

Emotions in Prison

using metaphor to explore
feelings, order and control

Ben Laws

Your emotions make you human. Even
the unpleasant ones have a purpose.

Sabaa Tahir

Overview

Context

Design

Findings: *framework based on a metaphor of water*

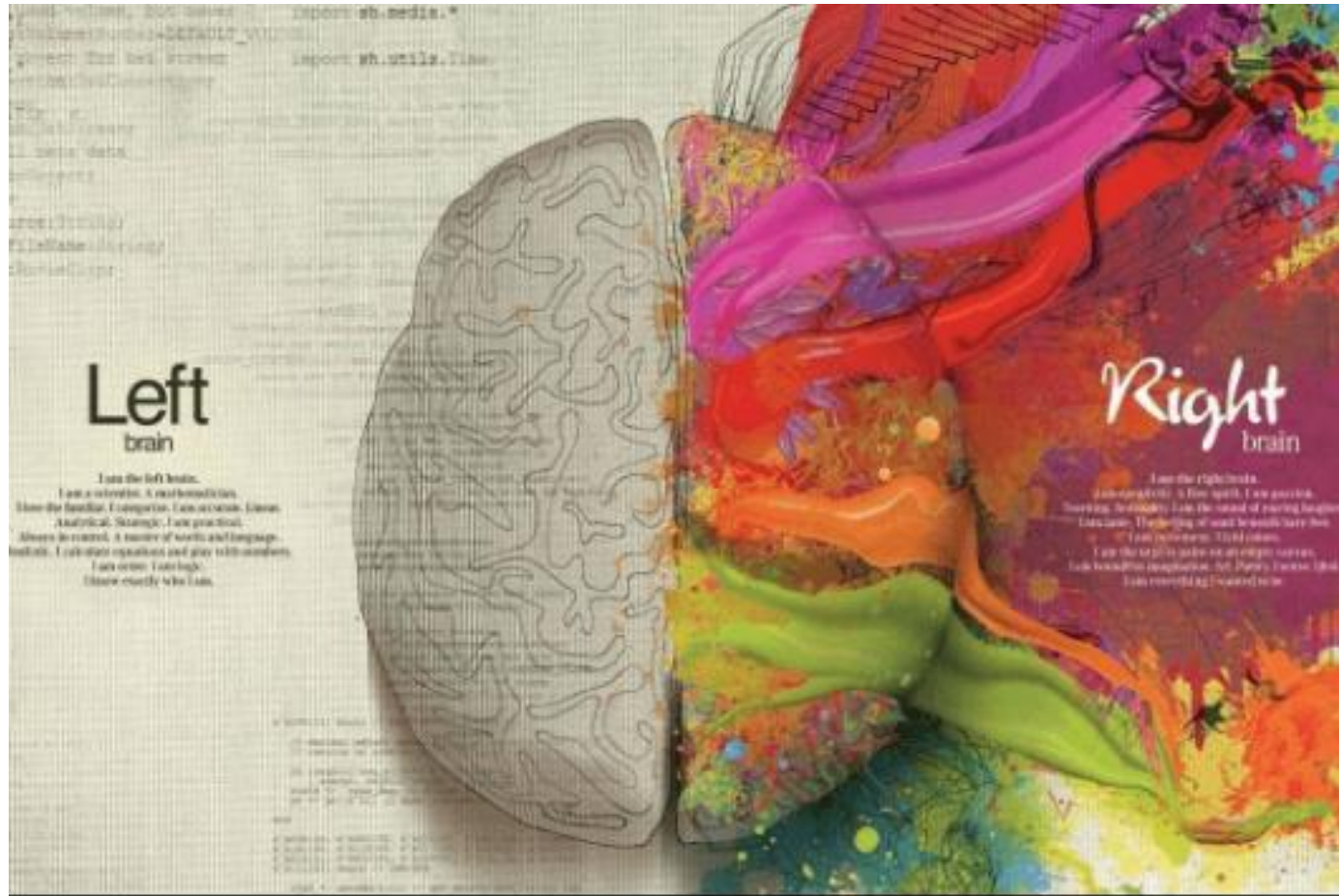
Bridges back to theory

Processes of change and transformation. Calverley & Farrall (2011): Emotions are not just 'by-products of criminality' but constitute the '**causal factors that drive and sustain crime**'

Relationships with established concepts like **control and order**

Limitations

Left Brain Social Science



Mechanistic, rule-guided theory privileged over the affective, subjective, creative approaches: 'maleness' rationality vs 'female' emotionality
'Intertwined in a collaborative relationship needed for normal functioning' (Sapolsky, 2017: 58)

Emotional turn or return?

