

Emotion as the Bridge Between Awareness and Lived Experience: The Structural Necessity of Affective Disclosure

David Matta

*American University of Beirut
Lebanese Mindfulness Association*

Corresponding Author: David Matta
American University of Beirut, Beirut, Lebanon

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Abstract

Emotion is traditionally understood as a response to experience, whether as physiological reaction, cognitive appraisal, or constructed psychological state. These accounts implicitly assume that experience is already available to awareness and that emotion occurs subsequently as a secondary process. This paper advances a more fundamental claim: emotion is not merely a response within experience but the structural mechanism through which experience becomes available to awareness as lived reality. Emotion is defined as affective disclosure—the process through which experiential states are offered to awareness and through which awareness receives experience as phenomenally present. From this formulation follows the Structural Necessity of Emotion Theorem: emotion is a necessary structural condition for lived experience and is therefore present in every experience, irrespective of its specific emotional content. This account distinguishes structural emotion from emotional content and situates emotion as the integrative bridge between experiential processes and awareness. By reframing emotion as a constitutive feature of conscious systems rather than a contingent psychological event, this theory provides a unifying structural framework that integrates phenomenology, cognitive science, and integrative awareness models. Emotion emerges not merely as something experienced but as the condition that makes experience experientially present.

Keywords: *emotion; awareness; lived experience; affective disclosure; consciousness; phenomenology; integrative awareness; structural necessity; M^s model; phenomenal experience; affective primordialism; predictive processing*

1. Introduction

Emotion occupies a central yet theoretically unsettled position in the study of consciousness. It has been variously described as a physiological response (James, 1884; Damasio, 1999), a cognitive appraisal of environmental significance (Lazarus, 1991; Scherer, 2005), a constructed psychological category emerging from predictive processes (Barrett, 2017), or an adaptive action tendency oriented toward survival and regulation (Frijda, 1986; Panksepp, 1998). While these accounts have significantly advanced the scientific understanding of emotion, they share a common structural assumption: emotion is understood as something that occurs within experience, rather than as something that makes experience experientially available in the first place.

This assumption leaves unresolved a deeper structural question: how does experience become lived for awareness? Perceptual, cognitive, and bodily processes continuously unfold within conscious systems, yet not all such processes constitute lived experience. The distinction between informational processing and phenomenally lived experience remains one of the central problems in the study of consciousness (Chalmers, 1995; Tononi, 2004). Existing emotion theories typically presuppose that experiential states are already present to awareness and that emotion modifies, evaluates, or responds to these states. However, this presupposition obscures the possibility that emotion may play a more fundamental structural role in the emergence of lived experience itself.

Phenomenological philosophy has long suggested that affectivity is inseparable from the structure of experience. Heidegger (1927/1962) introduced the concept of *Stimmung* (mood) to describe the affective attunement through which the world is disclosed as meaningful for the experiencing subject. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) emphasized the embodied and affective nature of perception, arguing that experience is always situated within a lived, affectively structured relation between organism and world. More recently, Colombetti (2014) has argued that all experience possesses a primordial affective dimension, and Ratcliffe (2008) has described existential feelings as the background bodily conditions through which the world appears as real and inhabitable. These accounts suggest that affectivity is not merely an addition to experience but a fundamental dimension of experiential disclosure. However, phenomenology and affective philosophy have generally described this relationship descriptively rather than identifying the precise structural mechanism through which experiential disclosure occurs.

Contemporary neuroscience provides converging evidence for the central role of affective systems in conscious experience. Affective processes regulate salience, relevance, and experiential integration, shaping which experiential states become consciously accessible and behaviorally meaningful (Damasio, 1999; Panksepp, 1998; Seth, 2013). Predictive processing models similarly emphasize the role of precision weighting and affective valuation in determining which internal and external signals become integrated into conscious experience (Friston, 2010; Barrett, 2017). These findings suggest that affective processes play a foundational role in the transition from informational processing to conscious experience. However, existing accounts have not fully articulated emotion as the structural mechanism through which experiential states are disclosed to awareness.

Table 1
Comparative Positioning of Emotion Theories

Theory	Role of Emotion	Relation to Awareness	Structural vs. Content	Mechanism Identified
James (1884)	Physiological response to perception	Awareness follows bodily change	Content (bodily feeling)	Peripheral nervous system arousal
Lazarus (1991)	Cognitive appraisal of significance	Emotion follows cognitive evaluation	Content (appraisal outcome)	Appraisal of person–environment relation
Damasio (1999)	Somatic marker for conscious access	Feeling as awareness of bodily state	Content (somatic pattern)	Somatic marker system
Panksepp (1998)	Primary affective consciousness	Affect as core of conscious experience	Content (basic affect categories)	Subcortical affective circuits
Barrett (2017)	Constructed category from prediction	Emotion as predictive inference	Content (constructed category)	Predictive categorization
Colombetti (2014)	Primordial affective dimension	Experience always affectively laden	Approaches structural level	Described, not mechanistically specified
Present Theory	Structural mechanism of experiential disclosure	Emotion constitutes phenomenal presence for awareness	Structural (disclosure mechanism)	Affective disclosure: offering of experience to awareness

Note. The present theory uniquely identifies emotion as the structural mechanism of experiential disclosure rather than as experiential content.

