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Theories of EMOTION

a comparative framework

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Emotion theories address a deceptively simple question: what is the causal sequence between a stimulus, physiological arousal, and subjective emotional experience?

Three classical theories offer competing answers. They differ fundamentally on two axes the ordering of bodily and mental events, and the role of cognition in generating emotion.

The central question

Does the body lead?

James-Lange:
physiological change precedes and produces emotional experience.

Do they co-occur?

Cannon-Bard:
arousal and experience are parallel, independent outputs.

Does cognition mediate?

Schachter-Singer:
arousal is undifferen-tiated; cognitive appraisal determines the specific emotion felt.

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James-Lange theory

William James (1884) · Carl Lange (1885)

Emotion is the conscious perception of peripheral physiological changes. The stimulus triggers a bodily response first the subjective feeling is a consequence of perceiving that response not its cause.

We feel sorry because we cry

afraid because we tremble

angry because we strike

Stimulus	→	Physiological response (visceral, motor)	→	Perception of response = emotion



Encountering a threatening situation → muscles tense, heart rate elevates → the perception of these changes constitutes the experience of fear. Without the bodily response, there is no emotion.

Critical limitation: Physiological responses are too slow, too diffuse, and too similar across distinct emotions (e.g. fear vs. anger share nearly identical arousal profiles) to serve as their sole differentiator.

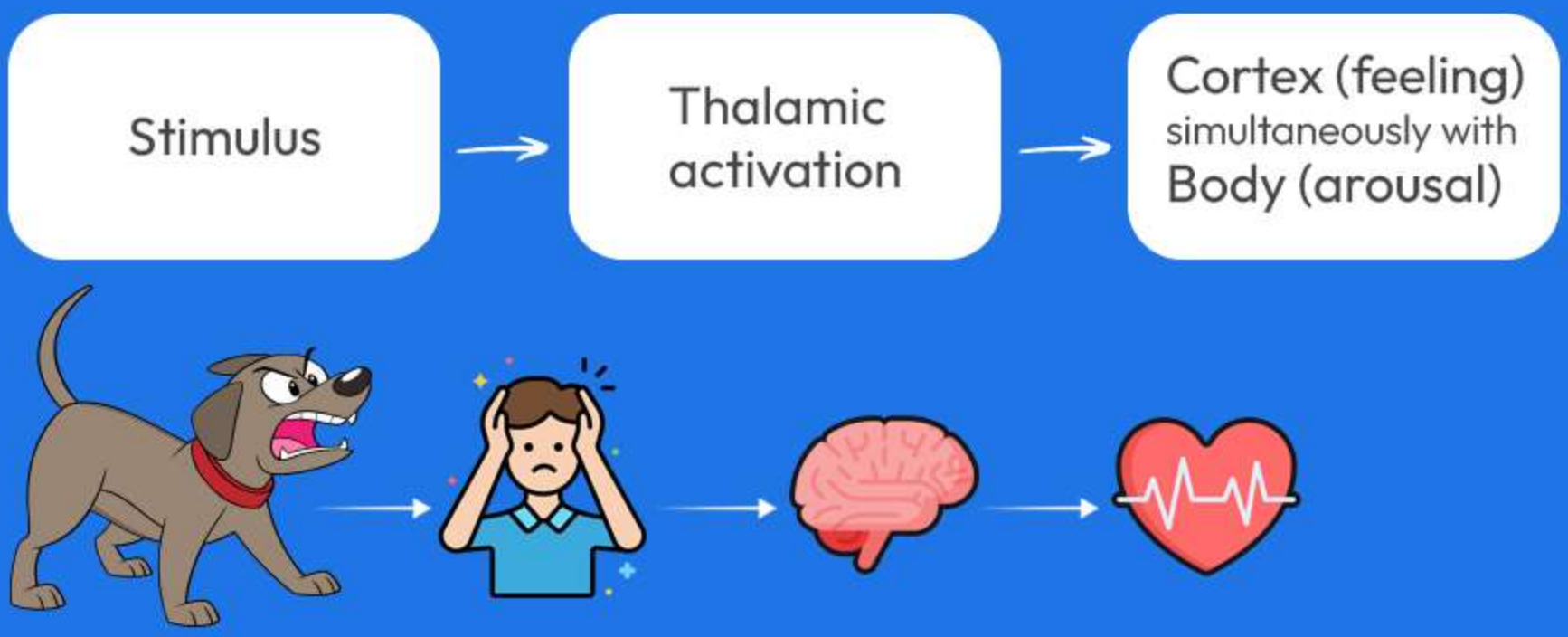
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Cannon-Bard theory

Walter Cannon (1927) · Philip Bard (1928)

Cannon challenged James-Lange on empirical grounds. The thalamus receives the sensory stimulus and simultaneously transmits signals to the cortex (producing subjective experience) and to peripheral organs (producing arousal). The two processes are independent neither causes the other.



Upon perceiving a threat, fear is experienced and the heart rate increases at the same moment two parallel outputs of the same neural signal. Disruption of peripheral feedback (e.g. spinal cord injury) does not eliminate emotional experience.

Critical limitation: Overemphasises the thalamus; ignores cortical and cognitive contributions to emotional differentiation. Subsequent neuroscience (e.g. LeDoux) complicates the proposed architecture.