A number of key texts in sociology in reaction to capitalistic systems that denied a role for affect (e.g. Marx, Simmel, Weber)

Simmel: 'de-individualizing tendencies of the metropolis'

Prison Context: Emotions surprisingly under-explored in general. *But growing interest.*

Important Publications

- **Over-reliance on clinical instruments** in prisons
'subjective, cognitive, or affective contributions' (Liebling, 1999: 287)
- **Crewe et al. (2014)** notes that previous accounts emphasize anger and aggression but that prisons have an emotional geography/wider range of feelings

How can emotions help us understand the prison world? Different Levels of analysis

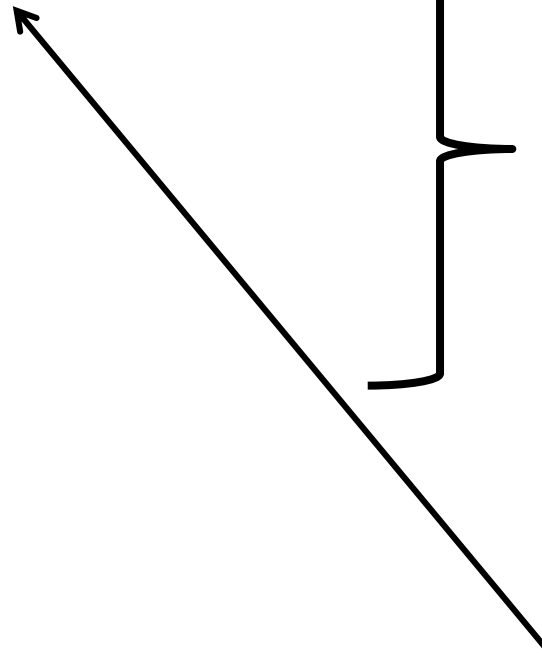
The Self - Psychological

Social Emotions

Space and Emotion

Full explanation of emotion in prison should aim to incorporate all three levels of analysis

