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# What We Think Is What We Feel

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## What We Think Is What We Feel

A Review of

### [Handbook of Affect and Social Cognition](#)

by [Joseph P. Forgas](#) (Ed.)

Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2001. 457 pp. ISBN 0-8058-3217-3. \$99.95

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Reviewed by

Dolores Albarracin, Harry M. Wallace

Awareness of and reflection about thought processes are some of the things that make us human. Therefore, it should be no surprise that psychology (the study of human behavior) is at the center of this reflection. However, it was not until the last few decades that psychologists started to take affect seriously. How seriously is illustrated in Forgas's *Handbook of Affect and Social Cognition*. The 19 chapters of the book document the growth of a relatively new area that has quickly developed a clear identity and a unique set of controversies.

### Section I: The Relationship Between Affect and Cognition: Fundamental Issues

Following an overview of the book by Forgas, Adolphs and Damasio discuss the neurobiological evidence that suggests that affect and cognition are intertwined, rather than separate processes. They maintain that a "feeling" is a representation of the connection between an event in the external environment and one's reaction to that event (see also Smith and Kirby's chapter on appraisal theory of emotion). Although feelings are conscious "thoughts," they have behavioral consequences that are both automatic and volitional and facilitate manipulation of the environment to maximize hedonism. Apparently, anatomic connections from the amygdala to the prefrontal cortex are responsible for the conscious experience of affect. Moreover, an important function of the amygdala (as well as the basal forebrain) is to modulate attention to stimuli, and emotion-eliciting stimuli appear to attract more attention than emotionally neutral ones. The amygdala also provides inputs to the ventromedial cortex, which in turn enables individuals to respond to behavioral stimuli. This distributed system is responsible for the guidance of affective processes on the encoding and retrieval of emotionally relevant events, as well as one's responses to these events. (Similarly, Ito

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and Cacioppo theorize that although the experience of affect is always conscious, rudimentary evaluations take place outside of awareness and may result in feelings that one cannot link to their source of origin. From Adolphs and Damasio's chapter, however, one could add that sufficiently intense emotional stimuli are likely to attract conscious attention and bring the source of the feelings to the surface.)

## **Sections II, III, and V: Affective Influences on the Content of Cognition, on Social Information Processing, and Cognitively Mediated Social Behaviors**

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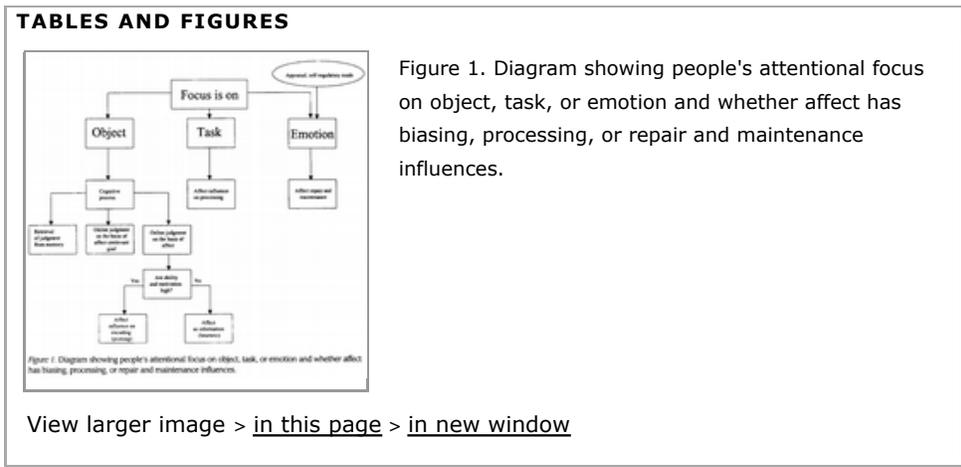
The chapters by Bower and Forgas, by Clore, Gasper, and Garvin, by Sedikides and Green, by Fiedler, by Higgins, and by Petty, DeSteno, and Rucker exemplify some of the current points of view in the study of affect within social psychology. For example, can affect influence mood-congruent encoding and recall? Do such effects occur when people search for information in an unconstrained fashion, and do they exist at all? Bower and Forgas, Sedikides and Green, Fiedler, and Petty and his colleagues all agree that people do rely on affect as a cue for retrieving representations that are associated with this affect. Bower and Forgas further argue that such "affect priming" occurs when people produce free associations rather than when they respond to external, "closed-ended" demands. For example, Sedikides and Green illustrate how individuals' affective reactions bias self-related judgments when people form these judgments online or when their judgments about the self fluctuate due to low self-esteem.