The present paper advances a structural theory of emotion that addresses this gap. Emotion is defined not merely as a response to experience but as affective disclosure: the mechanism

through which experiential states are offered to awareness and through which awareness receives experience as phenomenally lived reality. Emotion, in this sense, is the bridge between experiential processes and awareness. It transforms informational states into lived states by enabling experiential disclosure.

This formulation builds upon the Integrative Awareness framework and the M⁵ model of conscious architecture (Matta, 2025, 2026), which describe conscious systems as integrative structures that unify perception, bodily state, cognition, action, and awareness into coherent experiential wholes. Within this architecture, awareness functions as the integrative field in which experiential processes are unified. The present theory identifies emotion as the complementary mechanism through which experiential processes become available to this integrative field. Emotion offers experience to awareness, and awareness receives and integrates this offered experience, resulting in phenomenal experience.

From this formulation follows the central theoretical proposition of this paper: the Structural Necessity of Emotion Theorem. If emotion is the mechanism through which experience is disclosed to awareness, then emotion is not merely a contingent psychological event but a necessary structural condition for lived experience. Emotion must therefore be structurally present in all lived experience, irrespective of whether specific emotional content such as fear, anger, or joy is consciously identified. This distinction between structural emotion and emotional content allows emotion to be understood not merely as a category of experience but as a constitutive feature of conscious systems.

This structural account reframes emotion as a fundamental mechanism in the architecture of consciousness. Emotion is not merely something that occurs within experience but the mechanism through which experience becomes lived. By identifying emotion as the bridge between experiential processes and awareness, this theory provides a unified framework for understanding the structural role of emotion in conscious systems and offers a novel integration of phenomenological, neuroscientific, and integrative awareness approaches to consciousness.

2. Conceptual Foundations: Awareness, Experience, and Affective Disclosure

2.1 Awareness as the Integrative Field of Conscious Systems

Awareness refers to the integrative capacity of conscious systems to register, unify, and illuminate experiential states. It is the condition under which experiential contents appear as present to the subject. Awareness does not generate experiential contents by itself; rather, it functions as the field within which experiential states become phenomenally available.

Within integrative models of consciousness (Matta, 2025, 2026), awareness operates as the structural integrator of perceptual, cognitive, and bodily processes. These processes generate informational and experiential structures, but awareness is the condition under which these structures become consciously present. Awareness thus performs an integrative and illuminative function, enabling experiential coherence across multiple domains.

However, awareness alone does not explain why experiential states appear as lived rather than merely informational. Informational processes may occur without entering awareness, as in unconscious perception, implicit processing, or autonomic regulation. The transition from informational processing to lived experience requires an additional structural mechanism that enables experiential disclosure to awareness.

The present theory identifies emotion as this mechanism.

2.2 Experience as Structured Interaction Between Organism and World

Experience refers to the structured interaction between conscious systems and their internal and external environments. Experience arises from the integration of multiple processes, including perception, bodily sensation, cognitive interpretation, and action readiness.

Experience, in its structural form, exists as organized informational and physiological activity. However, not all experiential processes become lived experience. For experience to be lived, it must be disclosed to awareness. Without such disclosure, experiential processes remain latent or informational rather than phenomenally present.

This distinction is evident in numerous domains. Sensory signals may be processed without entering conscious awareness, as demonstrated in subliminal perception and blindsight

(Weiskrantz, 1986). Similarly, autonomic and regulatory processes continuously occur without becoming lived experience. These examples illustrate that experiential structure alone is insufficient for phenomenal presence.

Lived experience requires disclosure.

2.3 Affective Disclosure: The Offering of Experience to Awareness

The present theory introduces the concept of affective disclosure to describe the mechanism through which experiential states become phenomenally available to awareness.

Affective disclosure refers to the process through which experiential states are offered to awareness as lived reality. This process transforms experiential structure into phenomenally lived experience.

Emotion, in this structural sense, is affective disclosure.

Emotion does not merely respond to experience but enables experience to appear as lived. Emotion is the offering of experience to awareness and the corresponding reception of experience as phenomenally present.

The concept of offering, as employed here, requires clarification regarding its ontological status. Affective disclosure is best understood as constitutive rather than causal. Emotion does not cause experience to appear as an external force acting upon an otherwise inert experiential substrate. Rather, emotion constitutes the phenomenal presence of experiential states. The relationship is analogous to how illumination constitutes visibility: light does not cause objects to exist, but it constitutes their being visible. Similarly, affective disclosure does not create experiential states but constitutes their being phenomenally present to awareness. The offering is therefore not a temporal event that follows experience but the structural constitution of experience as lived.

This formulation must be situated in relation to Zahavi's (2005, 2014) influential account of pre-reflective self-awareness. Zahavi argues that experiential states are inherently self-manifesting: they carry their own first-person givenness without requiring an additional reflective act. The present theory does not contradict this claim but rather provides a structural account of

what enables this givenness. Pre-reflective self-awareness describes the phenomenological fact that experience is self-luminous. Affective disclosure describes the mechanism through which this self-luminous character is realized. The claim is not that experience requires an external disclosure imposed from outside, but that the very self-manifesting character of experience is itself affectively constituted. Experience does not first exist as a neutral informational state and then receive affective coloring; rather, its appearing-as-lived is the affective disclosure. Structural emotion is therefore not an addition to pre-reflective self-awareness but its affective constitution.

This offering function distinguishes structural emotion from informational processing. Informational processes may occur without being offered to awareness. Only when experiential states are affectively disclosed do they become lived experience.

