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ENHANCING EMOTIONAL VOCABULARY FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL LITERACY

Abstract

Various aspects of language development, comprehension and neurological functioning contribute to reflective psychological attitudes and indicate the importance of language in understanding human behaviour. In this perspective we focus our attention on the role of emotional language in shaping psychological literacy. Our research mostly relies on the findings of the Theory of Constructed Emotion (TCE) and Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT) that confirmed the importance of emotional vocabulary in the process of forming the effective understanding of the emotions and creating new conscious experiences. Due to the development of affective neuroscience, emotional vocabulary is presented as a necessary tool for psychological studies of personality, emotions and mood that aim to increase empirical evidence on the ways how emotions are organised in the mind. Special attention is given to the phenomenon of blended emotions that refer to the simultaneous experience of two or more emotions. We show that the awareness of the complexity of emotional experience is directly related to finding words that capture combinations of a variety of emotions.

Keywords: emotional vocabulary; psychological literacy; emotion awareness; emotional psychology

1. Introduction

Numerous psychological, anthropological and linguistic studies confirmed the importance of emotional language for our understanding of human behaviour. The complexity of the realm of emotion was primarily investigated through the nonverbal signals that were considered superior to verbal expressions in communicating emotions. The sceptic view towards emotional language was abandoned thanks to the experiential affective neuroscience research that emphasised the influence of emotions on cognitive processes and behaviours.

Although experts from various disciplines acknowledge emotions as the central element of human experience and change, there is still no agreement about the definition of emotion. For our research, we follow a broader definition as summarised by Ponsommet (2022, p. 308) "Emotions are internal states that have a cognitive dimension (in contrast to sensations such as hunger or cold, for instance), as well as a subjective appraisal dimension (distinguishing them from purely intellectual evaluations such as belief or agreement".

In this paper we discuss the importance of emotional vocabulary for the development of psychological literacy. As stated above, emotions have become an important topic in psychology and affective science, and they are considered as "salient exemplars of conscious mental states" (Reisenzein, 2015). Since they are not directly observable, verbal expressions of emotions convey valuable information about individuals' mental states, aiding in adjusting behaviours and responses during social interactions, enhancing communication, and understanding. Our starting hypothesis is that the study of emotional vocabulary contributes to psychological literacy by enhancing understanding of emotions and effective emotional management.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. In Section 2 we provide some background on psychological and emotional literacy. Section 3 outlines the previous research of emotional vocabulary and introduces the notion of *emotional granularity*. In Section 4 we begin to develop an understanding of the phenomenology of blended and multiple

feelings. Section 5 finally draws some conclusions from the presented results and outlines several future tasks that can further enrich the subject.

2. Psychological literacy and vocabulary

In the last two-three decades the concept of psychological literacy has been integrated in education through learning outcomes as well as the pedagogical approach to teaching psychology to an undergraduate audience. The concepts of psychological literacy and the psychologically literate citizen were first developed by McGovern et al. in 2010 and were promoted as the primary outcome of the undergraduate education in psychology. The first National Standards for psychological literacy and global citizenship were published in Australia (Cranney et al. 2012) with the aim to revise the outcomes of Undergraduate Psychology Education. According to Roberts et al. (2015, p. 1) psychological literacy is "the ability to apply psychological knowledge to personal, family, occupational, community and societal challenges".

The development of psychological literacy was accompanied by the need to acquire the basic knowledge of the discipline-relevant terminology. Having a well-defined vocabulary is still considered as one of the major prerequisites for psychological literacy. In his seminal study Boneau (1990) suggested a list of "Psychology's Top 100 concepts" which can be considered as part of the core vocabulary, especially to students.

The history of the anglophone vocabulary of psychology was later thoroughly analysed by Benjafield (2019), who acknowledged the *words as tools analogy* developed by Wittgenstein (1958) and Zipf (1949/2012). In this perspective words are considered as tools that are more or less available for dealing with the particular tasks. "If a task requires a tool that I have available, then the solution is straightforward. However, if, for whatever reason, a tool that will do the job is not available, then there are two avenues open to me. Either I can invent a tool that will do the job, or I can adapt one of my existing tools to do the job" (Benjafield, 2019, p.1059). Furthermore, the author explores the relation between

frequency and polysemy stating that more frequent and available words have tendency to become polysemous. By analysing six-hundred words with psychological senses in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) and in the PsycINFO database (2011), Benjafield (2012) discovered inconsistencies in the word use and the existence of multiple meanings which impact the communication efficiency. He concludes that observing the dynamics and development of the vocabulary is a major component of psychological literacy because it reveals different cognitive and linguistic processing mechanisms. Various aspects of language development, comprehension and neurological functioning contribute to reflective psychological attitudes and indicate the importance of language in understanding human behaviour. In this perspective we focus our attention on the role of emotional language in shaping psychological literacy.