In contrast to Bower and Forgas's conceptualization, Clore and his colleagues (see also Wyer, Clore, & Isbell, 1999) maintain that when affect guides encoding and retrieval of information, it does so as a result of the concepts affect elicits. "Priming" is not the result of affective reactions per se. Thus, they present evidence that conceptual primes that are positive or negative produce "affect-congruent" effects. However, affective stimuli that are not cognitively labeled as positive or negative fail to bias judgments.

Another interesting aspect of Clore et al.'s chapter is the presentation of the affect-as-information theory (Schwarz & Clore, 1983). Beyond describing the original model, the chapter organizes more recent theorizing on how the processing influences of affect are in fact a result of the informational value of affect. For example, Clore and his colleagues argue that people's foci determine whether informational or processing effects emerge. When individuals think about an object or event, affect informs their judgments of the object or event. However, when people are concerned with their own competence in the task at hand (e.g., the experiment they happen to be participating in), affect can inform whether or not they are correctly executing the task. When positive affect increases confidence that one is implementing an adequate strategy, one is more likely to rely on accessible knowledge and strategies. Instead, when people experience negative affect, they are more likely to doubt their accessible

knowledge and to scrutinize the stimuli as a way of maximizing performance in the task at hand (see also Fiedler's chapter).

Bower and Forgas as well as Fiedler further describe how individuals may concentrate on their affective states and attempt to maintain partial affective states but mitigate negative states. Such mechanisms imply that people will seek information that has the potential to induce positive affect but avoid information that promises to increase negative affect. Without a doubt, the amount of information covered in these sections is vast. Arguably, however, what the book is missing is an integration and specification of the boundaries within which affect has different types of influence. We have attempted to articulate the book's information in Figure 1.



The figure shows that whether affect has (a) biasing, (b) processing, or (c) repair and maintenance influences depends in part on people's attentional focus. When people focus on the object of judgment, they may retrieve a preformed judgment from memory or process information on the basis of affect-irrelevant goals (i.e., direct access and motivated processing; Bower and Forgas's chapter). Neither of these cognitive mechanisms should induce affective biases. In contrast, affect appears to bias online judgments. When ability and motivation are high (see Petty et al.'s chapter), perceivers are likely to encode and retrieve information that is consistent with this affect (presumably via conceptual priming; see Clore et al.'s chapter). When ability and motivation are low, affect is likely to inform judgments as proposed by Schwarz and Clore (1983). Finally, as shown in [Figure 1](#), focusing on either the task or the emotion (a decision that depends on appraisal processes; see chapters by Higgins as well as Smith and Kirby) entirely changes the processes that affect can induce. People who make judgments about their performance on the task at hand process information in a bottom-up fashion when affect is negative but in a top-down fashion when affect is positive. Likewise, when individuals focus on their emotions, they may avoid information that threatens positive affect but scrutinize stimuli that can improve their moods. Importantly, both processing and biasing effects of affect have an impact on the attitudes people form as well as on their overt behavioral

responses to external stimuli (see chapters by Forgas; Bodenhausen, Mussweiler, Gabriel, and Moreno; and Salovey).

## Section IV: Affective Influences on Motivation and Intentions

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Harmon-Jones opens this section by reviewing the links between affect and cognitive dissonance. Few psychological phenomena have received as much scientific attention as cognitive dissonance, but the popularity of cognitive dissonance as a research topic seems to be waning. Perhaps this trend of decreasing popularity reflects the frustration of cognitive dissonance researchers. Harmon-Jones makes it clear that cognitive dissonance is still poorly understood, especially with regard to affective influences. Harmon-Jones conveys the complexity of dissonance, the complexity of affect, and the challenge of reconciling conflicting literatures. The end result is a chapter that raises many questions. Unfortunately, Harmon-Jones seems to be one of the few researchers presently seeking these answers.

