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Understanding Enthusiasm

Structure, Function, and Social Regulation

Rijn Vogelaar

This dissertation investigates enthusiasm as a distinct psychological emotion with its own structure, function, and social regulation. Although widely recognized in everyday life and frequently discussed by philosophers throughout history, enthusiasm has received little systematic attention in psychological research. The dissertation first situates enthusiasm within its historical and philosophical context, before examining the concept through three empirical studies.

A prototype analysis shows that enthusiasm has a coherent internal structure characterized by positive affect, high energy, goal directedness, and interpersonal contact. Appraisal and response type research demonstrates that enthusiasm differs from related emotions such as joy and hope by its strong action orientation and the perception that desired goals are attainable. A large cross-cultural survey across 51 societies examines how frequently people experience enthusiasm and how appropriate they consider it to express enthusiasm in private, work, and public contexts, and how these patterns vary across cultures. The final chapter integrates these findings, proposes a working definition of enthusiasm, discusses its role within contemporary emotion theory, examines its social and motivational functions, reflects on its moral ambivalence, and outlines practical implications for domains such as education, organizations, leadership, consumer behavior, and politics.

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