**The Alba Method and the Science of Emotions**

Juan Pablo Kalawski

Universidad Autónoma de Chile

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Juan Pablo Kalawski, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades, Universidad Autónoma de Chile, sede Temuco, Av. Alemania 01090, Edificio A, 6º Piso, Temuco, Chile, (e-mail: jpkalawski@hotmail.com).

# Abstract

The Alba Method, also known as Alba Emoting™, is a way to work with emotions by using specific respiratory, postural, and facial behaviors. The Alba Method is based on psychophysiological research. This article reviews the original research that gave rise to the method. Criticisms and limitations of that research are noted. The article then presents relevant recent theory and research. Recent theoretical and empirical work suggests that anger, fear, sadness, joy/laughter, eroticism, and tenderness are distinct emotions and that each includes a specific respiratory, postural, and/or facial pattern. Recent research also shows that somatic feedback can induce anger, fear, sadness, and joy. Of note, there is a lack of studies on the breathing and postural patterns of eroticism. More studies will be needed to solve discrepancies in the description of the breathing patterns of tenderness, laughter, and sadness.

*Keywords*: breath work; basic emotions; emotional expression; somatic feedback and emotions; tenderness; eroticism

**The Alba Method and the Science of Emotions**

The Alba Method, also known as Alba Emoting™, is an approach for working with emotions through the intentional application of specific bodily actions. In order to illustrate how the method works, below is a first person account from a workshop attendee:

[Susana Bloch, the main developer of the method] noticed me and beckoned me to join the participants on the floor. “Please do exactly as I request,” she said, “breathe this way.” She instructed me specifically how to breathe in and out, and then she came back quietly instructing postural, facial, and muscular changes in addition to breathing, a total of five times. The final instruction, “now…unfocus your eyes,” catapulted me into a full-blown sexual arousal –no context, no psychological or direct physical stimulus –in a room full of judgmental strangers. So sudden, so astonishing was this full-body experience that I shall never in my life forget it! (Angelin, 2010, p. 2)

The Alba Method is based on laboratory studies on human emotions (Bloch, Lemeignan, & Aguilera-Torres, 1991; Bloch, Orthous, & Santibáñez, 1987; Bloch, Paulet, & Lemeignan, 1994; Bloch & Santibáñez-H, 1973; Lemeignan, Aguilera-Torres, & Bloch, 1992; Santibáñez-H & Bloch, 1986). The goal of the present article is to assess the scientific support for the Alba Method. I will first review the original research that gave rise to the method. Next, I will present some of its applications in order to illustrate the relevance of the Alba Method. I will then note some criticisms and limitations of the research behind the method and present subsequent studies that address those potential shortcomings.

# The Research Basis of the Alba Method

In Chile, in 1970, Susana Bloch and Guy Santibáñez started a research program to study the physiological changes occurring during different emotions (Bloch, 1993; Bloch & Santibáñez, 1973; Santibáñez & Bloch, 1986). They focused on six basic emotions: anger, fear, joy-laughter, sadness-crying, eroticism-sexuality, and tenderness-parental love. Bloch (2017) considers eroticism and tenderness as two distinct forms of love.

Bloch and Santibáñez (1973; Santibáñez & Bloch, 1986) asked professional actors to relive various emotions. They also hypnotically induced emotions in participants with anxiety disorders and participants with no psychopathology. The authors found that each of the emotions they studied was characterized by a specific breathing pattern. A later study (Bloch et al., 1991) showed that the distinction among breathing patterns for the different emotions could be described not only qualitatively but quantitatively as well.

Bloch and Santibáñez (1973, Santibáñez & Bloch, 1986) also discovered that each of the six emotions studied included a specific facial and postural configuration. In a later study, Lemeignan, Aguilera-Torres, and Bloch (1992) showed French participants videos of Danish targets displaying these expressions. Participants were able to correctly identify the emotion corresponding to each expression.