Psychology research devoted to emotions was first based on Darwin's evolutionary perspective focusing on biological origins and causes. Later cognitive based approaches evoked the importance of developing perception processes in the outward environment as well as in the inward, affective level. Emotional vocabulary was soon considered a necessary tool for psychological studies of personality, emotions and mood that aimed to increase empirical evidence on the ways how emotions are organised in the mind. Due to the popularisation of the concepts emotional intelligence and emotional competence introduced by Goleman (1995), the scientific community also devoted significant efforts to expand on similar concepts such as emotional literacy (Matthews, 2006) and emotional quotient (Bar-On, 2006). The development of emotional literacy was highly propagated by the CASEL framework striving to advance academic, social and emotional learning. The most widespread model today is the Social and emotional learning (SEL) program[1] oriented towards the acquisition of skills, attitudes and core competencies necessary to recognise and manage emotions. In the following chapter we discuss the emotional vocabulary as an integral part of this comprehensive approach.

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[1]   https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/ (April 24, 2024)

3. Emotional vocabulary development

Previous research in emotion psychology considered emotion concepts as prototypical structures with the most representative category at the centre and the less typical concepts scattered around the periphery. The basic six emotional states: anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness and surprise were considered as human universal emotions and were primarily investigated in relation to prototypical facial expressions by analysing the photos as a methodological tool (Ekman 1993). This methodology was soon abandoned as later empirical research confirmed the greater complexity between emotions and expressions confirming that a smile may not always communicate happiness but other emotions like embarrassment, anger, or even sadness depending on context (Cowen & Keltner, 2018).

Cowen et al. (2019) explain the high-dimensional space of emotions, from prototypical emotions to more complex experiences that involve "blends between disgust and horror, for example, or awe and feelings of aesthetic appreciation, or love and desire, or sympathy and empathic pain". These findings influenced the authors to call for the expansion of the methodological approach to emotional vocabulary that moved beyond the single emotion paradigm. Particular attention has been paid to the ambiguities of the single emotion words and the fact that the interpretation of emotional expression varies across cultures.

Research on sociocultural diversity and similarity of emotional language (Wierzbicka 1992, 1999, Dewaele & Pavlenko, 2002, Hurtado de Mendoza 2008, Bak 2022) confirmed only the partial overlapping of prototypical emotional structures. The cross-cultural variability of emotion concepts and the complexity of emotion categories is especially visible when it comes to the translation of emotion concepts and the search for one-to-one equivalents.

The psycholinguistic view of emotion concepts stresses the fact that each category of emotion involves the interaction between brains (cognition), bodies (bodily and verbal behaviour) and the environment (context) (Lachlan Mackenzie & Alba-Juez, 2019). That is also the reason

why emotion concepts are considered as a separate category from both concrete and abstract words. According to Rosaldo (1984, p. 304) "emotions are both feelings and cognitive constructions linking person, action, and sociological milieu".

The correlation between the development of our emotional vocabulary and mental health was stressed by the *Theory of Constructed Emotion* (Barrett, 2006) which emphasised the importance of acquiring emotion concepts before we can experience or perceive them. The findings attested that people with alexithymia, a naturally impoverished conceptual system for emotion, have difficulties experiencing emotions which led to the conclusion that the development of emotional granularity influences the extent to which we experience our life events. Barrett (2017) explains that people who exhibit high emotional granularity can be considered as emotion experts while an impoverished conceptual system for emotions can lead to distinguishing only pleasant from unpleasant emotions without taking in account the granularity and multidimensionality of emotions. This perspective is in line with the results of the study conducted by the Yale Centre for Emotional Intelligence (YCEI) which confirmed that the development of the richer conceptual system for emotions leads to improved social behaviour and academic performance in children.