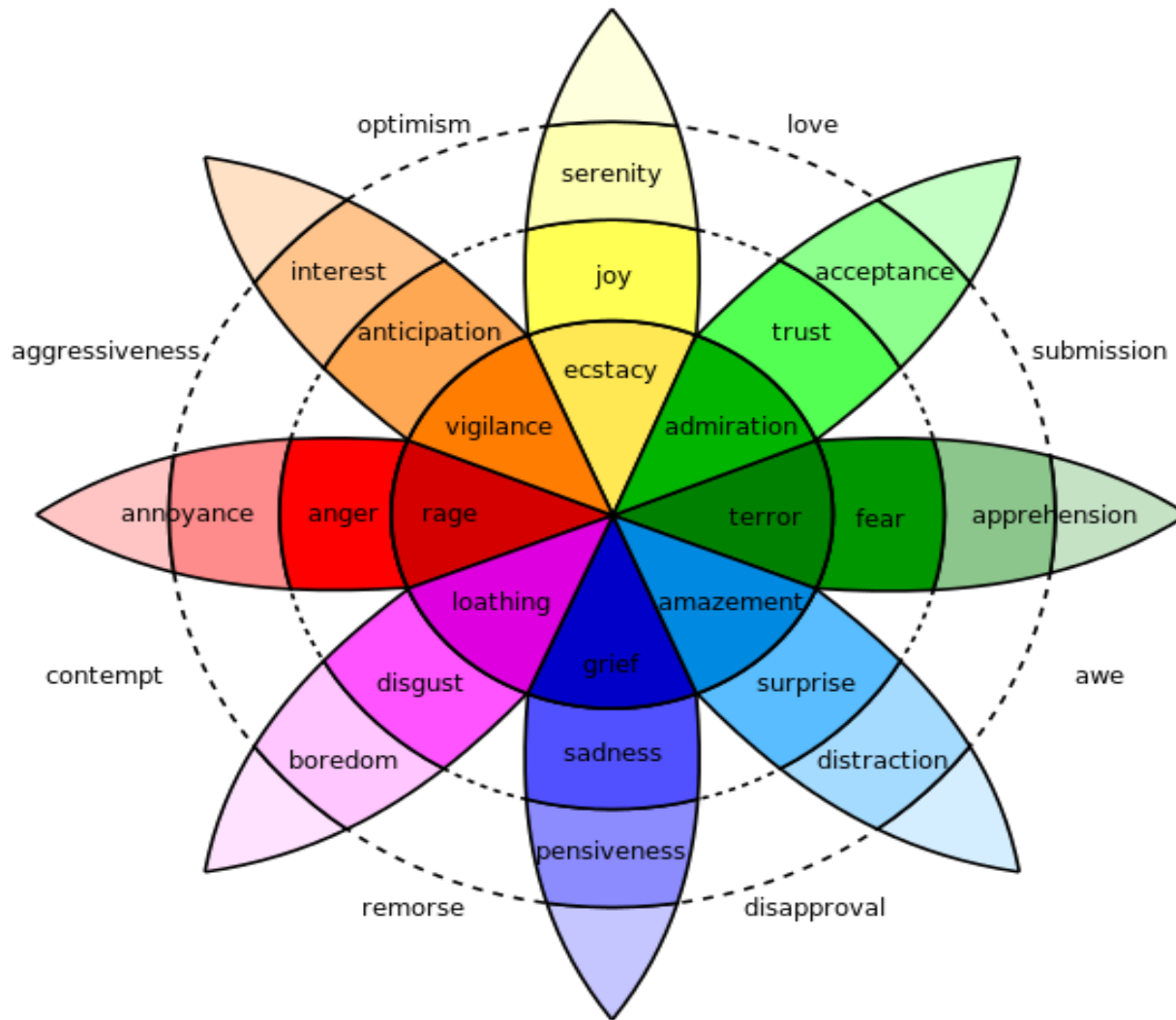
Findings



Research question: What kinds of emotions do prisoners experience, and how are they managed?

- HMP Send and HMP Ranby
- Women's prison in Surrey (Closed category).
- Men's prison (Cat-C) in Nottinghamshire.
- 50 Interviews, 25 men, 25 women, between 45 mins and 2.5 hours.
- 50 sets of prisoner shadowing.
- 6 months in the field.

Plutchick's Emotion Wheel



- Stimulate discussions of different types of emotions
- And various types of intensities
- Helped avoid assumptions about 'gender' and emotions— reminder to ask all prisoners about all emotions.

Findings

Metaphors of Emotions as flowing, fluid, and mixing.



Emotions: Fluids metaphor

Passive &
Avoidant

1. **Bottling up (Suppressing)**
2. **Pressurised Explosions**
3. **Diluting**
4. **Distilling**
5. **Alchemy**

Active &
Engaged

1. Suppressing emotions: 'bottling up'

- In the broader literature, it's supposedly men who do all the bottling: parents teach children that 'boys don't cry', girls as keepers of the heart.

Many emotions suppressed in prison (among both genders)

1. A product of the **prisoner norms** ('do your own time') be independent common to male prisons. Showing emotion = weakness = risks of exploitation

'People will kick you when you're down' (Rebecca)

'If you show your emotions people think you're weak...then people start bullying you and taking liberties' (Pia)

*Masking emotion is **not just a product of prison masculinity***

A product of the **institutional management of emotion**?

- Prisoners at risk of suicide and self harm (ACCTs) had perceptions of being spotlighted rather than supported?
- Feeling **pathologized** instead of receiving therapeutic support
- Help seeking lingered on the record (parole hearings).

They think you can't cope, and that by showing emotions ...you're not going to be able to cope out there. But people out there cry, people out there show emotions, but in prison you seem not to be allowed to. (Danielle)

- **Suppression of emotion driven by a modern penal power labelled 'tightness' (Crewe, 2011)**

Suppressing emotions: 'positive states too'

- Emotional states such as joy and happiness could be also penalised.