Breathing, facial expression, and posture have the special feature of being under both voluntary and automatic control (unlike other changes present during different emotions such as heart rate and blood pressure). Bloch and Santibáñez (1973; Santibáñez & Bloch, 1986) investigated what happened if they asked a person to reproduce the respiratory-posturo-facial patterns for each emotion without naming the emotion. They found that this procedure could activate the rest of the emotional system, namely the subjective experience of the person and autonomic changes such as heart rate. These findings with Chilean participants were later replicated in France (Bloch et al., 1994).

Based on these findings, Bloch, Orthous, and Santibáñez (1987) developed a method for emotional induction based on the reproduction of the respiratory-postural-facial emotional patterns. Bloch (1993, 2017; Bloch et al., 1994) later called this method “Alba Emoting™”. Some instructors trained by Susana Bloch, organized in the Alba Method Association, have used the simpler name “Alba Method”.

# Some Applications of the Alba Method

Susana Bloch, the main developer of the method, is an experimental psychologist with a lifelong interest in theatre. One of her main motivations in developing Alba Emoting was to help actors access emotions for the stage (Bloch, 2017). Starting in the early 1970s, she has used it to train actors (Bloch et al., 1987). Alba initially encountered resistance from the acting community in the United States because it is very different from mainstream acting approaches to accessing emotions. The Alba Method relies on the body, rather than imagination or memories, to connect to emotions. Over time, actors have found that, with proper training in the Alba Method, they are able to access genuine emotions and they can integrate Alba with other acting tools (e.g., Angelin, 2010; Bloch, 2017; Rix, 1998, 2001; Townsend, 2009).

Even though the original application of the method was in acting, Bloch and her colleagues soon found that the training seemed to have psychotherapeutic effects (Bloch et al., 1987). However, Alba was not formally applied to psychotherapy until Susana Bloch specifically trained me for that purpose beginning in 1995 (Bloch, 2017; Kalawski, 1997). Since then, many psychotherapists, especially in Chile, have attended Alba trainings to improve their skills in working with emotions. It is important to note that Alba is not a method of psychotherapy per se. The method does not include a model of psychopathology or any proposed mechanism for therapeutic change. In order to fill this gap, in a previous article (Kalawski, 2013), I have integrated the Alba Method within Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT, Greenberg, 2010; Greenberg, & Paivio, 1997). One of EFT’s theoretical sources is the basic emotions view, which makes it especially compatible with the Alba Method. Also, unlike more cognitive approaches, EFT recognizes the therapeutic role of bodily experience and active expression of emotions. Within an EFT framework, I proposed that therapists can use Alba to facilitate emotion awareness, regulation, and transformation (Kalawski, 2013). This integration is not itself part of the Alba Method, and it is in theory possible to apply Alba in therapy from a different approach.

The usefulness of Alba to increase emotional abilities has just recently been tested (Kalawski, Dal Vera, Schilling, & Loitz, 2019). In our study, undergraduate acting students took an emotion recognition test before and after either an Alba Method course or an unrelated acting course. The students that took the Alba Method course showed a higher increase in their scores compared to the students in the unrelated course. These findings suggest that the Alba Method can indeed increase emotion recognition skills.

In sum, the Alba Method originated in psychophysiological research. It has applications in theatre and psychotherapy, and it aids in developing emotional skills. Having briefly sketched the usefulness of the method, I will now focus on the scientific basis of the method itself.

# Addressing Theoretical and Empirical Issues about the Method

In this section, I will review some criticisms and limitations of the original research by Bloch and her colleagues, as well as some relevant recent work by other authors. First, I will clarify the meaning of “emotion” as used in the Alba Method. Next, I will address eroticism and tenderness, which are considered basic emotions in the Alba Method, but do not appear in other basic emotion lists. Then I will compare the descriptions of the respiratory, postural, and facial patterns included in the Alba Method with findings from recent research. Finally, I will review recent research concerning the main claim of the Alba Method: that reproducing specific respiratory, postural, and facial patterns induces specific emotions.

