



Commentary

The thinking person's emotion theorist: A comment on Bartlett's 'Feeling, imaging, and thinking'

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It is impossible to work as a psychologist in Cambridge for very long without succumbing to the influence of Frederic Bartlett who spent his whole academic life in the city. For my own part, his portrait gazes penetratingly down on me each day from the common room wall of the Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit which he directed in its former guise as the Applied Psychology Unit from 1945 to 1951. Prior to that, Bartlett had studied as an undergraduate in Moral Science at St. John's College before joining the staff of the then Cambridge Psychological Laboratory, initially replacing Cyril Burt as the laboratory assistant. Bartlett went on to direct the laboratory and became Cambridge's first Professor of Experimental Psychology. Whilst there he wrote the present target article 'Feeling, imaging, and thinking', about which I later offer some comments.

What kind of psychologist was Bartlett? He is perhaps best known for his study of memory, epitomized by his classic work *Remembering* published in 1932 (Bartlett, 1932). Despite this, some would describe him as a social psychologist and he certainly devoted much of his published output to this field, as well as spending hours teaching it to generations of students. However, he also made enormous contributions to perception, the psychology of thinking (more later), and the fields of anthropology, historical psychology, applied psychology, and industrial/organizational psychology. Bartlett himself eschewed any such ready descriptions: 'Apparently, a psychologist must have a descriptive label if people are to take much notice of him. He must be of this "school" or of that, and if his "school" is his own invention thrice blessed is he. There may be something ineffaceably controversial in the typical psychological temperament. This puts me in some difficulty, for, if I am to say what sort of a psychologist I am, I think I can say only that I am a Cambridge psychologist' (Bartlett, 1936). Heeding this warning, it is perhaps better to think of Bartlett as someone who developed and refined an *approach* to psychology, that cuts through social, cognitive and applied domains, rather than as a member of any particular school.

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Much of this ‘Bartlett approach’ concerns ideals of methodology and experimental scrutiny (see Bartlett, 1936), but there were also clear theoretical themes and it is these that are most pertinent when considering his singular contribution to the psychology of emotions ‘Feeling, imaging, and thinking’, which I turn to now. Bartlett’s is a classic cognitive theory of emotion. By this I mean that stimuli in the world are not seen as being inherently emotive but become so as a result of a cognitive analysis that elucidates their implications for a person’s ‘tendencies’ (something akin to ‘goal-driven action readiness’ in more contemporary parlance). Furthermore, Bartlett’s is a functional theory of emotion such that ‘when feeling first arises it does so as a sign to the organism concerned that there is a conflict or that integration and the achievement of a new response is possible’ (p. 25). Emotions, then, tell us that ‘something should be done!’ (p. 25). Bartlett’s theory thus belongs to a long line of cognitive functionalist approaches to emotion dating back at least to Aristotle in the *Art of Rhetoric* (Aristotle, 1991), though it is unclear whether Bartlett was aware of this pedigree (despite being an active member of the Aristotelian Society) as he restricts his acknowledgements to MacCurdy’s ideas published in *The Psychology of Emotions* in 1925.

Within this broad cognitive-functional context the influence of several key ideas that run through much of Bartlett’s work is most pervasive in his discussion of the different roles of feelings, imagery, and thinking. Bartlett proposes that feelings, although they spur us to action, can only deliver a blurred understanding of the situations that have given rise to them due to the ‘diffusion’ and ‘transference’ of affect. What is needed, he proposes, is the recruitment of cognitive analysis to generate ‘a more conscious discrimination of the situations which have aroused the antagonistic reaction tendencies’ (pp. 25–26). This idea of ‘effort after meaning’ (Bartlett, 1916) is central to Bartlett’s body of work. The first of such ‘efforts’ is imaging (Bartlett, 1916, 1921, 1927). Imaging involves a precise formulation of the situation in the absence of the immediate sensory stimuli (and thus differs from perceiving). Imaging therefore overcomes the inevitable blurring of events associated with feelings and provides the beginnings of an understanding of the original events. Bartlett identifies two problems with images though. First, they are not associated with any kind of drive to do anything about the situation. Images don’t cry out that ‘something must be done!’ and so feelings ‘cannot be wholly dropped’. Secondly, images have a ‘fatal liability to particularize situations’, as they project on to present circumstances clear images of similar past experiences which may turn out not to be appropriate and indeed may offer ‘an exceedingly bad solution of any difficulty’. This influence of regularities in past experience on current cognition occurs repeatedly in Bartlett’s work, most famously in his invocation of Henry Head’s notion of schema (see Oldfield & Zangwill, 1943) in the repeated recounting of folk tales such as War of the Ghosts, as detailed in *Remembering*. These shortfalls of imaging clear the way for ‘thinking’ – the second effort after meaning. Thinking is more abstracted from the original situation. As such it ‘proceeds by isolating and generalizing the elements which gave rise to the check’, thus identifying a more appropriate course of action ‘because it gets farther away from the elements of a particular environment’. These ideas about thinking became progressively central to Bartlett’s work as his career developed culminating in his seminal book of that title published in 1958 when he was in his 70s (Bartlett, 1958).

Bartlett is keen to acknowledge that feeling, imaging, and thinking all have their place in the analysis of conflict-provoking situations and that ‘each has its own excellences as well as its own shortcoming’ (p. 27). However, even a cursory reading of his essay reveals his true allegiance to thinking as the highest psychological process and

indeed, his own comments notwithstanding, it is hard to find any discussion of thinking's shortcomings therein. In this respect Bartlett's contribution to the psychology of emotion echoes that of another eminent Greek scholar - Plato - who in his *Republic* (Plato, 1977) reified the role of intellectual thought over that of emotions. Plato's citizens would have felt very comfortable with Bartlett's 'unaffectionate man' - 'the man of supreme practical effectiveness within a limited sphere or the man of remarkable intellectual clarity' (p. 17). It is in this elevation of thinking over emoting perhaps that Bartlett's ideas diverge most clearly from contemporary cognitive models of affect where the putative functional contributions of emotion and thinking to mental life have greater parity (see Power & Dalgleish, 2008). This partisanship may partly explain why Bartlett said little more about emotion in his subsequent writings such that the importance of his contribution to the field remains somewhat neglected. It is to be hoped that the republication of this elegant and important work will bring Bartlett's ideas to the attention of a new generation of scholars in affective science.

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