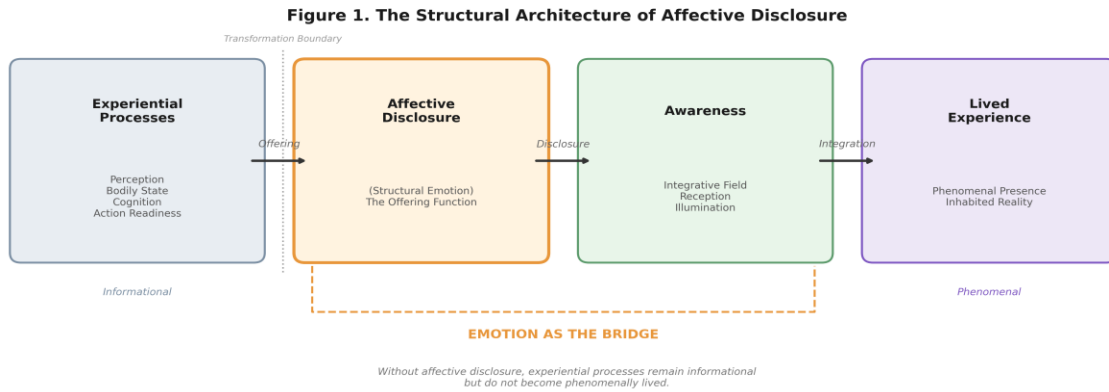


Figure 1. The structural architecture of affective disclosure showing the transformation from informational experiential processes to phenomenally lived experience through affective disclosure (structural emotion) and awareness integration.

Emotion serves as the bridge between experiential processes and awareness.

2.4 Distinguishing Structural Emotion from Emotional Content

A critical distinction must be drawn between structural emotion and emotional content.

Emotional content refers to specific emotional forms such as fear, anger, joy, sadness, or desire. These emotional categories vary across experiences and represent distinct qualitative manifestations.

Structural emotion, by contrast, refers to the affective disclosure mechanism itself—the offering of experience to awareness. This structural function is present in all lived experience, regardless of whether specific emotional content is consciously identified.

Even experiences commonly described as emotionally neutral involve structural emotion. The perception of a neutral object, such as a wall or a familiar environment, still appears as present and lived. This appearance constitutes affective disclosure, even in the absence of identifiable emotional categories.

Thus, emotional content varies, but structural emotion does not.

This distinction finds support in Ratcliffe’s (2008) concept of existential feelings. Ratcliffe describes a class of pre-intentional bodily feelings that structure the subject’s sense of reality, belonging, and inhabitation of the world. Existential feelings are not directed at specific objects and do not constitute emotional content in the conventional sense; rather, they form the affective background against which all intentional experience occurs. The present account can be understood as providing a structural-theoretical formulation of what Ratcliffe describes phenomenologically. Structural emotion encompasses existential feelings as one of its manifestations but is formulated at a more general level, applicable across phenomenological, cognitive, and neuroscientific frameworks. Where Ratcliffe identifies a phenomenological category, the present theory identifies a structural mechanism: the offering of experience to awareness that makes experiential inhabitation possible.

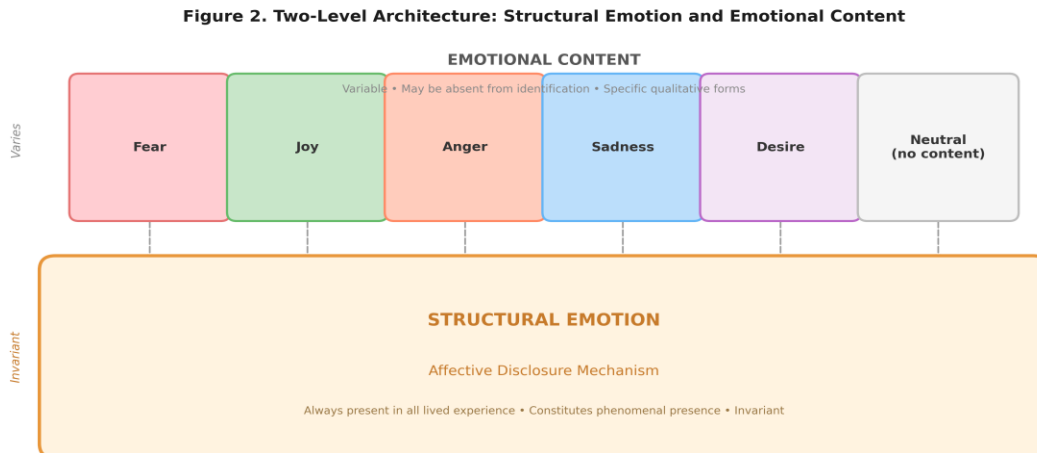


Figure 2. Two-level architecture of emotion showing the invariant structural level (affective disclosure mechanism, always present) and the variable content level (specific emotional categories that may or may not be identified). Neutral experience lacks emotional content but retains structural emotion.

This distinction resolves a longstanding ambiguity in emotion theory by clarifying that emotion operates at both structural and qualitative levels.

2.5 Emotion as the Bridge Between Experience and Awareness

The relationship between experiential processes and awareness requires a bridging mechanism. Experiential processes generate structured interactions between organism and environment, but these processes become lived only when disclosed to awareness.

Emotion performs this bridging function.