## Definitional Issues

The research described earlier showed that the reproduction of specific respiratory-postural-facial patterns induces specific emotions. To better understand what this means, it is necessary to clarify on what “emotion” means in this context. Bloch (1993) recalled,

In Santiago de Chile in 1970, I started an interdisciplinary research project on the topic of emotions with Guy Santibáñez (neurophysiologist) and Pedro Orthous (theatre director). The aim of the study was to relate some of the physiological and expressive activations present during an emotion with the corresponding subjective experience. *The study was not concerned either with the causes which may produce an emotional state, nor with cultural implications or social consequences, but with the emotional state per se* (p. 124, emphasis added).

People often understand emotions as being about something. For example, I may be angry with someone or scared of something. In common parlance, whatever the emotion is about is also considered itself part of the emotion. For example, people may consider fear *of heights* an emotion. For the Alba Method, the emotion is fear, regardless of whether it is about heights, dogs, or anything else. Fear of heights, or sadness about being away from my mother, are *emotional interpretations* (Lewis & Granic, 1999), not simply emotions. The Alba Method is concerned with emotions rather than with emotional interpretations. Bloch (2017) noted:

The internal subjective state is different from person to person or from one moment to another in the same person. It is clear that the content, the cause, the degree of compromise, the intensity of the feeling, all will depend on the personal history and the particular circumstances of the emotional arousal of the individual. But, when a person is angry, that anger has a “particular color,” so one can presumably name it independently of the situation that originated it. What would be strange, and terribly confusing, is that what John calls anger, Maria would call joy. I repeat that the intensity of the emotional feeling, the degree of coping with it, and the associations that anger evokes, are totally personal and circumstantial. (pp. 56-57)

The Alba Method induces specific emotions, not necessarily emotional interpretations. For example, two people who reproduce the somatic pattern of fear will experience the feeling of fear, as long as they both reproduce all the elements correctly. However, the cognitive meaning of the experience will be different from one person to another.

## Tender and Erotic Emotions

One potentially controversial element of the Alba Method is its list of basic emotions. In response to the article by Bloch et al. (1987), Ekman (1988) noted,

Few emotion theorists or researchers characterize eroticism and tenderness as emotions, although emotions may become involved in either. We have studied emotions for which there is evidence of universal, distinctive patterns of expressive behavior, as well as evidence of these same expressions in other animals (see reviews in Ekman, 1973 and Ekman & Oster. 1979). I do not believe there is such evidence for eroticism and tenderness. (p. 202)

Below I will present subsequent scholarly work addressing the questions of whether eroticism and tenderness are basic emotions and whether they are distinct from other emotions. I will address the question of their expressive patterns in another section.

To know whether eroticism and tenderness are basic emotions, it is necessary to know what distinguishes basic emotions. Panksepp and Biven (2012) proposed that basic emotions can be defined by the following characteristics:

1. Unconditioned stimuli,
2. Instinctive responses, especially autonomic;
3. The relevance of several potential conditioned stimuli is controlled by the emotional systems;
4. Emotions last longer than the stimuli that activated them;
5. Emotions can be activated or inhibited by higher cortical areas; and
6. Emotional systems clearly have the power to control and modify higher brain functions.

Panksepp and Biven (2012) distinguish between primary, secondary, and tertiary processes. The emotions of human adults are usually tertiary process experiences, similar to the concept of emotional interpretation previously discussed. Basic emotions are primary process experiences.

According to Panksepp and Biven (2012), neurobehavioral research suggest that seven basic emotions meet the requirements previously listed. These authors use words in all caps to emphasize that they refer to primary process phenomena, as opposed to the everyday, tertiary-process feelings. They want to avoid the cognitive connotations of vernacular words such as “anger”. Below is their list of basic emotions in their original uppercase names, followed by the vernacular words usually associated with each.