*I was **dancing** around, proper dancing around the prison, letting other people listen to the music. The next day I'm doing an MDT [mandatory drug test]. (Zoe)*

- *'You can't be happy, you can't be shining in here' (Craig)*

Not only to more drugs tests, but also an increased frequency of cell searches and invasive pat downs.

- Too much positive **emotion could catch the institutional gaze.**

2. Pressurized Explosions

- Strong link between concealing feelings and subsequent loss of control over emotions.
- Especially **outbursts of violence** and **verbal aggression**.
- A kind of 'boomerang' effect which suggested that emotional suppression had consequences.

Hawkins (2013) **unprocessed emotions resurface through the body's endocrine and nervous system.**

Gabor Maté (2003) **suppression and discharge are inseparable processes** caused by the build-up of acute physiological stress.

"This is a most important book, both for patient and physician. It could save your life."

—Peter Levine, Ph.D., author of
Waking the Tiger

When the Body Says

NO

EXPLORING THE
STRESS-DISEASE
CONNECTION

GABOR MATÉ, M.D.

AUTHOR OF *IN THE REALM OF HUNGRY GHOSTS*

A NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE

BRAIN, MIND, AND BODY
IN THE HEALING OF TRAUMA



BESSEL VAN DER KOLK, M.D.

"A MASTERPIECE THAT COMBINES THE BOUNDLESS CURIOSITY
OF THE SCIENTIST, THE ERUDITION OF THE SCHOLAR, AND THE PASSION
OF THE TRUTH TELLER." —JUDITH HERMAN, M.D.

Biographical
depth and
painful life
histories
before
prison,
perpetuated
in it

The return of the suppressed: Exploring how emotional suppression reappears as violence and pain among male and female prisoners

Ben Laws

University of Cambridge, UK

Abstract

Prisons research is familiar with the idea that prisoners 'mask' their feelings. But this behaviour is often characterised as a social defence mechanism, or a product of prison masculinity, rather than a deeply embedded psychosocial strategy forged over time. The term 'emotional suppression' is introduced as a way of better exploring the 'biographical depth' of this behaviour. This article aims to outline why both male ($n = 25$) and female prisoners ($n = 25$) engage in suppression, by uniting their traumatic life histories with their current lives in prison. One of the most salient findings is the connection between 'bottling-up' emotions and an explosive 'boomerang' effect—suppressed emotions return through violence towards others and the self. This implies that emotion suppression cannot easily be separated from subsequent discharge. This article suggests the need for 'integration work' and a crucial re-orientation of our current understanding of suppression, violence and aggression in prison environments which are often treated as separate entities. Importantly, withholding emotions has been associated with a range of negative health outcomes, and may be especially damaging in the long-term. Prison regimes could do more to encourage therapeutic talk and psychological attunement to reverse the process of emotional numbing.

3. Diluting

- **Side-stepping emotions**, rather than confronting them head-on.
- a relatively passive strategy of immersion in routine. Diversion dissolved emotional intensity of troubling feelings.



‘The way I managed my emotions from day dot was to be proactive and keep busy’. (Paula)

‘Break it up into little sections’ (Alan)

Diluting

*'I know where I'm at, and where I need to be, and I'm ready. **I'm not rushing**. I'm not woken up by the officer coming in' (Kyle) [Bounded agency]*

'Skeleton to support each day' (O'Donnell, 2014)

- Ironically prisoners with busy routines (programmes, work, education and physical exercise) felt 'free' from institutional grip.

Diluting

Avoiding drugs: more exotic but riskier form of diversion:

It is boredom that drives you towards these things [Spice]. If you've got things to occupy your mind, you don't need drugs. (Elliot)

- A perpetual project (avoids the root emotion)
- Vulnerable to regime changes, staff shortages etc.