Emotion offers experiential states to awareness, enabling awareness to receive and integrate them. Without this offering function, experiential processes would remain informational but would not constitute lived experience.

This structural relationship can be expressed as follows: Experience is generated by perceptual, bodily, and cognitive processes. Emotion discloses these experiential processes to awareness. Awareness integrates disclosed experience into phenomenally lived reality.

Emotion and awareness therefore perform complementary structural roles: emotion offers experience, and awareness receives experience. Lived experience emerges from their relation.

2.6 Emotion as a Necessary Structural Condition of Lived Experience

If emotion is the mechanism through which experiential states are disclosed to awareness, then emotion is not merely a contingent feature of conscious systems but a necessary structural condition for lived experience.

Without affective disclosure, experiential processes would not appear to awareness and therefore would not constitute lived experience.

This conclusion follows directly from the structural relationship between experience, emotion, and awareness.

Emotion is therefore constitutive of lived experience.

This conclusion forms the basis for the Structural Necessity of Emotion Theorem, which will be formally developed in the following section.

3. The Structural Necessity of Emotion Theorem

3.1 Formal Definitions

To establish the structural necessity of emotion, the key concepts must first be defined precisely.

Definition 1. Experience. Experience refers to the structured interaction between a conscious system and its internal or external environment, arising from perceptual, bodily, and cognitive processes.

Definition 2. Awareness. Awareness refers to the integrative capacity of conscious systems to register and illuminate experiential states, enabling their phenomenal presence.

Definition 3. Affective Disclosure. Affective disclosure refers to the process through which experiential states are offered to awareness as phenomenally present reality.

Definition 4. Structural Emotion. Emotion, in its structural sense, is identical with affective disclosure. Emotion is the mechanism through which experiential states are disclosed to awareness and thereby become lived experience.

Definition 5. Phenomenal Presence. Phenomenal presence refers to the quality by which experiential states appear as lived, real, and inhabited by the conscious subject, rather than merely informational or latent. Phenomenal presence is what distinguishes lived experience from unconscious processing.

These definitions establish emotion not as a contingent experiential content but as a structural mechanism within conscious systems.

3.2 Formal Statement of the Theorem

Structural Necessity of Emotion Theorem. Emotion, understood as affective disclosure, is a necessary structural condition for lived experience because it is the mechanism through which experiential states are offered to awareness and through which awareness receives these states as phenomenally present reality. Therefore, emotion is structurally present in every lived experience, irrespective of its specific qualitative emotional content.

3.3 Structural Propositions

The theorem follows from three structural propositions.

Proposition 1: *Experiential processes do not constitute lived experience unless disclosed to awareness.* An experiential state that is not disclosed to awareness cannot be said to be lived experience but remains merely a latent or unconscious process. Numerous empirical findings demonstrate the existence of unconscious perceptual and cognitive processing (Dehaene, 2014). Such processes remain informational rather than phenomenally lived. Therefore, disclosure to awareness is necessary for lived experience.

Proposition 2: *Disclosure to awareness requires affective presentation.* For experiential states to be disclosed to awareness, they must appear as present, significant, or real for the conscious system. This appearance is not purely informational but affective. A purely informational state that lacks affective presentation does not constitute lived experience but remains a computational or representational process without phenomenal presence. Affective presentation provides the experiential character that transforms informational availability into phenomenal presence.

A possible objection is that phenomenal presence is a function of attention or global access rather than affect. However, this objection conflates two distinct functions. Attention selects which experiential states are processed; affect constitutes how those states appear as lived. Attentional selection without affective constitution yields informational availability without phenomenal presence—precisely the condition observed in blindsight, where stimuli are attended to and acted upon without being phenomenally experienced (Weiskrantz, 1986). Conversely, in conditions such as depersonalization, attentional and cognitive functions remain intact while affective constitution is diminished, resulting in reduced phenomenal presence despite preserved access (Sierra & Berrios, 1998). These dissociations indicate that attention provides access but affect provides presence. The two are functionally distinct, and it is the latter—*affective disclosure*—that constitutes the phenomenal character of lived experience.

This proposition is the empirically vulnerable step of the argument: if a case could be demonstrated in which experiential states achieve full phenomenal presence without any affective dimension whatsoever—not merely without identifiable emotional content, but without structural

affective tone—the proposition would be falsified. However, phenomenological, neuroscientific, and clinical evidence consistently indicates that phenomenal presence and affective constitution are structurally inseparable (Damasio, 1999; Panksepp, 1998; Ratcliffe, 2008; Colombetti, 2014).

Proposition 3: *Emotion is the mechanism of affective disclosure.* Emotion is the process through which experiential states are presented to awareness as lived reality. Emotion offers experience to awareness and enables its integration into phenomenal consciousness. Emotion therefore constitutes affective disclosure.

3.4 Proof of the Theorem

From Proposition 1, lived experience requires disclosure to awareness. From Proposition 2, disclosure requires affective presentation. From Proposition 3, affective presentation is emotion. Therefore, emotion is necessary for lived experience. Thus, emotion is structurally present in all lived experience.

This completes the proof.

3.5 Distinction Between Structural Emotion and Emotional Content

The theorem requires distinguishing structural emotion from emotional content.

Emotional content refers to specific emotional categories such as fear, anger, joy, sadness, or desire. These categories vary across experiences and may be absent from conscious identification.

