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The rise of affectivism

Daniel Dukes, Kathryn Abrams, Ralph Adolphs, Mohammed E Ahmed, Andrew Beatty, Kent C Berridge, Susan Broomhall, Tobias Brosch, Joseph J Campos, Zanna Clay, et al.

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1 The rise of *affectivism*

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64 Standfirst:

65 Research over the past decades has demonstrated the explanatory power of emotions,
66 feelings, motivations, moods, and other affective processes when trying to understand and
67 predict how we think and behave. In this consensus article, we ask: Has the increasingly
68 recognized impact of affective phenomena ushered in a new era, the era of *affectivism*?

69

70 The behavioural and cognitive sciences have faced perennial challenges of
71 incorporating emotions, feelings, motivations, moods, and other affective processes into
72 models of human behaviour and the human mind. Such processes have long been
73 marginalised or ignored, typically on the basis that they were irrational, unmeasurable, or
74 simply unenlightening. However, it has become increasingly difficult to deny that these
75 processes are not only linked to our well-being, but also that they shape our behaviour and
76 drive key cognitive mechanisms such as attention, learning, memory, and decision-making.

77 Fertile ground for addressing these challenges lies in the writings of the ancient Greeks,
78 and of eminent scholars such as Descartes, Hume, Darwin, Wundt and James, to name but a
79 few. The most recent seeds were sown in the 1960s, allowing an unprecedented,
80 multidisciplinary interest in affective processes to take root around twenty years later.
81 Research on such processes has positively blossomed since, as growing numbers of dedicated
82 researchers, departments, research centres, journals and societies contribute to the affective
83 sciences – a highly integrative endeavour that spans disciplines, methods, and theories.¹⁻⁴ By
84 reaping the fruits of these cumulative advances, we are now able to understand and account
85 for more of the variability in the available data and formulate more powerful and precise
86 predictions as a consequence. Indeed, so profound have the repercussions for our shared
87 models of human behaviour become that we can now ask whether we have moved beyond the
88 eras of behaviourism and cognitivism, into the era of *affectivism*.

89 **Characterizing *affectivism***

90 One of the leaders of the “cognitive (r)evolution” described how “behavio[u]rism faded
91 because of its failure to solve basic questions about human thought and action”.⁵ Indeed,
92 although elements of behaviourism continued to influence cognitivist thinking, cognitivism
93 represented a rejection of some of the central tenets of behaviourism. But the affective
94 sciences supplement cognitivism rather than supplant it. In fact, if cognitivism is conceived

95 of as an approach in which the inclusion of cognitive processes in models of behaviour, mind
96 and brain increases the power to explain not only cognitive phenomena but also behaviour,
97 then *affectivism* would be the approach in which the inclusion of affective processes in such
98 models not only explains affective phenomena but, critically, further enhances the power to
99 explain cognition and behaviour (Figure 1a).

100 The definition of affective processes, either as a whole or individually, is subject to
101 debate. For example, questions continue concerning how definitions of emotion should
102 accommodate the fact that we continuously evaluate events around us and the way in which
103 our central and peripheral nervous systems allow the emergence of expressions, physiological
104 arousal and bodily reactions, action tendencies and felt subjective experiences. Nonetheless,
105 it seems that affective processes are typically understood to relate to the notion of
106 (dis)pleasure or valence, to not necessarily be consciously felt, and to mobilize the organism
107 to deal with events that may be important to that organism. In any case, scientific study is
108 beset by questions of terminology: Persistent difficulties in formally defining ‘cognition’⁶ did
109 not prevent the transition from behaviourism to cognitivism, and the fact that there is no
110 consensus concerning a formal definition of other important constructs such as intelligence,
111 religion, culture and even life does not preclude fruitful scientific study of them.

112 Indeed, in spite of these questions of definition of some of its core phenomena, the
113 affective sciences have already led to a better understanding of how we acquire knowledge of
114 the objects, concepts and people around us, and how we determine the value of those things.
115 Importantly, emotions do not just shape how we interpret the world, but also shape which
116 aspects of the world need our attention and which can safely be ignored: Emotions are not
117 just about what *is*, but also about what *matters*.

118 **Developing affective sciences**

119 The recent and transformative influence of the affective sciences on scholarly discourse
120 about human mind and behaviour is apparent in the evolution of funding (Figure 1b) and
121 publications (Figure 1c), even in areas related to central cognitive mechanisms - e.g.,
122 memory, attention, perception, and decision-making (Figures 1d-1g). Particularly in
123 psychology since the 1980s, the tight relationship between affect, cognition and behaviour
124 has been revealed in ongoing research topics such as emotional intelligence, emotion
125 regulation, addiction, decision making and social interaction. But several other disciplines
126 also began paying increasing attention to affective phenomena around the same time, and the
127 burgeoning interest continues.