4. Distilling emotions

- Distillation is introduced here as ‘the **extraction of the essential meaning** or most important aspects of something’ (OED, 2009).
- The first rule of any handbook on survival: understand what is happening to you. (Cohen and Taylor, 1972)



Distilling

Billy identifying (*'I know how I work and how I feel'*), noting physical sensations (*'If I'm embarrassed I feel myself getting hot'*), locations in the body (*'Anger? I feel it here [points to his stomach]'*)

Therapeutic empowerment

'I do an inventory every night on myself; I can look underneath at what's really going on. So if I've got resentment throughout the day, I look at why I'm resentful...and what is the fear underneath it?' (Janice)

Distilling

- ‘I will sit down and write them a letter, but I won’t post it’ (Paul)
- ‘As soon as something bad happens I put it on paper; once I read it back I can see it in a different light. (Molly)
- ‘My emotions speak through my art...this is my heartbeat’ – (Danielle)
- empowering and stabilizing activity, understanding and acceptance of internal states
- to garner perspective on their emotions rather than feel completely at their mercy.

5. Alchemy



- the attempt **'to transform one chemical element into another'** (New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy, 2005). The creative and generative aspects this strategy.

- Involves a **direct engagement with affective states**, to completely alter the impact and diffuse their intensity.

Emotions reappraisal.

'cognitive reframing'.

'Reinterpretation' (O'Donnell: 2014)

Alchemy

Invoking spiritual philosophies to make sense of their sentence. 'The grand scheme' (Alan)

I was on a chaotic roller coaster for too long...I believe in fate. I try to tell myself that the sequence of events inevitably had to happen. (Paula)

If you can make yourself aware that there is something bigger than you in all of this then it's not as bad...try and find a spiritual resolution (Olivia)

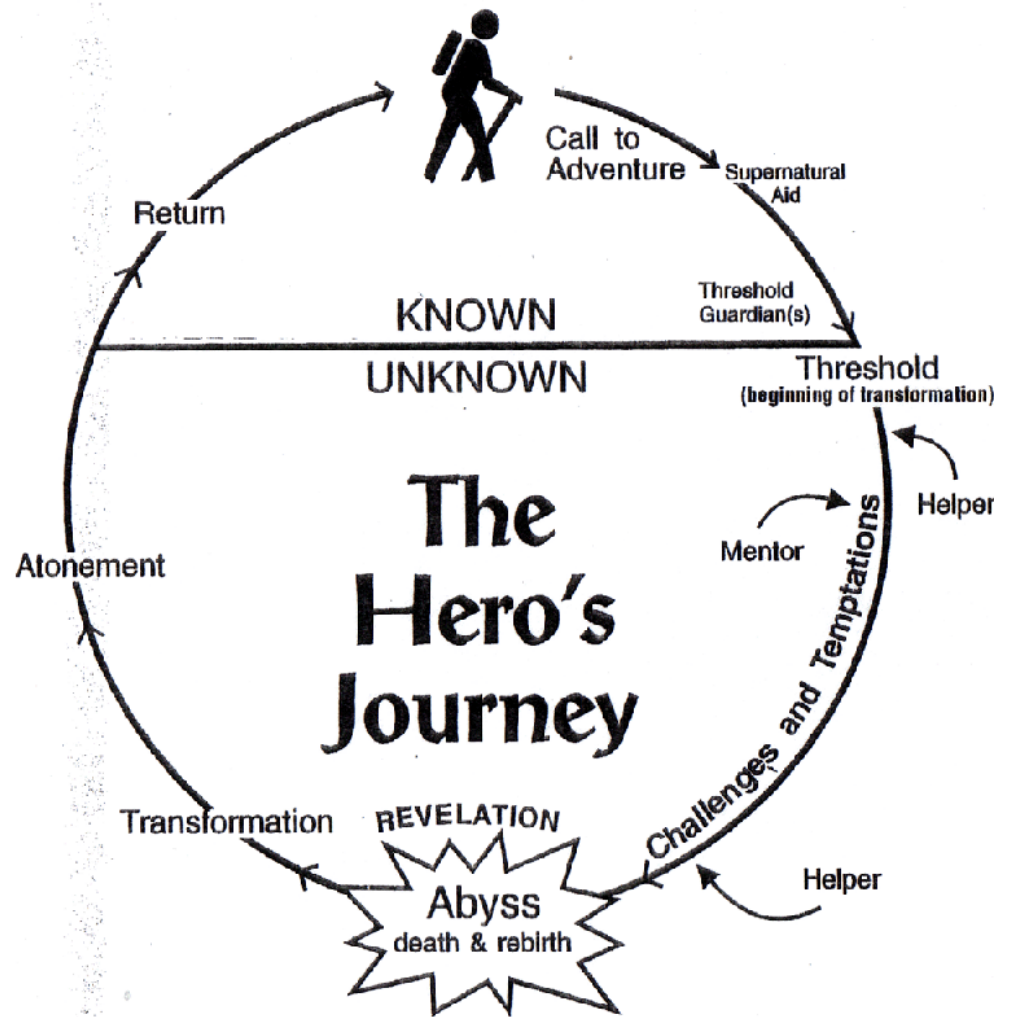
Hitting 'rock bottom' was mentally recast as the solid foundation that allowed one to rebuild: 'Out of the tragedy has come something good' (Ellie).

