

Module: Psychological Foundations of Mental Health

Week 4 Beyond basic cognition and emotion

Topic 2 Evaluation: interpretation and appraisal – Part 2 of 3

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Lecture transcript

Slide 2

Appraisals of our environment influence how we feel, and how we feel influences how we appraise the environment. It is not surprising that psychologists are therefore very interested in how these processes work and what can be done to promote well-being and happiness or minimise suffering through the lens of appraisals.

One particular focus is how people can effectively deal with stress, which occurs when people appraise events as harmful, threatening, or challenging, and these events are perceived to tax or exceed one's resources. Trying to manage demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding one's resources is known as coping. Indeed, appraisals are key to understanding how people cope with stress and how we can increase people's coping skills.

Dr. Pile will discuss appraisals and mental health in more detail in the next lecture. And I will first introduce to you some general theories on appraisals in the context of coping.

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Lazarus cognitive-motivational-relational theory is one of the most influential frameworks for understanding how people process potentially stressful experiences. According to Lazarus theory, appraisals can be separated into two categories of appraisals. Accordingly, these appraisals are referred to as primary and secondary appraisals.

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When people are confronted with an event, their primary appraisal is typically characterised by an assessment of whether the event is congruent with their own goals and how relevant the event is for themselves. For example, a student learning that she failed her exam may appraise this event as highly relevant and incongruent with her goal of mastering a subject, leading to negative emotions, such as sadness or disappointment. Passing the exam, on the other hand, would likely elicit positive emotions, such as pride and happiness. Events that are perceived as irrelevant-- for example, because they are not seen as important-- are unlikely to elicit emotions.

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The secondary appraisals involve an assessment of the options that are available to the person for coping with the event-- especially when it is eliciting negative emotions-- and what resources are available to do so. For example, the person may appraise whether the cause for the emotion is oneself or another person. Going back to the student who failed her exam, she can seek to blame herself for the situation-- for example, for not studying hard enough-- or blame another, or the situation for the event-- for example, that the exam was unfairly difficult.

Furthermore, the secondary appraisal process involves an assessment of coping potential-- does the person possess the resources to deal with a negative event and how the problem can be tackled. This is also called self-efficacy-- the perception that one is able to perform a certain action.

One factor here is people's belief in their potential for problem-focused coping. Are they able to change the situation to make it congruent with their goals? In context of the student failing the exam, this may be difficult, for it would require changing the outcome of the test. In that example, the potential for problem-focused coping would therefore likely be appraised as low.

Another strategy is emotion-focused coping. In particular, as part of the secondary appraisals, people assess their potential for changing the way they relate to the situation rather than changing the situation itself. In the student example, the girl may convince herself that she does not care about studying after all or she may remind herself that failing one exam does not mean the end of the world. In these cases, she has changed the way she relates herself and her goal to the unpleasant event.

If people appraise their coping potential-- be it emotion-focused or problem-focused-- as high, then they are unlikely to feel particularly stressed about the event. If, on the other hand, coping potential is appraised as low, then they are likely to become stressed.

Lazarus model is one of various models that describe how stress and appraisals relate, albeit an important one. You can see this model as complimentary rather than contradictory to Schachter and Singer's more general theory of emotions. Whereas Schachter and Singer's theory focuses on emotional experiences in general, Lazarus theory focuses on coping in particular.

In the next lecture, Dr. Pile will discuss the relationships of these appraisal processes in more detail with a particular focus on mental health.