

A call for an evolved understanding of emotion

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In a new scholarly review, psychology professor Lisa Feldman Barrett points out that the beliefs about emotion guiding many security practices today may be flawed. Credit: Mary Knox Merrill.

(Medical Xpress) -- Many scientists believe that all people experience and express the same biologically “basic” emotions — an idea they have attributed to evolutionist Charles Darwin and one that has shaped modern security training and law enforcement techniques.

But that belief is not rooted in sound scientific study, says Northeastern’s Lisa Feldman Barrett, Distinguished Professor of Psychology in the College of Science, who wrote a review of recent research for the Association for Psychological Science’s journal, *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, titled “[Was Darwin Wrong About Emotional Expressions?](#)”

“It has been assumed for many years that when you feel some emotion, you automatically show that emotion on your face. This belief guides security training at airports, FBI training and so on,” Barrett said. “But there’s a lot of research out there to show that emotions are not written on the face, that there’s a lot of context that a perceiver like you or me brings to the judgment of facial expressions.”

Backers of a “basic” emotions approach cite Darwin, who wrote “Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals” after his famous “Origin of the Species.” That book argued that emotions were states of minds that were automatically expressed across animal species.

“But Darwin’s views were that these [emotional](#) expressions were vestigial, more like your tailbone — something that evolution carried forward but which may no longer be of any use,” Barrett said. “So Darwin was arguing that these expressions are no longer functional, thereby showing that they must exist as an inherited characteristic.”

Commonly held beliefs in psychology include that humans automatically express a handful of emotions, like sadness through a frown or anger through a scowl. But recent research — by Barrett’s own lab at Northeastern and others — has challenged that longstanding hypothesis. Instead, the new research shows that small changes in an experiment can lead to dramatically different results. And recent articles published in the journals Nature and Science call into question the use of security-training techniques based on the “basic emotion” approach.

“The fact is, it’s not really clear from the existing evidence that people actually make these expressions on an everyday basis,” Barrett said.

“When do people actually pout in sadness? You certainly couldn’t win an Academy Award for pouting in sadness.”

Barrett said that further study of emotion beyond the most popular

hypothesis is important, especially since the potentially flawed research has become the basis for law enforcement and homeland security protocols and procedures.

“The idea that facial expressions are a beacon for you to read is just not right,” she said. “It’s a really popular view and you can find data that supports it, but you can also find a tremendous amount of data that does not. That research doesn’t seem to be getting much play, and it needs to.”

Provided by Northeastern University

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