The connection between mental health and emotional granularity was also put forward by Shinnosuke (2023). Different authors agree that going beyond the generic basic emotions like "sad" and „happy", learning and using more specific words like "ecstatic", "blissful" and "inspired" instead of "happy" is the best way to gain new emotion concepts and experience more fine-grained emotions. Barrett (2017) argues that even without having the exact word it is possible to perceive a particular emotion thanks to conceptual combination. This potent capability of the brain allows us to construct novel concepts from the existing ones. Barrett's provocative idea of constructing our emotions whether by learning the concepts using the more fine-grained vocabulary or by using the conceptual combination contradicts the classical view that emotions are built in our nervous system by evolution. Instead of separating emotions

from emotion concepts, the theory of constructed emotions stresses the importance of concept learning and conceptual combination that allow us to adapt to different social circumstances in accordance with cultural evolution. This idea entails emotion concepts as cultural tools and our actions and emotions as part of the socialisation process. Barrett emphasises that when communicating our feelings we are actually presenting categories of emotion that are filled with a variety of associated concepts depending on the cultural context. Distinguishing emotions from emotion categories enables us to recognise a plethora of different experiences that exist behind our feelings of happiness, calmness, pride, sadness, fear or anxiety. When we describe that we feel happy we actually use the same simplified word for a myriad of diverse instances that can vary from excitement, joy, euphoria, bliss, pleasure, delight depending on the context. Recognising and understanding the difference between emotions like disappointment and anger, envy and jealousy, happiness, and excitement, help us label the right emotion and adequately choose the best way to regulate it.

The importance of learning the concepts by enriching our emotional vocabulary was also highlighted by the RULER approach[2] consisting of five steps to emotional intelligence: recognize, understand, label, express and regulate emotion. As shown in Table 1, the RULER method aligns with the five elements of emotional intelligence and constitutes an integral part of the SEL program.

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[2]   https://www.rulerapproach.org (April 20, 2024)

Table 1. The Ruler approach[3]

RULER	EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE	MEANING	RESULT
Recognise	Self-awareness	Acknowledge the emotion	Employees are more mindful and receptive
Understanding	Motivation	Work out why it's being felt	Staff are more accepting and reflective
Labelling	Social skills and empathy	Being able to appropriately name and explain the emotion	Your team will benefit from stronger relationships and improved communication
Expressing			
Regulation	Self-regulation	Manage the emotion	Improves mental health and well-being

An important part of developing emotional intelligence and emotional vocabulary is determining the intensity of emotion as is evidenced in emotion taxonomies which traditionally conceptualise emotions on a bipolar continuum, from positive to negative valence considering different dimensions from high to low arousal. Plutchik's (2001) conical emotion wheel model categorises emotions into primary, secondary and tertiary level, providing a comprehensive framework to understand and analyse human emotions in various contexts. Instead of six basic emotion expressions this model arranges eight basic emotions: acceptance, anger, anticipation, disgust, fear, joy, sadness and surprise in a circular pattern. The wheel represents pairs of polar opposites, joy vs. sadness, trust vs. disgust, fear vs. anger, surprise vs. anticipation and allows for mixed emotions through combinations.

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[3] https://www.tsw.co.uk/blog/leadership-and-management/the-ruler-tool/ (April 17, 2024)
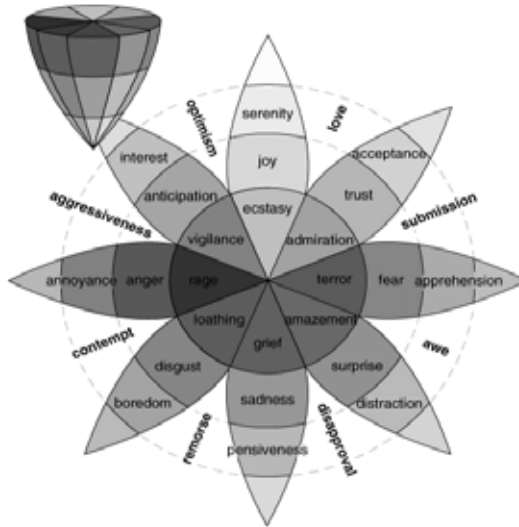
Fig. 1 Plutchik's emotion circumplex (2001)