Structural emotion refers to the affective disclosure mechanism itself. Structural emotion is present in all lived experience. Emotional content is not.

This distinction resolves the apparent contradiction between emotionally neutral experiences and the structural necessity of emotion. Neutral experiences lack specific emotional content but still involve affective disclosure. They are still offered to awareness as lived reality.

3.6 Phenomenological Support

Phenomenological observation supports the theorem. Experience always appears as lived presence. Even in emotionally neutral states, experience is disclosed as phenomenally real.

This disclosure is affective in nature. Heidegger (1927/1962) described affective attunement as the condition through which the world appears as meaningful. Similarly, contemporary affective neuroscience demonstrates that affective systems regulate experiential salience and conscious accessibility (Damasio, 1999; Panksepp, 1998).

These findings support the structural necessity of affective disclosure.

3.7 Integration with the Integrative Awareness and M⁵ Framework

Within the Integrative Awareness and M⁵ framework (Matta, 2025, 2026), conscious systems consist of multiple interacting processes, including perception, bodily state, cognition, action, and awareness.

Awareness functions as the integrative field of these processes. Emotion functions as the mechanism through which these processes are offered to awareness. Emotion therefore bridges experiential processes and awareness.

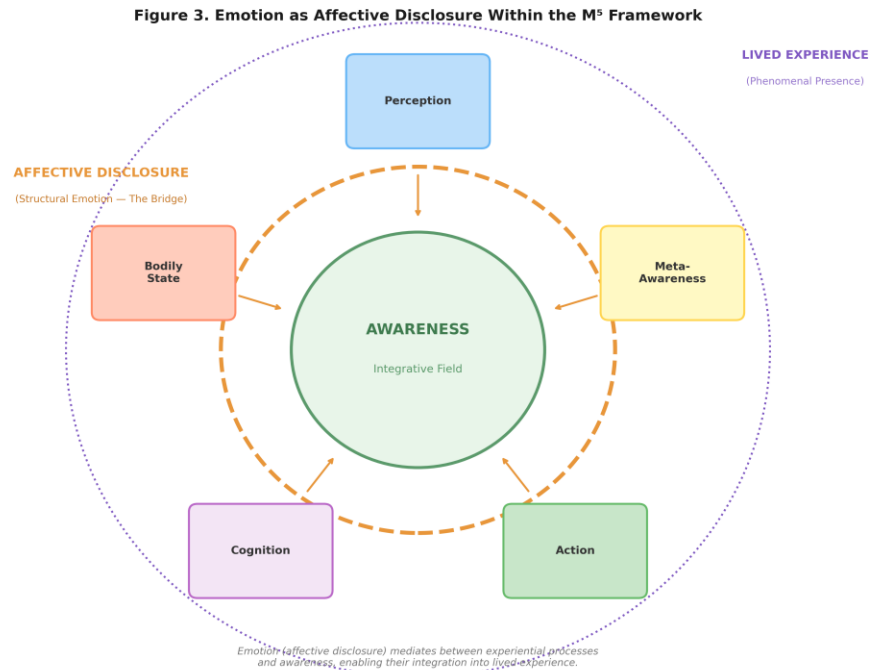


Figure 3. Emotion as affective disclosure within the M⁵ framework. The five experiential domains (Perception, Bodily State, Cognition, Action, Meta-Awareness) are mediated through the affective disclosure layer (dashed orange ring) before integration within the central awareness field, resulting in lived experience (outer dotted circle).

Emotion enables experiential integration by enabling experiential disclosure.

This structural account finds a natural computational complement in the predictive processing framework. Within predictive processing models, affect is increasingly understood not merely as emotional content but as encoding the precision or reliability of predictions (Friston, 2010; Seth, 2013; Barrett, 2017). Precision weighting determines which prediction errors gain access to higher-level processing and ultimately to conscious experience. Affective disclosure, in predictive processing terms, can be understood as the precision-weighted presentation of experiential states to awareness. High-precision affective signals disclose experiential states with greater phenomenal intensity and vividness; low-precision signals result in diminished phenomenal presence, as observed in states of depersonalization or emotional numbing.

This correspondence can be specified more precisely. In the active inference framework, organisms minimize free energy by updating either their internal models (perceptual inference) or the world itself (active inference). Affect, within this framework, signals the expected precision of sensorimotor contingencies—a meta-level evaluation of the reliability of the organism’s engagement with the world (Seth & Friston, 2016). This meta-level evaluation is structurally analogous to affective disclosure: it does not add emotional content to experience but determines the degree to which experiential states are rendered phenomenally salient and present. When expected precision is high, experience is vivid and inhabited; when it is low, experience becomes thin, unreal, or depersonalized. The offering function of emotion, in computational terms, is the precision-weighted modulation that transforms prediction-error signals from informational states into phenomenally lived states. This is not merely an analogy: both affective disclosure and precision weighting occupy the same structural position—between informational processing and phenomenal presence—and perform the same functional role—constituting the experiential character of conscious states rather than merely modifying their content.

The predictive processing framework thus offers a bridge between the structural-phenomenological account developed here and the computational and neurobiological levels of description.

3.8 Corollaries

Corollary 1: Structural Universality of Emotion. Emotion is present in all lived experience, regardless of specific emotional content.

Corollary 2: Emotion as a Constitutive Feature of Conscious Systems. Emotion is not merely an accessory to consciousness but a structural feature of conscious systems.