128 One key example is *affective neuroscience*. While the term itself emerged only in the
129 1990s, previous ground-breaking studies of the emotional brain, in particular of the amygdala
130 and its role in emotional learning, had set the stage for this field to emerge.⁷ Studies began to
131 reveal the brain circuitry responsible for many affective phenomena in animals and humans,
132 including threat detection and anxiety reactions, homeostatic feelings and motivations, sexual
133 and affiliative reactions, reward wanting and liking, and addictions. Innovative studies with
134 brain-damaged patients highlighted the interdependence of cognitive and affective processes,
135 the distinction between emotions and feelings, and the essential role of emotions in the
136 decision-making process. Neuroscientific advances also played a key role in popularising
137 emotion research for the public at large, as the first functional magnetic resonance imaging
138 pictures in the 1990s seemed to cement the status of human emotion as an objective,
139 measurable, and scientifically accessible phenomenon. In terms of the origins of our affective
140 lives, studies of young children began and continue to highlight the critical role of emotion
141 and motivation in human development,⁸ and advances in *comparative affective science* are
142 providing new insights into the evolutionary and ethological bases of affective processes in
143 humans and non-human animals.⁹

144 In the clinical domain, long-established classification models of mental health and
145 illness based largely on lists of behavioural manifestations and cognitive disturbances have
146 recently been challenged by a new diagnostic system, proposed by the NIMH, which relies
147 heavily on emotion-related constructs, including arousal, and positive and negative valence
148 systems.¹⁰ Similarly, neuropsychological assessment, intervention and rehabilitation after
149 brain damage or disease have traditionally focused on cognitive functions (e.g., language,
150 perception, and memory), but have in recent years begun to take affective domains more
151 seriously, as has the psychotherapeutic treatment of many mental health problems. These
152 advances represent key shifts in fundamental conceptions of mental well-being, illustrating
153 how research on affective processes benefits from and influences advances elsewhere.

154 A similar illustration can be found in *affective computing*. Since its launch in the
155 1990s,¹¹ the development of artificial intelligence and social robotics has led to specific
156 computational approaches aimed at implementing emotional processes in artificial agents
157 (socially interactive agents, social robotics, chatbots) and systems. This trend is particularly
158 apparent in signal processing research that allows more sensitive measuring and monitoring
159 of affective responses. Affective computing has powerful implications for industry, social
160 media and education, and, when combined with clinical research, also for health monitoring
161 and patient care.

162 There are also key roles for the humanities and the social sciences in the affective
163 sciences. In recent decades, philosophy has seen emotion, affect, feelings, and related notions
164 become central explanatory tools, alongside belief and desire, in theories of mind and in
165 accounts of moral and evaluative thought and behaviour.¹² In the field of history, several
166 research centres dedicated to emotions have been established in the past decade, mapping
167 how emotions themselves have been conceptualised and expressed differently over time and

168 across cultures, and highlighting the influence of emotions as determinants of historical
169 action and thought.¹³

170 Researchers have also begun to pay more attention to affective processes in general
171 linguistics, analysing, for example, how emotions are referred to in the languages of the
172 world via the diverse emotion lexica.¹⁴ In terms of cultural comparisons, there are emotion
173 words that do not seem to have equivalent words in English, such as *amae*, a Japanese
174 emotion word which means something like desiring to be loved by or dependent on someone.
175 In linguistic pragmatics, theories of utterance interpretation now explore not only the
176 expressive qualities of figurative language (metaphor in particular), but also the direct
177 manifestation of emotions through linguistic and paralinguistic means, effectively embracing
178 the very same affective dimension that was formerly disregarded.

179 Meanwhile, in the social sciences, behavioural economists have developed more
180 psychologically realistic assumptions about economic agents - *homo economicus* - by
181 incorporating affective processes into their theoretical and empirical models of investment
182 behaviour, medical decision making, bargaining, and issues in political economy such as
183 voting behaviour. Anthropology, too, has begun to focus on the cultural modelling of human
184 affective processes, highlighting the intercultural variety of emotion repertoires, while
185 research in sociology has complemented this approach with a focus on intra-cultural plurality
186 and the role of emotions in social collectives.¹⁵ Indeed, most anthropologists and sociologists
187 now recognise the significance of emotions in human behaviour, and study emotional
188 interactions at the micro-level (between individuals or in small groups), the meso-level
189 (social institutions), and the macro-level (social structures such as class, age or
190 gender). Emotions are considered fundamental social phenomena, forming the basis for many
191 kinds of social activities and interactions, and playing an essential role in socialisation

192 processes, such as affective social learning. Thus, just as cognition and behaviour can serve
193 both social and non-social functions, so too can affect.

194 The influence of affective sciences is also growing in socially relevant domains,
195 shaping research and public attention accordingly (Box 1). Other key disciplines in which
196 emotions and feelings are being taken more seriously as objects of research include the
197 political sciences, public policy, communication, literature, and the arts.