Another dimensional approach to emotions and emotional vocabulary is offered by the Geneva Emotion Wheel (GEW), an instrument proposed by Scherer (2005, p. 723) to measure emotional reactions to objects, events and situations.
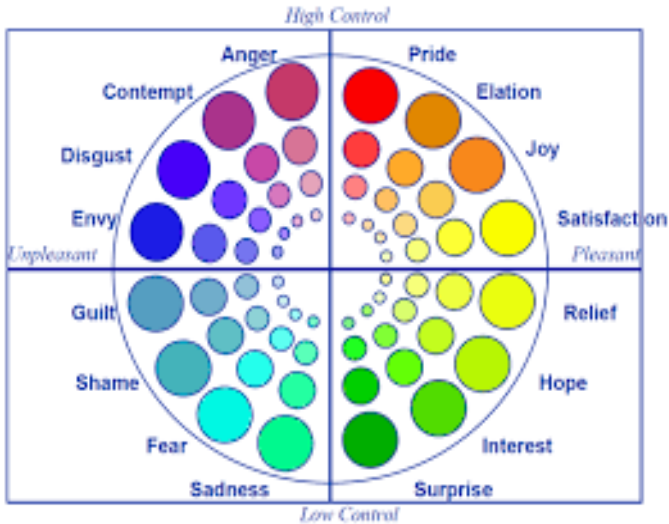

Fig. 2 Geneva Emotion Wheel (GEW)

In the framework of the componential theory of emotion Scherer (2005) examines the defining characteristics of emotions and their fine-grained differences. The author considers that dictionary definitions or thesaurus entries for emotion concepts offer only partial insight into the learned intuitions suggested by language experts or editors. Instead, Scherer advocates for a more comprehensive way of profiling of emotion terms by using a semantic grid profile which allows to determine the semantic field of an emotion but also potential cultural and linguistic differences in emotion encoding. The 2.0 version of the GEW promotes vocabulary development by engaging users to associate concepts with words to be learned, aiding in understanding, retention and application of new vocabulary words effectively.
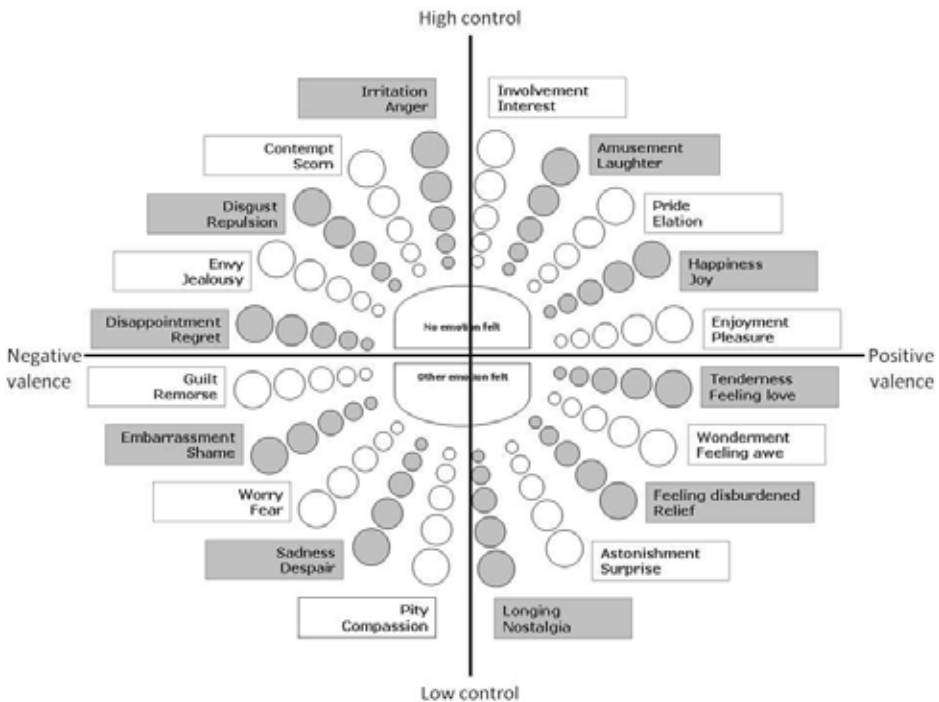

Fig. 3 Template of Version 2.0 of the GEW

The introduction of associated concepts also enables the comparison among related and unrelated words, leading to the formation of

higher-level abstract concepts. Mazzuca, Barca and Borghi (2017) suggest that the higher the abstractness level of emotional words, the later they are acquired. This confirms the idea that the role of language is more important for the acquisition of complex and sophisticated emotion words than for those referring to basic emotions.

