How Do Children Experience Mixed Emotion? Piloting an Analogue Emotion Scale

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Introduction

Current theories concerning adult populations suggest that mixed emotions can be simultaneously experienced in different ways (Larsen and McGraw, 2014).

A key measure of the subjective experience of mixed emotion is the Analogue Emotional Scale (AES) (Carrera & Oceja, 2007)

It was designed to measure subjective emotional experiences throughout the duration of an emotion and permit discrimination between two sequential or simultaneous emotions of opposite valence.

Carrera and Oceja’s (2007) assessed subjective experiences of happiness and sadness using affect ratings and AES responses about a recalled event of mixed happiness and sadness, an elicited event, and after participants viewed a film where the sequencing of single and mixed emotions was controlled. They found that adults’ AES responses could be grouped as simultaneous, sequential, parallel and combined.

The ways that children experience mixed emotion across childhood is less understood (Harris, 2000). Studies using interviews show that children report feeling happy and sad at the same time (Burkitt & Sheppard, 2014; Burkitt & Watling, 2015). However interview responses along with responses to rating scales designed to measure two emotions as a reaction to a single event do not capture a temporal measure of the experience.

This leads to the possibility that the simultaneous or sequential nature of the experience of mixed happiness and sadness is under or overestimated in recent research with children.

The present pilot research therefore explored the utility of an adapted AES to measure the possible types of children’s subjective experiences of mixed happiness and sadness.

Method

Participants: 55 children (23 girls, 22 boys), aged between 4 years 2 months - 6 years 2 months (6–5 years 3 months) participated in the research.

Materials: Vignette (see Burkitt & Watling, 2015) describing happy, sad and mixed happy and sad events experienced by a gender and age matched peer. AES training graph, AES graph.

Procedure: Training: A training phase for the adapted AES for was conducted.

Children looked at pictures of two different gender matched children with either a glass of blue fizzy drink or red fizzy drinks. The participants were asked to look at the pictures and assess the fullness of the glass. Fullness estimates were graphed at four different points using red and blue pencils signifying different point in the day (breakfast time, lunch time, dinner time, bed time).

Test phase: Children were seen individually in their schools. They were asked to consider how happy and sad the protagonist felt at different points during the vignette and draw each emotion separately on the same AES graph (see Figure 1).

Results

The AES graphs were coded using Carrera and Oceja’s (2007) categorical scheme: Simultaneous, Sequential, Parallel and Combined

The simultaneous category is characterised by emotional intensity increasing and decreasing together. The sequential category includes the interaction of opposing emotions, when one emotion’s intensity rose, the other fell. The parallel category is characterised by no interaction between emotions and the combined category shows a clear combination of both a sequential and simultaneous interaction of emotional intensity. Figures 2-4 show an example of each category.

Discussion

This pilot has shown that children in this age range understood how to use the adapted AES graph.

The AES shows a wider pattern of subjective experiences of mixed (Carrera and Oceja, 2007) recognised in others than the sequential and simultaneous types previously uncovered in childhood (Burkitt & Sheppard, 2014; Burkitt & Watling, 2015).

The AES offers a promising tool to assess mixed emotion in a range of assessment contexts.

Future research could validate the AES across figure types and further pairs of high and low arousal emotion against other emotion measures such as bipolar and relative rating scales, drawings and interview responses.

References


