Motivational Salience

Amygdala Tuning From Traits, Needs, Values, and Goals

Based on a basic emotions perspective, a dominant view in psychology is that the primary function of the amygdala is to govern the emotion of fear. In this view, the amygdala is necessary for a person to feel afraid, and when amygdala activity is detected, one can infer that a person is feeling afraid or threatened. In this paper, we review current research on amygdala function that calls into question this threat-specific view and propose a more general view of amygdala functioning based on appraisal theory and psychological constructivism. Specifically, we examine the hypothesis that the amygdala is involved in processing stimulus relevance for the goals and motivations of the perceiver. Thus, although threatening stimuli are almost always considered a relevant stimulus, novel, ambiguous, and extremely positive stimuli can also be relevant for different people in different situations. Once deemed relevant, the amygdala guides processing to orchestrate an appropriate response.