* SEEKING (expectancy)
* RAGE (anger)
* FEAR (fear)
* LUST (erotic love-sexuality)
* CARE (tenderness-parental love)
* GRIEF (sadness)
* PLAY (joy-laughter)

As can be seen, the emotions included in the Alba Method match the basic emotions proposed by Panksepp and Biven (2012), with the exception of expectancy, which is not included in the Alba Method.

Specifically concerning eroticism and tenderness, Panksepp and Biven (2012) describe the functions of the LUST and CARE brain systems this way:

When animals are in the throes of the LUST system … they exhibit abundant “courting” activities and eventually move toward an urgent joining of their bodies with a receptive mate … typically culminating in orgasmic delight—one of the most dramatic and positive experiences that life has to offer. In the absence of a mate, organisms in sexual arousal experience a craving tension that can become positive ... when satisfaction is in the offing. LUST is one of the sources of love.

When people and animals are aroused by the CARE system … they have the impulse to envelop loved ones with gentle caresses and tender ministrations. Without this system, taking care of the young would be a burden. Instead, nurturing can be a profound reward—a positive, relaxed affective state that is treasured. CARE is another source of love. (p. 36)

Basic emotions are by definition distinct from one another. Conversely, if it turned out that tenderness or eroticism are just versions of other emotions (such as joy), then they could not be basic emotions. Stevenson and his colleagues (2011) addressed the question of whether the emotional component of the sexual response (eroticism) is distinct from other emotions. They asked 1,099 participants to rate 1,450 sexual and non-sexual words according to the dimensional theories of emotion (using scales of valence, excitement and dominance) and according to the theories of basic emotions (using scales of happiness, anger, sadness, fear and disgust). In addition, participants rated sexual valence, sexual arousal and sexual energy. A factorial analysis produced four factors ("sexual", "disgusting", "happy" and "basic aversive"), which together accounted for 91.5% of the variation in the participants' scores. Whereas it may not be surprising that eroticism would be distinct from aversive emotions, these findings show that it is also different from simple happiness.

Regarding tenderness, in a previous article (Kalawski, 2010), I presented several arguments to consider it as a basic emotion. One such argument is the subjective distinction between tenderness and other emotions. I conducted an experiment to assess whether people make this distinction. For this purpose, I randomly assigned 147 participants to watch one of five movie clips, each with different emotional content. Afterward, participants independently rated how much anger, sadness, joy/amusement, and tenderness they felt. Figure 1 compares the tenderness, sadness, and joy/amusement people reported in response to either a "pitiful" or a "cute" scene. The pitiful scene showed a bear cub whose mother died. The cute scene showed a baby otter playing. People reported opposite levels of joy and sadness in response to one scene versus the other. However, both scenes generated similar levels of tenderness. In other words, the level of tenderness did not depend on the levels of joy or sadness. These results suggest that the subjective experience of tenderness is not simply a variant of either joy or sadness. Recently, Zhao, Zhang, and Ge (2018) were also able to distinguish amusement from tenderness based on EEG signals.

In sum, recent research shows that tenderness and eroticism can be considered basic emotions, thus addressing Ekman’s (1988) concern. It is also interesting to note the evolution of emotion science since Ekman’s criticism of the method. In 1988, it was true that most experts did not consider tenderness and eroticism as emotions. The literature discussed so far shows an increasing acknowledgement of these two emotions.

**Fig. 1** Mean self-reported emotion (tenderness, joy, or sadness, on a 0-10 scale) x Experimental condition (cute vs. pitiful; Kalawski, 2010)

## The Respiratory Patterns

In this section, I consider whether the breathing patterns reported by Bloch and her colleagues (1991) have been replicated by other researchers. Philippot, Chapelle, and Blairy (2002) asked naive participants to generate joy, fear, anger or sadness through breathing and then describe how they breathed. For sadness, participants reported nasal breathing with average amplitude and frequency, marked with sighs and tremors as well as some thoracic tension and irregularity. This pattern shares both similarities and differences with the Alba Method’s sadness pattern (inhalation with brief jolts through the nose followed by a long and deep exhalation through the mouth, i.e., a sigh; Bloch et al., 1991).