198 **A relevant and timely question**

199 Scientists typically neglect what they cannot measure in order to reduce noise in their
200 data and better attend to their object of study: Behaviourism neglected the central role of
201 cognitive and affective processes; cognitivism neglected the role of affective processes.
202 While the behavioural and the cognitive sciences remain essential to the study of the mind,
203 brain and behaviour, given that emotions are often held to involve both cognitive aspects
204 and behavioural tendencies, an era of *affectivism* can be seen as a potential
205 natural successor to both the behaviourism and cognitivism eras: it would
206 naturally incorporate both perspectives. In this light, perhaps the growing interest in the
207 affective sciences stems from the maturation of the scientific study of how and why we think
208 the way we think and do the things we do.

209 But the relevance of the question of whether or not we are in a new era hinges perhaps
210 not just on an appreciation of historical scientific progress or of the contribution of the
211 affective sciences, but also on how cognitive processes are defined: If one assumes that all
212 mental processes – including affective processes – are captured by the word *cognitive*, then
213 any blossoming of the affective sciences could be said to be simply part of the further
214 growth of the cognitive sciences; as such, the question could perhaps seem irrelevant.
215 Nevertheless, asking it would at the very least constitute a call for our colleagues to consider
216 advances in the affective sciences in light of their own models and research: considering

217 affective processes in cognitive and behavioural models may well increase the explanatory
218 and predictive power of such models. Above all, we hope this brief opinion piece might
219 initiate and stimulate constructive, interdisciplinary, and passionate debate.

220 The conceptual, methodological and technical advances made within the last few
221 decades have demonstrated that affective processes are unquestionably enlightening when it
222 comes to understanding both behaviour and cognition. While it will ultimately be the
223 responsibility of historians of science to determine whether or not a new era has begun,
224 given the undeniable impact of affective sciences on our models of brain, mind, and
225 behaviour, it seems relevant to ask today whether we are now in the era of *affectivism*.

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229 Total = 1992 words (with “standfirst”)

230

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262 **Author contributions**

263 The manuscript was written primarily by the first author D.D. and last author D.S. after
264 taking into account the inputs and rounds of comments from the other co-authors (K.A., R.A.,
265 M.E.A., A.B., K.C.B., S.B., T.B., J.J.C., Z.C., F.C., W.A.C., A.D., H.D., J.D'A., J.W.D.,
266 B.deG., J.D., R.deS., P.E., P.C.E., E.F., A.F., A.Foolen., U.F., D.G., J.G., L.G., P.G., J.J.G.,
267 E.H., A.K., D.K., B.K., D.Konstan., M.E.K., J.E.LeD., J.S.L., R.W.L., G.L., A.S.R.M.,
268 T.A.M., A.M., P.N., B.P., I.P., C.P., S.D.P., G.P., B.R.-R., J.A.R., D.Sauter., A.S., K.R.R.,
269 P.S., J.E.S., C.T., F.T., J.T., J.Turner, C.V.R., P.V., and T.W). I.P. and M.E.A. prepared
270 Figures 1b-1g. Except for the first author D.D. and the last author D.S., the authorship list is
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272 **Competing interests**