Corollary 3: Emotion as the Bridge Between Experience and Awareness. Emotion performs the bridging function that enables awareness to receive experiential states as lived reality.

4. Implications for Consciousness, Phenomenology, and Cognitive Science

4.1 Emotion as a Constitutive Condition of Consciousness

The Structural Necessity of Emotion Theorem has direct implications for the nature of consciousness itself. If emotion is the mechanism through which experiential states are disclosed to awareness, then emotion is not merely a component of conscious experience but a constitutive condition of phenomenal consciousness.

This reframes the relationship between emotion and consciousness. Traditional models often treat emotion as one domain of conscious experience alongside perception, cognition, and action. In contrast, the present account identifies emotion as the structural mechanism that enables experiential states to become phenomenally present in the first place.

Consciousness, in this sense, is not merely awareness of informational states but awareness of affectively disclosed experience. Emotion enables conscious systems to inhabit their experiential world. Without affective disclosure, informational processing may occur, but lived experience does not arise.

Emotion is therefore constitutive of phenomenal consciousness.

4.2 Resolving the Relationship Between Cognition and Emotion

A longstanding debate in cognitive science concerns the relationship between cognition and emotion. Traditional views often treat cognition and emotion as distinct or competing processes, with cognition associated with rational evaluation and emotion associated with affective response.

The present framework resolves this distinction structurally. Cognition operates on experiential states that have already been disclosed to awareness. Emotion performs the disclosure function that makes experiential states available for cognitive processing.

Emotion therefore precedes and enables cognition at the structural level. Cognition interprets experience; emotion enables experience to be lived.

This relationship explains why emotional impairments can disrupt decision-making and experiential coherence, as demonstrated in neurological studies of affective dysfunction (Damasio, 1999).

Emotion is not opposed to cognition but structurally necessary for it.

4.3 Integration with Phenomenology: Emotion as World-Disclosure

The theorem provides a structural formulation of phenomenological insights regarding affective disclosure.

Heidegger's analysis of mood (*Stimmung*) demonstrated that affective attunement underlies the disclosure of the world as meaningful (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Mood is not merely a subjective feeling but the condition under which the world appears as significant for the experiencing subject.

The present account is indebted to Heidegger's broader concept of *Befindlichkeit* (disposedness), which describes the existential structure through which *Dasein* always already finds itself affectively attuned in a world. *Befindlichkeit* characterizes the ontological condition of affective disclosure at the level of existential description. However, the present theory advances beyond Heidegger's account in two respects. First, where *Befindlichkeit* describes the condition of always-already being affectively situated, the present account identifies a structural mechanism: affective disclosure as the process through which experiential states are constitutively offered to awareness. Heidegger describes the existential fact; this paper identifies the structural function. Second, by distinguishing structural emotion from emotional content, the present account provides analytical precision that Heidegger's framework does not supply, enabling integration with cognitive science, predictive processing, and neuroscience in a manner that existential phenomenology alone cannot achieve.

Similarly, Merleau-Ponty emphasized that perception is always embedded within embodied and affectively structured relations between organism and world (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012).

More recently, Colombetti (2014) has developed the concept of the primordial affective dimension of experience, arguing that all experience is affectively laden and that affect is not a separable add-on but an intrinsic dimension of experiential life. The present theory is fully consistent with Colombetti's position but advances beyond it by providing a structural mechanism—*affective disclosure*—that explains why experience is always affectively constituted.

Colombetti describes the phenomenon of affective pervasiveness; this paper identifies the structural role of emotion within the architecture of conscious systems that accounts for this pervasiveness. Additionally, the structural emotion versus emotional content distinction provides analytical precision that Colombetti's framework does not explicitly develop, enabling finer-grained analysis of cases such as emotional flattening, depersonalization, and alexithymia in which the two levels dissociate.

The present theory provides a structural explanation for these phenomenological observations by identifying emotion as the mechanism of affective disclosure itself. Emotion enables experiential reality to appear as lived. Emotion bridges organism and world by enabling experiential inhabitation.

This structural account unifies phenomenological description with cognitive and neuroscientific explanation.

4.4 Neuroscientific Implications: Emotion as the Gateway to Conscious Access

Neuroscientific research has demonstrated that affective systems regulate salience, attention, and conscious accessibility (Panksepp, 1998; Damasio, 1999; Dehaene, 2014).

The present framework provides a structural interpretation of these findings. Affective processes regulate which experiential states are disclosed to awareness. Experiential states that are not affectively disclosed remain informational but do not enter phenomenal consciousness.

Candidate neural substrates for affective disclosure can be identified in the neuroanatomical literature. The anterior insula has been consistently implicated as a key hub for interoceptive awareness and the integration of affective signals into conscious experience (Craig, 2009; Seth, 2013). The anterior cingulate cortex plays a complementary role in monitoring experiential salience and regulating the allocation of processing resources to affectively significant states. Subcortical affective circuits, particularly those involving the periaqueductal gray, amygdala, and hypothalamus, generate the foundational affective states that Panksepp (1998) identified as the core of affective consciousness. These structures do not merely process emotional content; they regulate the affective availability of experiential states to awareness, consistent with the offering function described in this paper. The anterior insula, in particular, may serve as a

neuroanatomical locus for the convergence of interoceptive, exteroceptive, and affective signals into the unified phenomenal presence that the present theory terms affective disclosure.

