

Constructing Agency: Emotion, Identity, and the Power to Choose in the Predictive Brain

Mardoche Sidor, M.D.^{1,2}

Karen Dubin, Ph.D., LCSW^{1,3}

1. SWEET Institute, New York, NY
2. Urban Pathways, New York, NY; Former Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, Columbia University; Center for Psychoanalytic Training and Research, Columbia University
3. Private Practice, Queens, NTY

Abstract

The Theory of Constructed Emotion (TCE) reframes emotional experience as a dynamic, predictive process shaped by learned concepts, interoceptive awareness, and sociocultural meaning. Within this framework, identity and agency are not fixed traits, but emergent constructions formed through repeated emotional predictions. This article explores how emotions shape identity over time and how expanding emotional concepts, increasing prediction flexibility, and engaging in conceptual revision can restore a sense of choice, autonomy, and self-authorship. We highlight implications for psychotherapy, trauma recovery, personal development, and leadership.

Keywords

Constructed Emotion, Identity, Agency, Emotional Prediction, Emotion Concepts, Self-Authorship, Neuroplasticity, Autonomy, Trauma Recovery

Introduction

What makes you, you? Is identity something we discover—or something we create? Traditional psychological models often treat identity as a stable construct shaped by genetics or past experiences. The Theory of Constructed Emotion (TCE) challenges this notion by demonstrating that emotions—core to our sense of self—are not fixed responses but constructed predictions based on bodily sensations, learned emotion concepts, and cultural meaning (Barrett, 2017).

From this perspective, our emotional experiences shape how we see ourselves, how others see us, and what we believe we are capable of. This article explores the connection between emotion and identity construction, and how gaining awareness of emotional predictions can open the door to agency, change, and empowerment.

Theoretical Framework

Emotion as Prediction, Not Reaction

According to TCE, the brain constructs emotions by predicting what bodily state is occurring and applying emotion concepts to make meaning (Barrett & Simmons, 2015). These predictions are shaped by past experience and culture, and they directly influence what we perceive, feel, and do.

Identity as a Pattern of Predicted Emotions

Emotions help define our narrative identity—the stories we tell ourselves about who we are (McAdams, 2011). If a person consistently predicts shame or fear in uncertain contexts, they may come to see themselves as powerless or “anxious.” Over time, these emotional predictions become habits of mind that reinforce identity (Barrett, 2017).

Agency as Conceptual Flexibility

Agency emerges when we recognize that emotions—and thus identity—are constructed. The power to name, revise, and reconstruct emotional predictions gives rise to self-authorship, the capacity to redefine who we are in response to our values rather than our past.

Application / Analysis

Emotional Prediction and Learned Helplessness

Individuals exposed to chronic trauma, rejection, or invalidation may develop predictive models in which the body’s stress signals are interpreted as danger, futility, or failure (Khalsa et al., 2018). This leads to learned helplessness not because of external constraints, but because of internalized emotion concepts.

Identity and Emotional Granularity

Emotional granularity supports identity complexity. A person who can differentiate between feeling “ignored,” “disappointed,” or “betrayed” may be more likely to make sense of those experiences without internalizing them as a personal defect (Kashdan et al., 2015). Therapy that increases emotional vocabulary helps clients reclaim agency by separating self from feeling.

Reconstructing the Self Through Conceptual Revision

In therapy, coaching, or reflective practice, individuals can examine the emotional concepts they have inherited and decide which ones to keep, revise, or discard. This process of conceptual revision allows the construction of new emotional experiences and, therefore, new aspects of identity (Lindquist et al., 2015).

For example, someone who has always interpreted a racing heart as “panic” can learn to conceptualize it as “excitement” or “readiness,” transforming not only their momentary experience but their identity as “an anxious person.”

Implications

Psychotherapy and Personal Growth

Clinicians can foster agency by:

- Helping clients identify emotion patterns tied to identity
- Teaching emotional labeling as a way to differentiate feeling from self
- Encouraging clients to experiment with new interpretations and behavioral responses

Narrative therapy, ACT, and emotion-focused therapy already incorporate these elements and may be enhanced by integrating the TCE framework.

Leadership and Empowerment

In leadership development, understanding how emotion shapes identity is key to unlocking growth. Leaders who are emotionally self-aware and flexible in interpreting emotions are more likely to model psychological safety, courage, and resilience for others (Boyatzis et al., 2012).

Trauma Recovery

For trauma survivors, reclaiming agency begins with shifting how the brain predicts and constructs emotion. Interventions that integrate interoceptive awareness, somatic processing, and emotional reframing can alter identity from “I am broken” to “I am rebuilding.”

Conclusion

You are not your feelings. You are the builder of your emotional life—and, by extension, your identity. The Theory of Constructed Emotion shows that emotional predictions can be updated, meaning can be reinterpreted, and agency can be reclaimed. When we understand that emotions are not truths but constructions, we free ourselves to create new emotional experiences—and new selves—based on purpose, not just the past.

References

- Barrett, L. F. (2017). *How emotions are made: The secret life of the brain*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Barrett, L. F., & Simmons, W. K. (2015). Interoceptive predictions in the brain. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 16(7), 419–429. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn3950>
- Boyatzis, R. E., Smith, M. L., & Beveridge, A. J. (2012). Coaching with compassion: Inspiring health, well-being, and development in organizations. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 49(2), 153–178. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021886312462236>
- A, T. B., Barrett, L. F., & McKnight, P. E. (2015). Unpacking emotion differentiation: Transforming unpleasant experience by perceiving distinctions in negativity. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 24(1), 10–16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721414550708>
- Khalsa, S. S., Adolphs, R., Cameron, O. G., Critchley, H. D., Davenport, P. W., Feinstein, J. S., ... & Paulus, M. P. (2018). Interoception and mental health: A roadmap. *Biological Psychiatry: Cognitive Neuroscience and Neuroimaging*, 3(6), 501–513. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bpsc.2017.12.004>
- Lindquist, K. A., Satpute, A. B., & Gendron, M. (2015). Does language matter for emotion? Current evidence and new directions. *Emotion Review*, 7(2), 130–134. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073914553006>
- McAdams, D. P. (2011). Narrative identity. In S. J. Schwartz, K. Luyckx, & V. L. Vignoles (Eds.), *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research* (pp. 99–115). Springer.