273 The authors declare no competing interests.

274

275 **Box**
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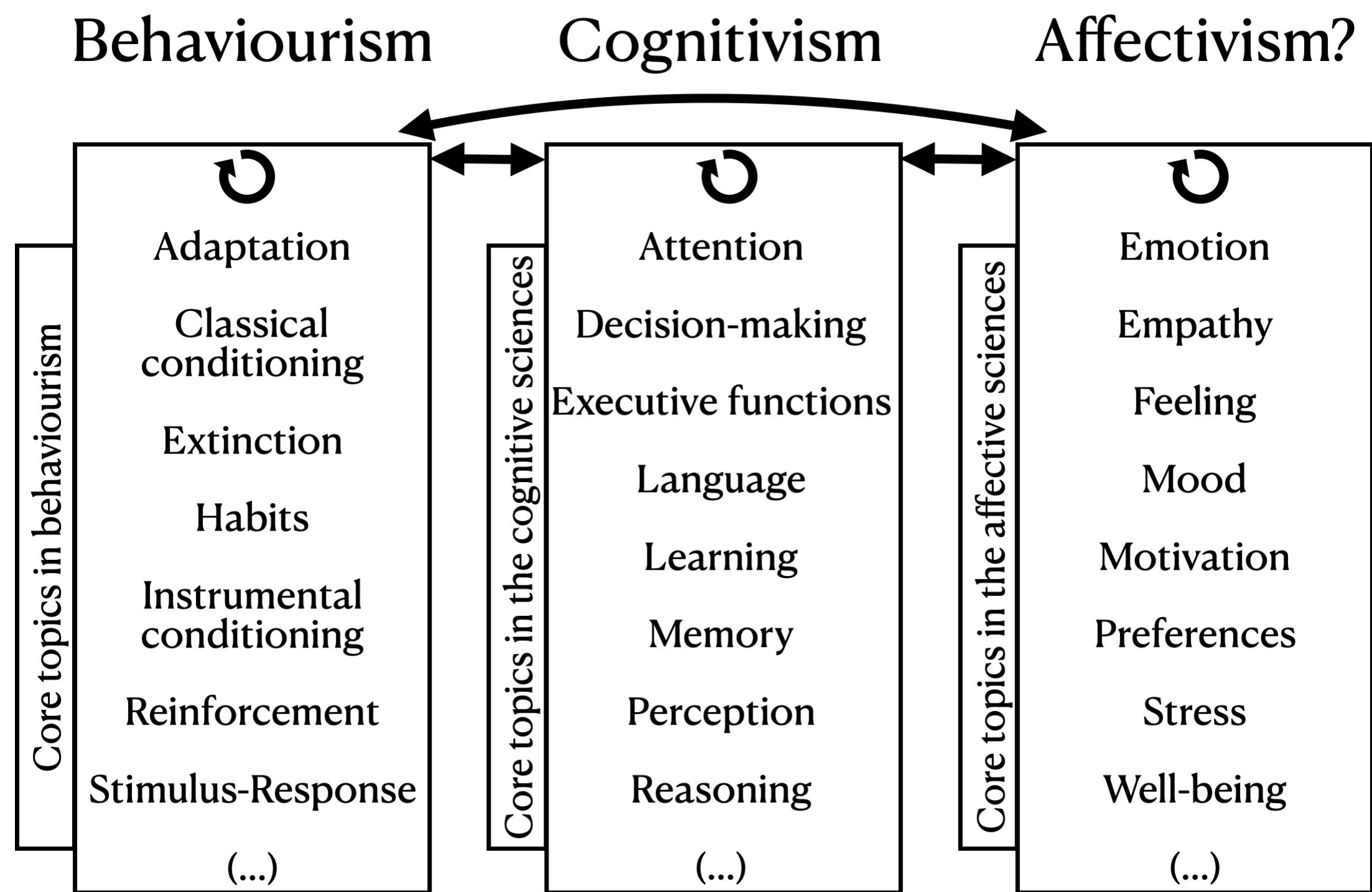