I got sent down for murder to prove to me that you're not the person you think you are and you've got to change. (Karl)

'My kids need me and I need my kids' (Mikey)

Prison was thus interpreted as a kind of heroic journey, and a powerful test of resilience: 'I keep reminding myself that prison hasn't broke you so far, don't let it now' (Olivia)

These reappraisal strategies **replaced anxiety and fear** with feelings of comfort and serenity, functioning like a kind of **psychological escape route**.

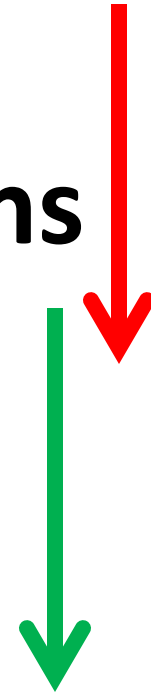


Bridging back to theory

- How might prisoners be 'grouped' in this framework, and what might this mean?
- Calverley & Farrall (2011): emotional 'stages' of the desistance process. Emotions as 'causal' factors driving behaviour.
- Different patterns of emotional management hints at pathways of development, into and away from crime. Differential health outcomes (John & Gross, 2004)

‘Rigid’ and ‘Flexible’ Groups

- 1. Bottling up**
- 2. Pressurised Explosions**
- 3. Diluting**
- 4. Distilling**
- 5. Alchemy**



Rigid group

Too passive: caught in the waves of their emotions

Too controlling: absolute stance made them particularly vulnerable

- ‘a narrower range of emotions’ (Calverley and Farrall, 2011). A **smaller toolkit**.
- Crewe et al's (2017) long term prisoners in the early stage ‘in effect treading water, being carried by the tide of the sentence or...seeking to swim against it’
- deleterious psychological and physiological effects of suppression (Mate, 2003)

Emotional Flexibility

- Prisoners were more emotionally pliable, less avoidant with their feeling states, had regular routines but less dependant on them. Mentors, more responsibility. Stable.
- Calverley & Farrall (2011): a 'building bridges' phase with **trust** and **caring** social relations. (Social Bonds Theory)
- Crewe et al's (2017) Late stage long term prisoners 'were swimming with the tide, rather than against it, using its energy to their advantage'

Emotions and Sociology of Imprisonment

- These groups may indicate a kind of emotional maturation process/awareness of patterns. Windows for change.
- Emotion management attempts to establish and negotiate order (see Sparks et al., 1996). Anger and loss of power.
- Emotion links social structures and individual actors (Barbalet, 2001). 'Connective tissue'.

E.G. How institutions marshal emotions within individuals:

- Emotional constriction? (Consequences for re-entry)
- Outlets for processing feelings. (Learning Together, Drawing Connections)

Limitations and Conclusions

The limits of metaphor

- Shoehorning the data/data as guide. Too loose. Too abstract?

Causal inferences

- Cross-sectional research/'signposts'
- ESRC grant to explore pathways of prisoners in segregation

Measurement problems/rational models

- Doing qualitative research differently

Thank you!

Ben Crewe

Alison Liebling & Yvonne Jewkes

Prisons Research Centre

First year reviewers (Susie Hulley and Loraine Gelsthorpe)



Open-ended definition of emotions

Any strong feeling or *affective* state of consciousness: such as sadness, joy, shame, anger or fear (Collins English Dictionary, 2003)

We don't experience emotions in general