As stated above, numerous taxonomies are developed for enabling better emotional granularity as well as determining the intensity of particular emotions. But when it comes to labelling emotions, it is often difficult to identify the exact, precise emotion because emotions, more frequently than not, blend together (Scherer & Moors, 2019). In the following chapter we delve into the mystery of blends or mixtures of emotions.

3.1. The complexity of blended emotions

The research of mixed or blended emotions brings more complexity to the traditional bipolar dimension of positive/pleasant versus negative/unpleasant feelings. Emotion blend refers to the simultaneous feeling of one or more emotions and leads to transitions between various feelings. This kind of non-prototypical experiences were documented before, based on evidence from facial expressions (Ekman, 1993) and from language (Scherer, 2005). Evidence indicates that the most common mixed feelings combine positive and negative valence, for instance happiness and sadness, anxiety and disgust, surprise and wondering, shock and concern. Conflicted emotions are usually evoked by the ambivalent, bittersweet stimuli. Watson and Stanton (2017) found that high-arousal positive affective states (e.g. joviality) co-occurred more often with high arousal negative affective states (e.g. fear) than with low arousal negative affective states (e.g. sadness).

Blends of emotions are an important part of Levels of Emotional Awareness (LEAS) measurement that assess emotional differentiation and integration focusing on emotional experience (Lane & Schwartz, 1987). While strong clear intense emotion shows either positive or negative valence, mixed or blended emotions can point to the existence of

nuances between emotions as well as different possibilities of blending emotions of opposite and equal valence. Fokkinga and Desmet (2012, p. 11) argue that "apparently clear-cut distinction between positive and negative emotions is deceptive. Negative is not always unwanted or superfluous. In the analysis we saw cases in which negative emotions actually even feel good. Moreover, there may be aspects of positive emotions that are unpleasant". According to their findings, the most enriching mixed emotions are the ones where underlying negative emotions have a positive or beneficial effect on our thoughts and actions.

Heavey et al. (2017) distinguish between blended emotions and mixed emotions. In the first case, one has different, separate emotions blended together as a single experience while in the other a person simultaneously experiences multiple distinct feelings related to the same event. Their empirical findings show that mixed emotions were more often of the opposite than of the same valence. Nevertheless, authors explain the difficulties of determining whether two emotions are experienced separately or merged in one feeling because simultaneous feelings sometimes mute the intensity of each other.

According to Larsen et al. (2017) mixed emotions appear more usually as a result of the circumstances that can simultaneously be fortunate and unfortunate, or even when events do not appear to have a pleasant aspect. The examples evoked by the authors are enjoying sadness, enjoyment of fear, enjoyment of disgust, enjoyment of spicy foods, enjoyment of physical pain, etc. Not surprisingly, Riediger et al. (2014) show that mixed emotions are experienced more often by those who value negative affect. These findings also indicate that the phenomenon of mixed emotions can be closely related to the construction psychology and the idea that emotions are our constructions of the world.

A more nuanced approach to understanding mixed emotions and emotional literacy in general was suggested by Russell (2017). In the framework of psychological construction, he develops the discussion around three key concepts: Core affect (CA), Perception of the Affective Quality (PAQ) and Emotional Meta-Experience (EME). He argues that CA should be distinguished from PAQ because the first one refers to hot

feeling and the second to cold judgement. While the CA includes basic affective feelings or moods, the PAQ is part of evaluation we impose on certain events or objects creating a certain attitude. This distinction is noteworthy because the author considers that mixed emotions occur when we are in fact dealing with mixed attitudes (PAQs) that can appear simultaneously, even of opposite valence. Because co-occurrence of positive and negative attitudes depends on our perception and personal evaluation, Russel includes a third component called Emotional Meta-Experience (EME) to bring focus to the individual perception and categorization of emotional states. This approach follows the constructivist view of our own experience based on the resemblance to mental scripts for specific emotion created from our past experiences. It is therefore not surprising that several life span theories report the increase in the individual ability to experience mixed emotions over the course of adulthood (Schneider & Stone, 2015).

These findings indicate that the approach to the development of emotional vocabulary should not approach emotion words as static emotional facts stored in our brain but as the result of varied emotional meanings, we construct from the acquired collective knowledge. Since blended feelings are frequently combinations of feelings of opposite valence it becomes difficult to categorise them (into one net valence) using the bipolar approach. Instead, it is necessary to create space and the vocabulary for conceptual blends that combine multiple emotions. Recognition of the components of blended emotions presents a challenge especially when it comes to conflicted emotions because emotional vocabulary often does not offer adequate labels.