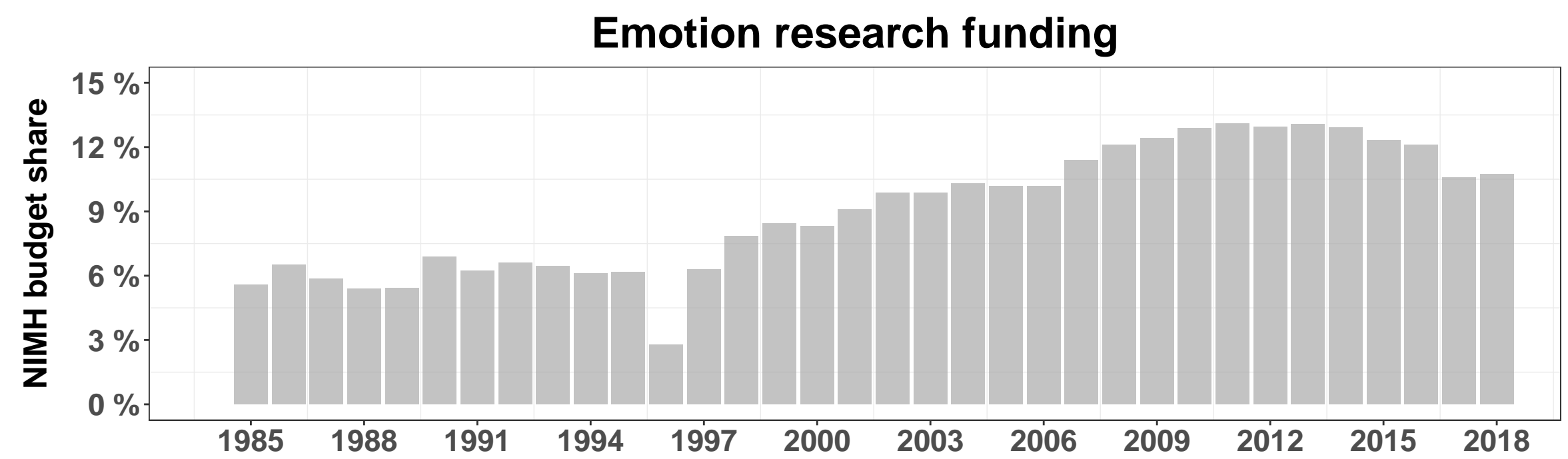
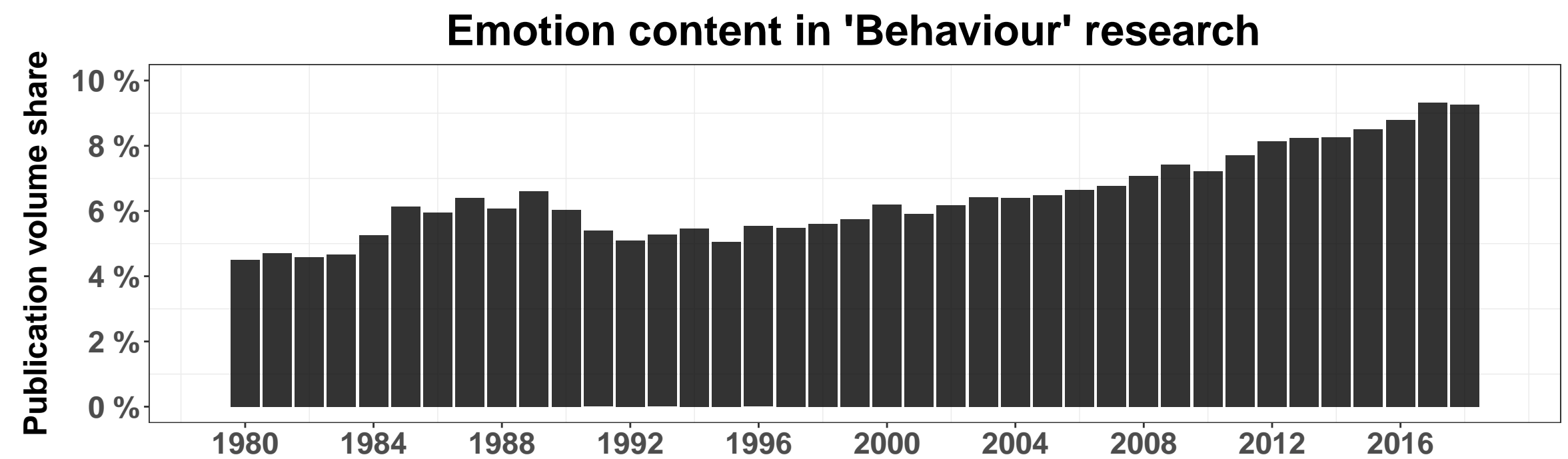
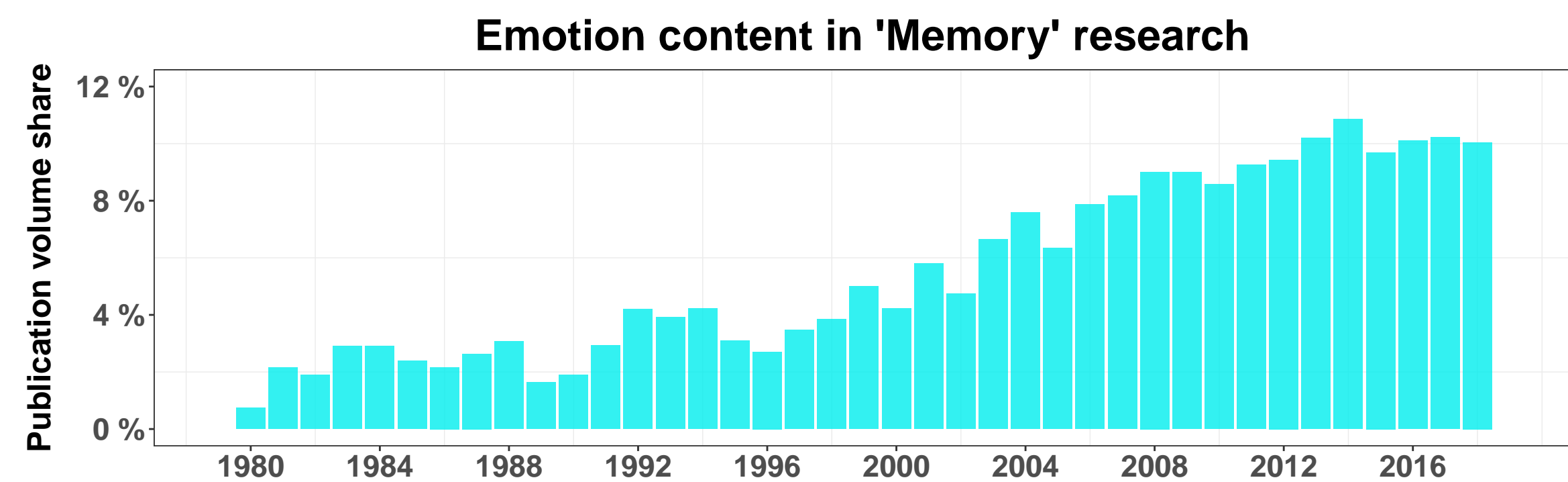
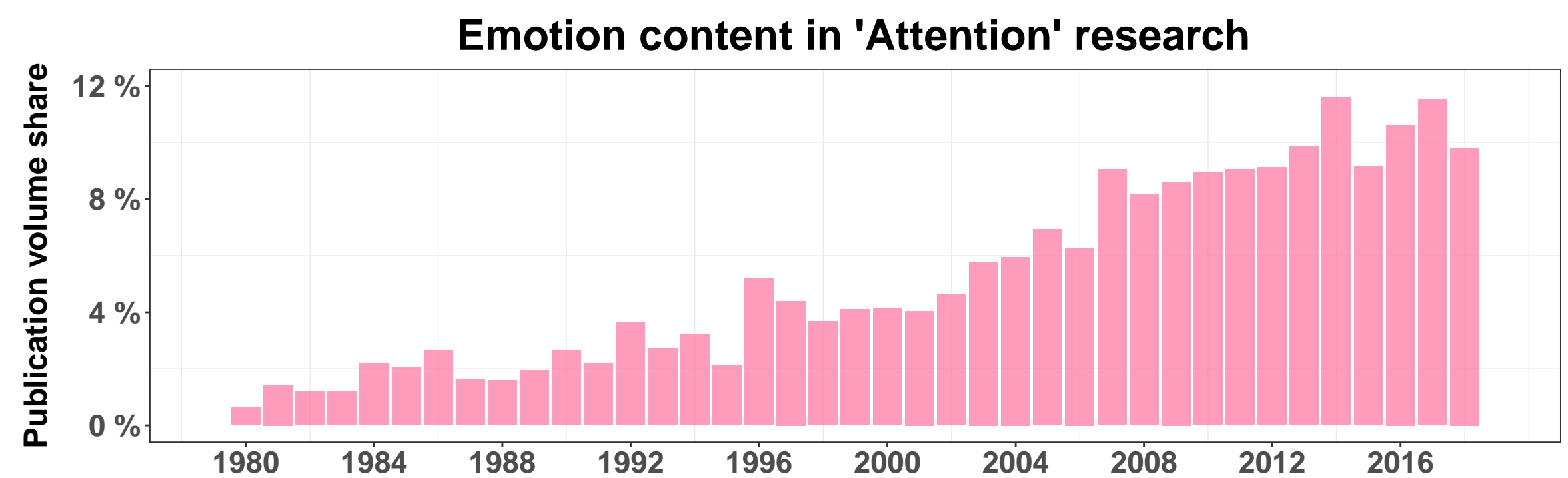
