defines feelings as the physical manifestations of emotions (what Robert Zajonc and Hazel Markus in "Affect and Cognition: The Hard Interface" call the first level of affect or the neurophysiological-biochemical level), I am defining feelings as part of our psychological as well
as our physiological baggage. This choice reflects a similar position taken by Grover Mathewson in his model of the affective processes in reading. Mathewson defines feelings as physical sensations, usually with an affective component. We can discriminate between emotions and feelings by seeing emotions as chains of feeling states (Plutchik). To illustrate, when we are in the grip of an emotion, we tend to draw on feeling states that reinforce that emotion. Betty, a student of mine, frequently demonstrated this tendency in personal diary entries. During one entry, begun in the midst of a depression, Betty opens with a memory of her brother traveling to O'Hare on the first leg of his flight to Vietnam. The entry leapfrogs from that memory to her current experiences in ROTC to her sense of alienation on a college campus filled with teenagers. Although the entry lacks what Robert de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Dressler call ideational coherence, it does have an emotional coherence, where one predominant emotion (that of emotion) ties successive feeling states (loss, disillusionment, alienation) into a unified experience.

By drawing on McLeod's intensity-stability taxonomy, we can differentiate between moods and feelings. Moods are more transitory and less
powerful than feelings, and thus more manageable. Dolf Zillman’s research suggests the manageability of moods. Zillman asserts that we consume media entertainment to manipulate our moods states. We choose material that will help us modify or regulate our moods in desirable ways. Thus, negative moods can be reduced and positive moods intensified through exposure to particular types of entertainment. More specifically, during a study in which I examined the affective processes in five subjects’ expressive writing and aesthetic reading activities, mood management seemed to be a primary impetus for their language activities. All five subjects claimed that they read and re-read certain novels because these novels had the power to transform a bad mood into a more pleasant one or to reinforce a pleasant one. Such a sentiment echoes that of James Britton’s daughter Clare, who claimed that she read *Treasure Island* when she was “feeling boyish,” and *The Smallest Dormouse* when she was feeling tired or girlish (35).

Finally, preferences, the last element of the top cluster, lead to particular actions, for instance, choosing one kind of novel (science fiction) over another (detective fiction), choosing one kind of writing environment over another, choosing one writing topic or perspective over another. As Zajonc points out, our development of a preference can occur with minimal cognitive mediation. For instance, Zajonc cites numerous empirical studies in which individuals formed preferences, or positive attitudes, toward an object (musical tone, ideograph, and so on) independent of recognition. Thus, our preference for a person, food, book, and so on can arise with a minimum of cognitive assessment.

These four experiences, which are similar but definitely not synonymous, are clustered together because of their common resistance to cognitive mediation. When we are attending to experiences at this end of the continuum, we are subsequently less attentive to parallel cognitive experiences. Thus, processes at this end of the continuum are extremely resistant to cognitive-mediated change; that is, it is difficult, if not impossible, to “talk” a person (or ourselves) out of an emotion, feeling, mood, or preference. We might be able to modify our moods, but only by selecting experiences which evoke one mood in place of another. We are usually unsuccessful when we try to change a bad mood by telling ourselves that such a mood is silly or nonproductive. At that point Poe’s “spirit of perverseness” seems to take over, and we cling to that bad mood, seemingly because it is silly and nonproductive. Similarly, while we might be able to identify or articulate a preference, it is usually more difficult to explain or change a preference. Affective experiences at the top of the continuum are rarely amenable to alteration by analysis.

On the other hand, attitudes and beliefs fall at the midpoint of the continuum since they involve greater cognitive input, a greater interweaving of emotional and analytical factors. Attitudes appear to function with less cognitive input than beliefs, which are more firmly seated and longer lived.
than attitudes (Zajonc and Markus, "Affective"). Motivations range even further from affect in that they require cognitive assessment of the changing internal states that disrupt an individual's unconscious sense of equilibrium. When this internal balance is threatened, the individual assesses the negative feedback and is motivated to some action (Plutchik). Evaluation is the cognitive aspect of affect; it influences the type of response pattern selected and involves an analytical assessment of stimuli according to previously structured criteria.

This continuum thus models a range of affective experiences and states. It also shows the relative influence of cognition within affect and, concomitantly, of affect within cognition. Finally, the continuum serves to show how an individual's focus reduces the intensity and density of affective experiences while simultaneously increasing the intensity and density of cognitive operations.

A Final Dimension

To further complicate matters, another dimension needs to be added to the continuum. An individual does not evoke a single range of affective experiences in response to a single task, such as reading or writing. Instead, the individual first approaches the task in an ongoing feeling state, regardless of whether it is positive or negative, and this feeling state subsequently colors both ensuing affective and cognitive processes (Izard; Plutchik). Second, the thought of an ensuing task evokes a particular affective response, for instance, writing-reading anxiety or pleasurable anticipation. Third, an awareness of the actual task performance creates an emotional response, whether frustration, excitement, or satisfaction. Finally, an emotional response is evoked by means of doing the task. This response is the vicarious lived-through experience that Rosenblatt says is the primary characteristic of aesthetic reading and that psychologists state is a therapeutic outgrowth of journal writing. This response, evoked by the performance of a task, may also be the engagement (Langston) or immersion (Spiro) writers and readers experience. Thus, the entire continuum of processes represented by Figure 1, plus the interwoven cognitive activities, functions on a variety of interpenetrating levels. Our attempts to investigate the role of affect in language activities need to include some means of designating, first, which affective experiences and, second, which moments within the language activities we wish to examine.

Any model attempting to render chaos meaningful cannot be judged by its representation of an objective reality. As scholars in various disciplines have been pointing out, the concept of an objective reality is ontologically and epistemologically debatable (Bruner; Glasersfeld; Berlin). Rather, the value of any model can only be established by its explanatory potential, its implications for further study, and its ability to address our needs as teachers.
and researchers. I believe that conceptualizing affect—as McLeod suggests, on the basis of intensity and stability or, as I suggest, on the basis of the cognitive-affective dance—offers powerful metaphors we can use to reexamine and enlarge our visions of meaning making.

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Works Cited


Reply to Kristie Fleckenstein

SUSAN H. MCLEOD

First of all, let me respond to a difficulty with the version of “The Affective Domain” paper as it appeared in JAC. The parenthetical statement on page 97 that references Piaget should read “quoted in Derry and Murphy 130”; I would like to blame the difficulty on a computer glitch, but I am sure that in fact the error was mine.

I am very interested in Professor Fleckenstein’s response for several reasons. First, she discusses the relationship of affect to schema theory, a relationship that seems to me to be a profitable line of inquiry. It is one I have been thinking about as well, and it’s one I hope others will help explore.