In her *EMCAT-ENG: a catalogue of 1,759 basic emotion terms in English* Bak (2022) reports 195 blended emotions. Apart from distinguishing 6 basic emotions Joy (J), Anger (A), Fear (F), Sadness (S), Surprise (S) and Disgust (D), Bak reports blended categories such as DF, FS, AD, AF, JS, DFS, FS, DFSS, DS, AJ, AS, DFS, AFD, FJ, AFS. These rich experiences illustrate blends of positive, negative but also conflict emotions. The advantage of this emotional model is that it confirms that the bipolar valence dimension of basic affective emotions is not contradictory

to the multidimensional nature of mixed feelings. The results reflect polysemy on a semantic level and blending on a conceptual level. For example, the adjective *upset* is tagged as a blended synonym of four emotions: disgust, fear, surprise and sadness. Other examples included words such as, e.g., *consternated* (synonymous with fear and surprise); *fuss* (anger, fear); *awful* (disgust, fear, sadness, surprise); *horror* (disgust, fear); *outrage* (anger, disgust) or *troubled* (fear, sadness). This kind of research calls for the further development of emotional vocabulary as an important part of emotional literacy.

Although mixed emotions can be viewed as rare and unstable results of ambiguous stimuli, Hershfield et al. (2013) consider them as a marker of greater resiliency and better emotional regulation. The findings of Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT) showed that adult life experiences rarely involve pure, basic emotions. Greenberg (2002, 2021) suggests that complex emotional states are the result of synthesised schemes in the internal world and blended emotions often appear for a good reason because the primary emotion is often obscured by other emotions. For example, anger and sadness or anger and shame can be blended in a way that anger is the secondary protecting emotion against the core, underlying emotion. Recognising both emotions and understanding the unconscious interaction between them allows their processing and transformation. According to EFT research, emotional expression can be primary, secondary or instrumental and emotions vary from primary, adaptive, maladaptive, secondary or instrumental. This categorisation offers valuable insights in therapy because it allows to distinguish, for example, primary adaptive anger from secondary anger that masks the primary painful emotion. Recognising and generating blended emotions can therefore facilitate the process of transforming the initial withdrawal tendencies of primary painful emotions into active and assertive actions. The complexity of blended emotions points to the importance of developing emotional awareness and emotional vocabulary that can capture a variety of emotional responses.

4. Conclusion

The capability to describe, understand and respond to emotions in oneself and others forms a crucial aspect of overall psychological knowledge and well-being. In this paper we illustrated how emotional language provides significant clues for a deeper understanding of how emotions shape human behaviour. Aside from understanding basic emotions, emotional literacy, as discussed in the paper, encompasses the full range and boundaries of emotional experience, including blended and mixed feelings. The complexity of rich emotional experiences confirms that emotional vocabulary is integral to emotional development and emotional intelligence. In conclusion, a holistic approach to affective education can be envisioned by including emotional vocabulary as part of psychological literacy.

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POBOLJŠANJE EMOCIONALNOGA VOKABULARA RADI PSIHOLOŠKE PISMENOSTI

Sažetak

Različiti aspekti jezičnoga razvoja, samorefleksije i neurobioloških procesa upućuju na važnost jezika u razumijevanju ljudskoga ponašanja. U ovome se radu naglašava uloga emocionalnoga vokabulara u razvoju kompetencije psihologijske pismenosti. Navode se rezultati istraživanja teorije emocionalnih konstrukata i emocionalno usredotočene terapije, koja su istakla značenje emocionalnoga vokabulara za kognitivne procese razumijevanja emocija i stvaranja novih svjesnih iskustava. Pozivajući se na suvremene spoznaje afektivne neuroznanosti, emocionalni vokabular predstavlja se kao neophodan alat za psihološka proučavanja osobnosti, emocija i raspoloženja kojima je cilj prikupiti empirijske dokaze o načinima na koje su emocije organizirane u umu – mozgu. Posebna pozornost posvećena je fenomenu miješanih emocija, koji se odnosi na istodobno doživljavanje dviju ili više emocija. U članku se zaključuje da je svijest o složenosti emocionalnoga iskustva izravno povezana s mogućnošću pronalaženja riječi koje obuhvaćaju kombinacije različitih emocija.

Ključne riječi: emocionalni vokabular; psihologijska pismenost; emocionalna svjesnost; emocionalna psihologija