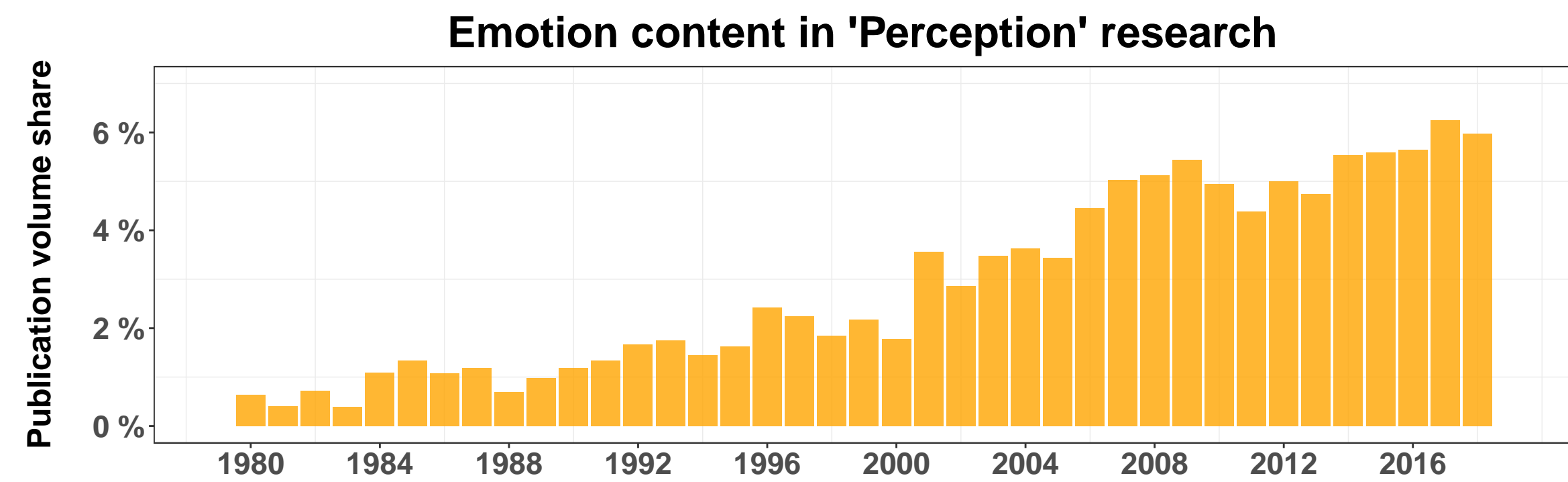
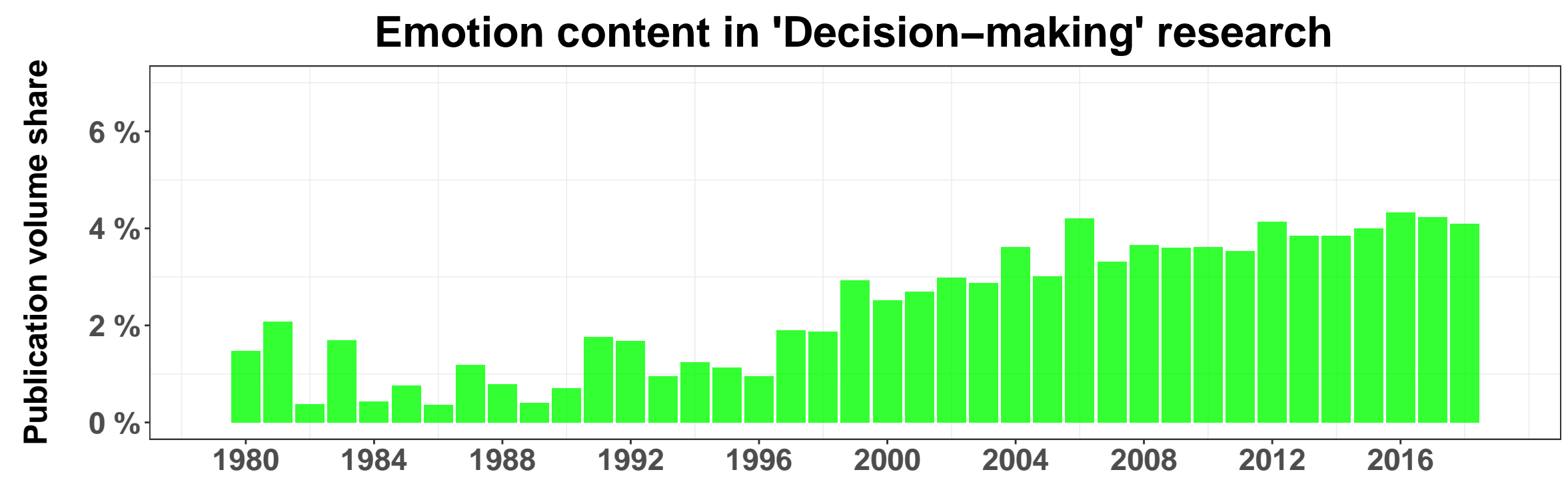
277 **The growing influence of the affective sciences in socially relevant domains**

