

Is Reason the Master of Emotions, or Are Emotions the Master of Reason?

It is well observed that the human mind is governed by two major forces: logical rationality and passionate emotions. It is also evident that both play very large roles in our everyday cognitions and behaviour, for example: almost every day, people wake up to go to work and earn their wages because they know it is the most efficient way for the law-abiding to use their skills to gain money (which gives them the easiest access to materials needed for survival; food, drink, shelter, etc.). But at the same time, we want to earn the money to invest in the luxuries of technology, entertainment, vanity, holidays, and so on. All of which have the purpose of making us happy, and if it were not for us desiring this emotion then we would not see half of the investments we make as at all necessary.

The same goes for why we choose how we gain money in the first place; lawful citizens choose honest work over theft or fraudulence because our logical reasoning informs us of the relative risk of imprisonment that comes with breaking the law, and naturally we fear this consequence so our emotional thinking reinforces the decision. What I will be discussing is when these two ways of thinking come into conflict with one another, and observe which one triumphs and in what context. So I will be investigating into which of the two truly governs our minds, while using studies made by psychologists that cover similar and relevant issues to this one.

The concepts of informational and normative social influence (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955)¹ illustrate two situations where either rational or emotional thinking take dominance. In the case of informational social influence, we reach 'internalisation' by copying the behaviour of others when we are not sure what is appropriate. It is fully logical that we are more likely to succeed if we find certainty over what we are doing than if we do not, so we rationally choose to seek certainty through others. Whereas in normative social influence, we are already certain of what we believe or know to be true, but in this case everyone else is displaying a different attitude. It is the fear of rejection and desire for approval in this situation that causes us to display an agreeing attitude to the majority.

In Asch's Comparison of lines experiment,(1955)² the naïve participant's compliance in choosing the clearly wrong answer (that the confederate majority agreed upon) was not logical; he had no need to contradict his own knowledge but did so anyway under effect of the emotionally driven normative social influence. This comes under Murray's 27 psychosocial motives (1938)² as the need for approval that is found to be high in conformists. Psychosocial motives are identified as requirements that have no biological need to be met, but our happiness or misery can depend upon their gratification, a clear example of emotional-over-rational thinking.

¹ AQA(A) Psychology for AS by Richard Gross and Geoff Rolls, first published 2008

² Psychology: A new introduction for A level by Richard Gross, Rob McIlveen, Hugh Coolican, Alan Clamp & Julia Russel

However, some of Murray's 27 psychogenic needs could be seen as fully rational as the needs associated with power can be seen as simply common sense, rather than being born from just wanting to feel happy; such as the need to sometimes defer to others and follow their lead.

When we allow another to control a situation and 'lead the way,' it is likely that we trust them to do so and know that the best outcome will result from following their instructions and decisions, and in some cases this will determine our own survival. For example, if you were with a group of friends in a building that was on fire and one of your friends happened to be a fire-fighter, you would follow their instructions because you *know* that it is the best way to survive, not necessarily because of any complex emotional motive. A more everyday example would be in the classroom setting, most students who know they want a high grade will likely submit to the instructions of their teacher. This is because their teacher can be viewed as their source of knowledge on how to understand the subject and reach their desired grade – a goal of success that is rational and will lead to easier access of the necessary materials described earlier. So whilst the psychogenic decision of yielding to someone else's power has no direct biological reason, it makes rational sense from an evolutionary perspective as it can lead to both survival and success.

The examples of the teacher and fire-fighter involve people obeying an expert, or a 'legitimate authority figure', which displays how rationality takes over no matter how we feel towards this expert. The extent of our rational mind's dominance in this case was tested by Hofling et al. (1966)³ in which a researcher ordered nurses to administer twice the advised dosage of a drug while claiming to be a 'Dr Smith' over the phone. It was found that 21 out of 22 nurses obeyed and gave an acting psychiatric patient, 'Mr Jones,' a supposedly harmful volume of 'Astrofen' (which, unknown to them, was a sugar pill invented for this study). It is likely that these nurses were trained to think 'the doctor knows best' and thought that their obedience was in the interest of both their employment and 'Mr Jones'' health, despite the dubious names of the patient, doctor, and drug. 9 times out of 10, obeying their superior would have been the best, and most reasonable, action. Nevertheless this study demonstrates that this logical obedience can overrule any feelings of doubt, mistrust or confusion, let alone more crude emotional bias that nurses might feel towards a doctor. However, this study has heavy historical and cultural bias since nurses in the USA 40 years ago are seen as more likely to obey an authority figure than someone from another culture in more recent years³.