In the second chapter in this section, Trope, Ferguson, and Raghunathan present evidence that positive mood facilitates self-assessment and self-improvement. Trope and his colleagues propose that positive mood buffers self-esteem and thus allows people to consider and process self-threatening information (e.g., negative feedback) that they avoid when in a negative mood (e.g., Wegener, Petty, & Smith 1995). In contrast, Erber and Erber, the authors of the next chapter, go a step further by arguing that people are not motivated to simply maintain positive mood. The Erbers' research suggests that people strive to minimize the intensity of their moods, whether positive or negative, in anticipation of future tasks and interactions. We agree that the Erbers' research strikes a blow to the widely accepted hedonic assumption that people are motivated to maximize positive affect and minimize negative affect (see Bower and Forgas's chapter). Their model and data are compelling and suggest that researchers of affect must be sensitive to affect intensity as well as valence. However, their perspective is challenged by other researchers whose alternative viewpoints receive sparse attention in this chapter (see *Psychological Inquiry*, Volume 11, Issue 3 [Baumeister, 2000] for different perspectives).

## Section VI: The Role of Individual Differences in Affectivity

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Rusting opens this section by discussing individual difference moderators of the mood-congruency effect—the tendency to process information in ways that are consistent with one's temporary mood. She describes how certain personality traits can enhance or diminish mood-congruency effects. For example, extraverted individuals show more mood congruency in positive moods, whereas neurotic people show more mood congruency in negative moods. Rusting also points out that people with high self-esteem and people with high confidence in their ability to regulate their moods show reverse mood-congruency effects by recruiting positive memories to

counteract negative affect. Interestingly, however, the correlations between personality and mood measures make it difficult to separate the unique influence of personality and mood factors.

In the next chapter, Suls dissects the relationship between two of the Big Five personality traits (neuroticism and agreeableness) and affective response to stress. Suls presents an avalanche of research from multiple sources that indicates that neurotic individuals experience more negative affect overall than others and are differentially more affected (negatively) by stress. Suls refers to "neurotic cascade" to summarize neurotic individuals' proclivity toward emotional hyperreactivity, exposure to problems, negative affective inertia, and coping deficits. Unlike neurotic individuals, people who score highly on measures of agreeableness are not prone to negative affect overall, but they are especially prone to experiencing negative affect when involved in conflict with others.

In the book's final chapter, Mayer reviews the scientific concept of emotional intelligence, the "idea that emotions and intelligence can combine to perform more sophisticated information processing than either is capable of alone" (p. 412). Mayer draws support for his model of emotional intelligence from a diverse set of sources within and outside psychology. Emotional intelligence is a relatively new construct so it is not surprising that this chapter is heavy on theory but light on data. For example, Mayer discusses a scale that he and his colleagues recently developed to assess individual differences in emotional intelligence, but it is too early to tell what this measure may predict. In the context of the Forgas's book, Mayer's chapter is the equivalent of a future direction section.

## Summary

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The "handbook" label has traditionally been reserved for books that provide a comprehensive and integrated overview of the literature relevant to a field or subfield. Handbook contributors typically present broad, balanced summaries of research germane to their specific areas of expertise in the fashion of a minitextbook. Some chapters in Forgas's handbook are written in this style, such as those by written by Clore and his colleagues, Harmon-Jones, Petty and his colleagues, as well as Rusting. However, many of the chapters in this handbook resemble chapters from ordinary edited books, which are typically narrow in focus and written to highlight the author's perspective and research. Nevertheless, Forgas's book is a valuable and timely contribution to the fields of social, personality, and clinical psychology. Forgas's book arrives at a time when affect research is growing exponentially, as are the methods available to study affect. Behavioral scientists can no longer pay lip service to the influence of emotion.

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JOSEPH P. FORGAS, School of Psychology, University of New South Wales, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia.

DOLORES ALBARRACIN and HARRY M. WALLACE, Department of Psychology, University of Florida, P.O. Box 112250, Gainesville, Florida 32611-2250. E-mail: dalbarra@ufl.edu or hwallace@ufl.edu

**TABLES AND FIGURES**

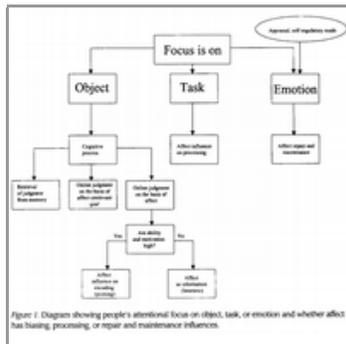


Figure 1. Diagram showing people's attentional focus on object, task, or emotion and whether affect has biasing, processing, or repair and maintenance influences.

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