278 These examples are taken from core disciplines in the social sciences (including law,
279 education, environmental research, conflict and reconciliation research).

- 280 • Legal scholars are increasingly challenging the incomplete behavioural and
281 cognitive assumptions inherent in legal theory and practice, carefully
282 considering the role of affective processes in legal decision making, and
283 acknowledging how laws and legal rules reflect and create cultural scripts of
284 how people *ought to feel*.
- 285 • In education research, links between well-being and education are increasingly
286 uncovered, resulting in changes in policy and the continuing rise in the number
287 of socio-emotional learning programs.
- 288 • In research on climate change mitigation, investigators have begun to focus on
289 the importance of affective processes for signalling the urgency of the situation
290 and for motivating collective remedial action, both for private citizens and
291 governmental organizations.
- 292 • In research on violent international conflict, purely ideological or rational
293 utility-based considerations for group and political actions are now outdated –
294 they are no longer considered within the limited scope of what is good
295 (conciliatory) versus what is bad (aggressive) – as research now takes into
296 account a more diverse scope of distinct emotions and possible consequent
297 behaviours.

298

299 **Figure Caption**
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a**b****c****d****e****f****g**

301 **Figure 1: The scope and increasing impact of the affective sciences**

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a, asks whether the increasing research focus on affective processes and on their explanatory power means we are now in the era of *affectivism*. The circular arrows represent how the study of the processes within each box improves our understanding of the core mechanisms typically investigated in behaviourism, and in the cognitive and affective sciences, respectively. The bidirectional arrows between the boxes represent the idea that the mechanisms described in one box are important to understand those described in the other boxes. **b**, shows the relative increase of NIMH funding spent on research on emotion since 1985. **c**, shows the extent to which publications with considerable emotion content grew faster than those concerning behaviour without emotion content since 1980. The lower panel shows the increasing prominence of publications involving emotion as a percentage of publications in the respective area of inquiry on core cognitive mechanisms such as **d**, memory, **e**, attention, **f**, perception, and **g**, decision-making.