The cognitive approach to psychological *abnormality* illustrates how emotional thinking can take over, as Ellis' A-B-C model (1975)⁴ describes how depression can result from irrational thoughts or 'Cognitive errors'. The A-stage is the 'activating event' where a negative stimulus occurs, like something as simple as a friend not responding to you in a corridor. The B-stage is the belief or reaction to this event, so whilst a possibility is that the friend did not see you, you may jump to the conclusion that they ignored you, this is also known as selective abstraction. This 'irrational' assumption may not be completely groundless, but

³ <http://www.integratedsociopsychology.net/hofling-nurses.html>

⁴ <http://www.gpcare.org/evidence%20based%20psychological/Cocognitivebehaviouraltherapy.htm>

focusing on this negative thought would lead to stage C, the emotional consequences, which can lead to repeating this cycle and result in depression. This identifies depression as a result of irrational thoughts that focus on the power of emotion, so it seems that even undesirable feelings like sadness can take over our beliefs. While this theory does not make it clear whether depression is causing the irrational thoughts or vice versa, it does illustrate the point that focus on emotional assumptions, without accommodating more reasonable explanations, will result in an unhealthy mental state.

According to Ellis, this shows that emotional dominance can be either the potential product or cause of mental illness. In my opinion this makes cognitive sense because if we all were to base important decisions like going to work or who we vote for on emotional ‘whims’ like what mood we are in and who makes us feel good we simply would not progress. Despite this, emotional thinking also plays a vital role in decisions that can define our lives; one could argue that our friends, partners, homes, and careers are determined by how we feel, otherwise it would not matter to us at all how these decisions were made, as long as they met a ‘sufficient’ level of usefulness.

When these two ‘systems’ of thinking are put in the context of dealing with stress, each one manifests itself in the forms known as ‘Problem-Focused Coping’ (PFC) and ‘Emotional-Focused Coping’ (EFC) as theorised by Lazarus and Folkman (1984)⁵. PFC involves assessing the cause of our stress and what we can do to remove or overcome it, whereas EFC focuses more on the personal effects of stress, and how we can avoid or reduce the negative feelings that stress provokes.

Identifying and dealing with the source of stress is probably the most efficient way to handle most stressors, because it deals with the stressor’s cause. However, in other cases this cannot be done if the situation is out of our control (for example, during a terrorist attack or the death of a close family member). So under less controllable circumstances, it may be better to use our emotional coping methods to handle the situation and get through the difficult feelings caused. What’s more is that when the effects of a stressor are extreme enough, it could be better to deal with them firstly so that the cause of stress can be given better attention. So the emotionally focused strategies of finding distractions, or sharing feelings with others, may be the best initial course of action in this case¹.

Although the equal use of both rational and emotional coping methods is most advisable, we do not necessarily react this way. As stress is an emotional response, it is likely that people more commonly use emotional thinking in these situations. As mentioned earlier, emotional focus is best used when a stressor cannot be controlled, but people may often feel that they have no control when they actually do, and so this ‘Emotional Focused Coping’ will often occur instead of PFC when the latter is more necessary. So in this context, emotions seem to dominate.

There is great subjectivity in truly measuring which of the two systems of thinking is the master of the other, because there is a lot of influence from individual differences. It has been

⁵ <http://www.simplypsychology.org/emotion-focused-coping.html>

demonstrated by the mentioned studies that the importance of either way of thinking depends on the nature of a situation (stressful, social, workplace, or emergency), but to determine which has more control will require greater thought, as the answer will differ from person to person.

Rationality is present in every human being, but in varying quantities; the examples of rational thinking explained before (Informational social influence and Problem focused coping) are more likely to be used by some people than others. Logical based thinking is the foundation of human survival, as it pursues: nutrition, exercise and, indirectly, success, but at the same time it may be emotional thinking that separates humanity from less complex forms of life.

Emotions provide a drive that can allow people to enrich and fulfil life; the majority of people have probably experienced the A-B-C process explained by Ellis above (when they have jumped to negative conclusions without any reasonable grounds) and while this may not be rational, it is not maladaptive either. It is only maladaptive when we allow these emotions to take over completely and prevent us from functioning properly, and this is why a similarly complex and powerful model of rationality is needed. Rationality can then be applied to emotions to figure out why we felt a certain way, made a particular choice, jumped to a certain conclusion, and then rationality can be used to modify this behaviour. So happiness, a subjective idea, can be pursued objectively. True abandonment of rationality would be to needlessly pursue anger or depression without good cause. And true abandonment of emotion would be to detach oneself from humanity. Both of these abandonments, strangely, appear to lead to the same state – abnormality.

Collectively, the studies I have discussed indicate that neither reason nor emotion is the most dominant in people as a collective. And even those who tend to use one more than the other may still find themselves doing the exact opposite in particular situations. So in conclusion, I find that while both rationality and emotion have great purpose as well as influence in the mind, which one is the master, is indeterminate.