The relationship between affective disclosure and Dehaene's (2014) Global Workspace Theory deserves explicit clarification. Global Workspace Theory provides an architectural account of how information becomes globally available to multiple cognitive systems through broadcasting within a distributed neuronal workspace. Affective disclosure, as formulated here, describes the qualitative transformation through which broadcasted information becomes phenomenally lived. The present claim is not that all global broadcasting is affective in content, but that the transition from informational availability to phenomenal presence requires affective constitution. Broadcasting provides the computational architecture for conscious access; affective disclosure provides the experiential character that transforms accessed information into lived reality. These two mechanisms are complementary rather than competing: global broadcasting determines which information becomes accessible, while affective disclosure determines whether that accessible information becomes phenomenally present.

Emotion functions as the gateway through which experiential states become consciously accessible. This explains phenomena such as subliminal perception, attentional selection, emotional salience, and experiential presence.

Emotion regulates experiential disclosure.

4.5 Implications for Neutral and Minimal Experience

The theorem clarifies the nature of emotionally neutral or minimal experiences.

Experiences commonly described as neutral still involve structural emotion. They are disclosed to awareness as lived presence, even if they lack distinct emotional content such as fear or joy.

This explains how experiences can be emotionally neutral yet still phenomenally present. Structural emotion provides experiential presence, even in the absence of emotional content.

This distinction also clarifies altered experiential states, such as depersonalization or emotional flattening, in which experiential disclosure may be weakened. In such states,

experiential structure remains, but affective disclosure is diminished, resulting in reduced experiential presence.

A critical test case for the present theory is provided by alexithymia and affective agnosia. Individuals with severe alexithymia report lived experience while having significantly impaired ability to identify, label, and describe their emotional states. At first glance, this appears to challenge the structural necessity of emotion. However, the structural emotion versus emotional content distinction provides a precise resolution. Alexithymia involves impaired access to emotional content—the capacity to categorize experiential states into discrete emotional categories—but does not eliminate structural emotion. Individuals with alexithymia typically report diffuse bodily sensations, undifferentiated arousal, and experiential presence; what they lack is the meta-cognitive capacity to identify these states as specific emotions. Structural emotion—the affective disclosure that makes experience phenomenally present—remains intact. Similarly, cases of affective agnosia following ventromedial prefrontal or insular damage typically involve disrupted emotional categorization and impaired decision-making but not the complete absence of phenomenal presence. Crucially, where phenomenal presence is genuinely diminished—as in severe depersonalization or derealization—the present theory predicts exactly this outcome: reduced affective disclosure results in reduced experiential presence, experienced by patients as a sense of unreality, detachment, or experiential emptiness. These clinical patterns support rather than challenge the Structural Necessity of Emotion Theorem by demonstrating that structural emotion and emotional content can dissociate, and that it is the former, not the latter, that is necessary for phenomenal presence.

Emotion is therefore necessary not only for emotional intensity but for experiential presence itself.

4.6 Integration with the Integrative Awareness and M⁵ Framework

Within the Integrative Awareness and M⁵ architecture (Matta, 2025, 2026), conscious systems consist of multiple interacting domains, including perception, bodily processes, cognition, action, and awareness.

The present theory identifies emotion as the structural bridge connecting experiential processes to awareness. Perception generates experiential structure. Emotion discloses experiential

structure to awareness. Awareness integrates disclosed experience into lived reality. Cognition interprets integrated experience. Action responds to interpreted experience.

Emotion enables experiential integration by enabling experiential disclosure. This structural role strengthens the integrative architecture by identifying the mechanism through which experiential processes become available to awareness.

Emotion enables conscious integration.

4.7 Implications for Artificial Conscious Systems

The theorem has implications for the possibility of artificial consciousness.

If emotion is structurally necessary for lived experience, then artificial systems that lack affective disclosure mechanisms may process information but do not possess lived experience. Artificial systems may simulate emotional categories, but without structural affective disclosure, experiential states are not offered to awareness.

This distinction clarifies the difference between informational processing and lived experience. Artificial consciousness would require mechanisms capable of affective disclosure. Emotion, in its structural sense, is necessary for lived experience in any conscious system.

4.8 Emotion as the Bridge Between Awareness and Lived Experience

The central implication of the theorem is that emotion bridges experiential processes and awareness. Emotion offers experience to awareness. Awareness receives experience through emotion. Lived experience emerges from this relationship.

Emotion is therefore not merely a psychological phenomenon but a structural feature of conscious systems. Emotion enables conscious systems to inhabit experiential reality. Emotion is the bridge between awareness and lived experience.

4.9 Falsifiability, Empirical Predictions, and Limitations

Any structural theory must address the conditions under which it could be challenged or falsified. The Structural Necessity of Emotion Theorem is not tautological because its three propositions are independently defensible and each could, in principle, be false. Proposition 2—that disclosure to

awareness requires affective presentation—is the empirically vulnerable step. The theorem would be challenged if a case could be demonstrated in which experiential states achieve full phenomenal presence without any affective dimension whatsoever: not merely without identifiable emotional content, but without structural affective tone.

Several empirical predictions follow from the theorem, each designed to discriminate the present account from the weaker claim that affect is merely a central feature of experience rather than its constitutive condition.