The reference list in the main text focuses on Handbook-type publications to represent the depth and breadth of the affective sciences across many academic fields. For a list containing some books and papers that have either helped shape the field in many disciplines in the affective sciences or that have the potential to do so, please see the suggested reading list in the supplementary material section.

Supplementary Material Section

- Dataset address
- R code directory
- Figure explanations
- Supplementary Reading List

A dataset was constructed for the figures and can be found at: <https://osf.io/2ktnv/>
The relevant R code can be found at: <https://github.com/UH-CPL/Affectivism-Code>

Figure 1b

The relative increase of NIMH funding spent on research on emotion since 1985

Figure 1b shows the evolution of NIMH funding on emotion as percentage of the overall NIMH budget on a yearly basis.

Methodology

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) in the United States is the lead federal funding agency for psychology and psychiatry. It is one of the 27 agencies that make up the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Accordingly, NIMH, due to its size, prestige, and relevancy to affective and related research, provides an excellent basis for investigating research funding trends. Moreover, NIH is one of the very few research funding agencies world-wide that keeps detailed public records of its grants since 1985. This information is available through an online portal called NIH RePORTER.

From NIH RePORTER, we collected all the NIMH grant data from 1985 to 2018. Then we identified within the NIMH grants the subgroup of grants related to research on emotion as those that featured either in their title or abstract at least one of the following keywords: ‘emotion’, ‘emotions’, ‘emote’, ‘emotive’. The figure illustrates the evolution of research funding on emotion as a percentage of overall NIMH funding on a yearly basis. Performing regression on this normalised time series confirms that funding of research on emotion experienced a significant increase as portion of the overall NIMH budget (Pearson correlation, $r = 0.260$, $p < 0.001$). In fact, it doubled, starting from about 6% of the total budget in 1985 and reaching about 12% of the total budget in the late 2010s.

Figure 1c

The extent to which publications with considerable emotion content outgrew publications concerning behaviour without emotion content since 1980

Figure 1c shows the evolution of *EM* publications as percentage of the *BBM* category since 1980 (see below).

Methodology

The Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) thesaurus is a controlled and hierarchically organised vocabulary produced by the National Library of Medicine. It is used for indexing, cataloguing, and searching of biomedical and health-related information. MeSH includes the subject headings appearing in MEDLINE/PubMed, the NLM Catalog, and other NLM databases. (<https://www.nlm.nih.gov/mesh/meshhome.html>)

We used the MeSH category ‘Behavior and Behavior Mechanisms’ (BBM) to acquire through PubMed all the relevant publications since 1980. In this MeSH category, papers that typically featured considerable affective content fall largely under the branch ‘Emotions’ (EM). Behaviour papers with either non-affective or partly affective content fall largely under the other branches of the BBM category. We consider the EM group the forefront of affective scholarship.

We found in PubMed that between 1980 and 2018 104,563 EM publications appeared in the literature within a total of 1,449,758 BBM publications. To test if the growth in the number of EM publications is above and beyond the natural expansion of the science system the last 40 years, we computed the proportion of the EM publications each year with respect to the overall number of BBM publications that year. The figure shows the evolution of the EM proportion during the period of observation. The increase is not only statistically significant (Pearson correlation, $r = 0.765$; $p < 0.001$) but also materially impressive. The relative volume of publications with considerable affective content in behavioural research more or less doubled since 1980, increasing from ~4.5% in 1980 to ~9.2% in 2018.

Figures 1d-g

The increasing prominence of affect in research on cognitive mechanisms.

Figures 1d-1g present the evolution of emotion content as a percentage of the overall publications on memory, attention, perception, and decision-making.

Methodology

To investigate to what degree emotion methods and content pollinated other areas of scholarship in psychology, we selected four MeSH areas:

$$X = \{\text{'Memory', 'Attention', 'Perception', 'Decision-making'}\}.$$

For each area X_i , we ran two queries in the PubMed database: Q1: ' X_i and Emotion' and Q2: ' X_i '. The first, joint query yielded those publications in subject area X_i that featured significant emotion content. The second, simple query yielded all the publications in X_i , that is, both those with and those without emotion content. The figure shows the growth of publications with considerable emotion content in each area X_i as a percentage of the total number of X_i publications each year.

Performing regression in all cases confirms the strong increase of the publications featuring significant emotion content in each area X_i , net of all other factors (Pearson correlation, $r > 0.8$; $p < 0.001$ in all cases). Depending on the case, this increase is between two-fold and ten-fold.

Supplementary Reading List

Please note: No attempt has been made to ensure that this list is representative or balanced across disciplines, impact, time or theories. A more complete analysis and explanation of individual papers, books and events that led to the rise of the affectivism is currently underway as part of a complementary project.

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