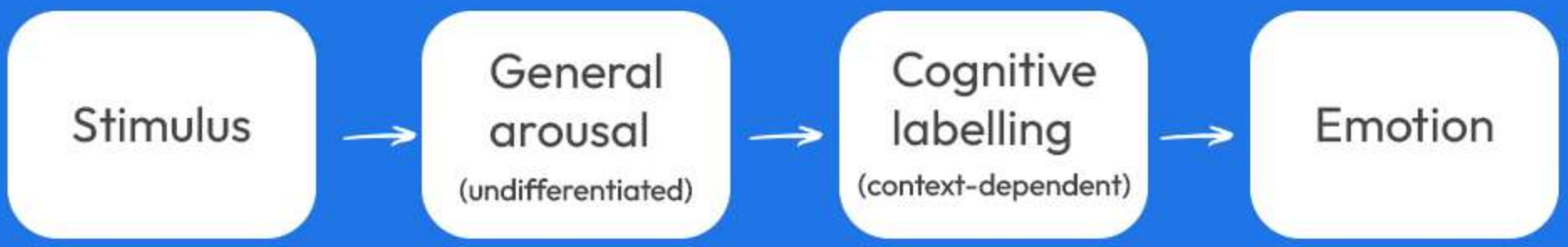
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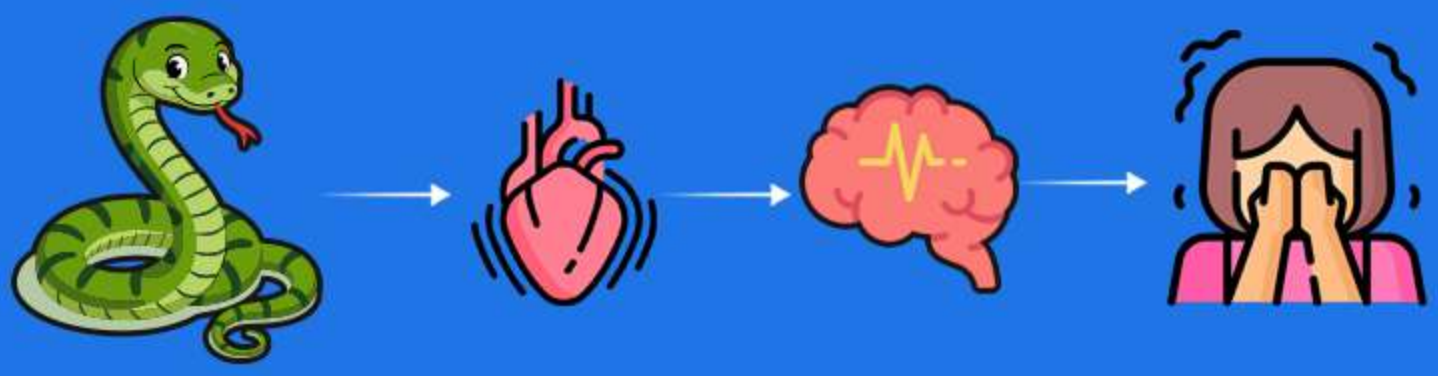
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Schachter-Singer two-factor theory

Stanley Schachter · Jerome Singer (1962)

Emotion requires two components:
(1) undifferentiated physiological arousal and
(2) a cognitive label applied to that arousal based on situational context.
Arousal is a necessary but insufficient condition the specific emotion experienced depends entirely on the appraisal of available cues.





Adrenaline-induced arousal (tachycardia, tremor) is labelled "euphoria" in a positive social context and "anger" in a hostile one — same physiology, different emotion. This predicts misattribution of arousal: arousal from exercise or caffeine can be mislabelled as attraction or anxiety.

Critical limitation: Arousal is not always prerequisite to emotion (Reisenzein, 1983). Cognitive labelling may follow emotional experience rather than constitute it.

Comparison

Theory	Causal sequence	Role of cognition	Neural locus	Key weakness
James-Lange	Stimulus → body → emotion	None — perception of body state is sufficient	Peripheral nervous system	Arousal patterns insufficiently distinct across emotions
Cannon-Bard	Stimulus → body + emotion (simultaneous)	None — thalamic relay is automatic	Thalamus	Neglects cortical/ cognitive modulation
Schachter-Singer	Stimulus → arousal → label → emotion	Central — determines which emotion is felt	Cortical appraisal	Arousal not always necessary; labelling may be post-hoc

Exam note: Questions will often describe a scenario and ask you to identify the theory. The diagnostic question: is cognition involved? If yes → Schachter-Singer. If no, are body and feeling simultaneous? Yes → Cannon-Bard. Body first → James-Lange.

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Mnemonics and exam application

- **James-Lange** — "I'm shaking, therefore I'm scared." Body precedes and produces emotion. No body response = no emotion.
- **Cannon-Bard** — "Scared AND shaking — simultaneously." Think parallel outputs, not a chain. Neither process depends on the other.
- **Schachter-Singer** — "Arousal + context = emotion." Arousal is generic fuel; the label you apply depends on what is happening around you.

High-yield exam triggers

"Cognitive label" / "misattribution of arousal" → Schachter-Singer

"Simultaneously" / "parallel processes" → Cannon-Bard

"Body before feeling" / "physiological response causes emotion" → James-Lange

Beyond these three: Lazarus (1991) proposed cognitive appraisal precedes all emotion. Zajonc (1980) countered that affect can occur without cognition. Both extend the Schachter-Singer debate.

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