First, neurophenomenological studies of depersonalization should reveal a correlation between degree of diminished affective processing and degree of reduced phenomenal presence, consistent with the claim that affective disclosure constitutes phenomenal presence. Critically, this prediction distinguishes the present theory from attention-based accounts: if phenomenal presence were constituted by attentional access rather than affect, depersonalization patients—who retain intact attentional function—should not report diminished experiential presence. Yet they do.

Second, pharmacological interventions that selectively attenuate affective processing while preserving perceptual and cognitive function should result in reduced experiential presence, not merely reduced emotional intensity. The key discriminating prediction here is that experiential presence should diminish even for stimuli that the subject can correctly identify and describe—a dissociation between informational access and phenomenal presence that only the constitutive account predicts.

Third, studies of anesthesia recovery should reveal that the return of phenomenal presence correlates with the restoration of affective processing rather than purely cognitive or perceptual function. If affect is merely a feature of experience, cognitive and perceptual recovery should suffice for phenomenal presence. If affect is constitutive, phenomenal presence should lag behind cognitive recovery and track affective restoration specifically.

Fourth, meditative states involving minimal phenomenal experience, such as those described in certain forms of absorption or cessation, may be understood as states in which affective disclosure approaches its structural minimum, consistent with reports of experiential thinning or dissolution. The discriminating prediction is that practitioners reporting diminished phenomenal presence during deep absorption will show reduced affective processing markers

(interoceptive, autonomic) while maintaining or even enhancing attentional and cognitive function.

The present theory also suggests that mindfulness-based interventions may be understood, in part, as practices that refine and enhance the capacity for affective disclosure—training awareness to receive experiential offerings with greater clarity, openness, and stability. This connection between contemplative practice and affective disclosure represents a promising avenue for future empirical and theoretical investigation.

Several limitations of the present account should be acknowledged. The theory is developed primarily at the structural-phenomenological level and does not yet specify a complete neuroscientific implementation, though candidate neural substrates have been identified. The distinction between structural emotion and emotional content, while analytically clear, may prove difficult to operationalize in experimental settings. Future work should develop empirical paradigms capable of distinguishing these levels and testing the specific predictions generated by the theorem. Additionally, the relationship between affective disclosure and other proposed mechanisms of conscious access—including global broadcasting, integrated information, and higher-order representation—requires further theoretical development.

5. Conclusion: Emotion as the Structural Bridge of Consciousness

This paper has advanced a structural theory of emotion that reframes its role within conscious systems. Rather than understanding emotion as a contingent response to experience, this account has identified emotion as the mechanism through which experience becomes experientially available to awareness. Emotion has been defined as affective disclosure—the process through which experiential states are offered to awareness and through which awareness receives experience as lived reality.

This formulation led to the Structural Necessity of Emotion Theorem, which establishes that emotion is a necessary structural condition for lived experience. Emotion is not merely one category of experience among others but the mechanism that enables experiential states to become phenomenally present. Without emotion, experiential processes would remain informational but would not become lived experience.

This account resolves a longstanding ambiguity in emotion theory by distinguishing structural emotion from emotional content. Emotional content varies across experiences and includes specific emotional forms such as fear, anger, or joy. Structural emotion, by contrast, refers to the affective disclosure mechanism itself. This mechanism is present in all lived experience, including experiences commonly described as emotionally neutral. Emotion is therefore structurally universal in conscious experience.

By identifying emotion as the bridge between experiential processes and awareness, this theory integrates insights from phenomenology, cognitive science, and integrative awareness models. Phenomenological analyses by Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Ratcliffe, and Colombetti have recognized the affective nature of experiential disclosure, while neuroscientific research has demonstrated the central role of affective systems in regulating conscious access and experiential integration. The present framework provides a structural explanation that unifies these observations by identifying emotion as the mechanism of experiential disclosure itself.

Within the Integrative Awareness and M⁵ framework, emotion occupies a structurally central position. Perceptual, bodily, and cognitive processes generate experiential structure, but emotion discloses this structure to awareness. Awareness integrates the disclosed experience,

enabling the emergence of lived reality. Emotion and awareness thus perform complementary roles: emotion offers experience, and awareness receives and integrates it.

This structural account has broader implications for the study of consciousness. It clarifies the distinction between informational processing and lived experience by identifying affective disclosure as the mechanism that transforms informational states into phenomenally lived reality. It resolves the relationship between cognition and emotion by showing that emotion enables cognition by disclosing experiential states to awareness. It also provides a framework for understanding altered experiential states, such as emotional flattening or depersonalization, as disruptions in affective disclosure rather than merely disruptions in emotional content. Clinical cases of alexithymia and affective agnosia further support the structural distinction by demonstrating that emotional content can be impaired while structural emotion remains intact.

Finally, this theory has implications for artificial systems. Informational processing alone is insufficient for lived experience. If emotion is structurally necessary for experiential disclosure, then artificial systems that lack affective disclosure mechanisms may process information without possessing lived experience. Emotion, in its structural sense, is necessary for any system capable of phenomenal consciousness.

The central contribution of this paper is therefore the identification of emotion as the structural bridge between awareness and lived experience. Emotion enables experiential disclosure. Emotion offers experience to awareness. Emotion allows conscious systems to inhabit experiential reality.

Structural Necessity of Emotion Theorem. Emotion is the affective disclosure mechanism through which experience becomes phenomenally present to awareness and therefore constitutes a necessary structural condition of lived experience.

Emotion is not merely something that occurs within experience. Emotion is what allows experience to become lived.

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