Philippot et al. (2002) reported that the breathing in anger was nasal, rather fast, irregular and deep, with marked thoracic tension and some tremors. The exhalation was diaphragmatic. This pattern parallels to some degree the anger pattern described in the Alba Method (regular, quick, and deep nasal breathing; Bloch et al., 1991).

For fear, Philippot et al. (2002) reported fast, irregular, rather shallow breathing, with much thoracic tension and some tremors. Their participants reported more thoracic breathing for fear than for any other emotion. This pattern has basic features in common with the Alba Method’s fear pattern (Bloch et al., 1991).

 In Philippot et al.’s (2002) study, joy was associated with regular, moderately deep and slow breathing through the nose. The breathing tended to be diaphragmatic or both thoracic and diaphragmatic. The joy pattern in the Alba Method (quick and deep nasal inhalation, followed by oral exhalation with small jolts; Bloch et al., 1991) is different from the pattern associated with joy by the participants in the study by Philippot et al. Interestingly, what the latter authors reported for joy is very similar to the pattern of tenderness in the Alba Method. This discrepancy may be due to the different methods used by Santibanez-H and Bloch (1986) and Philippot et al. The former authors used autobiographical memories to induce emotions. For example,

A 22-year-old student, under deep hypnosis, was asked to remember and to tell about some comic experiences. She told a joke in which a Portuguese man was ridiculed, laughing heartily. Afterwards, it was sufficient to tell her to “remember the joke of the Portuguese” for her to begin laughing. (p. 110)

By contrast, Philippot et al.’s participants “were simply instructed to produce an emotion--either joy, anger, fear, or sadness, in a random order--by modifying their respiration.” The problem with this procedure is that it relies on participants’ concept of “joy”, as opposed to evoking a specific emotional experience. Although Santibanez-H and Bloch used the word “joy”, the word “amusement” better captures the kind of experience evoked in their study. On the other hand, Philippot et al.’s participants’ understanding of “joy” may have been a generic pleasant mood, which may include tenderness, especially given that these authors did not include tenderness as one of the options.

Filippelli and colleagues (2001) used methods similar to those of Bloch and colleagues (1986, 1987, 1991), but only focused on laughter. Filippelli and colleagues induced laughter by showing participants clips of the funniest scenes from a movie. All fits of laughter were characterized by a sudden occurrence of repetitive expiratory efforts, which led to a final drop in functional residual capacity. This pattern is very similar to that reported by Bloch and colleagues. One important difference is that the Alba Method describes the laughter breathing as starting with a quick and deep inhalation, whereas Filippelli and colleagues found that it starts with the exhalation. In my experience training people in the laughter pattern, I have found that it is easier and more effective to start with the exhalation.

Similarly, Kreibig, Wilhelm, Roth, and Gross (2007) used films to elicit fear. They found that fear was associated with an increase in respiratory rate and a decrease in tidal volume (respiratory depth), compared to a non-emotional state. These findings are a replication of those reported by Bloch et al. (1991).

Finally, Shiota, Neufeld, Yeung, Moser and Perea (2011) used images to induce either amusement (joy/laughter) or nurturant love (tenderness). Unfortunately, these authors did not study the overall respiratory pattern. The only breathing variable included in their study was respiratory rate. They found that both amusement and tenderness increase the respiratory rate. In contrast, Bloch et al. (1991) reported that both emotions decreased it, although in the case of tenderness such decrease was not statistically significant.

To conclude this section on the respiratory patterns, it should be noted that Santibanez-H and Bloch (1986) first observed each emotion’s pattern in Chilean participants, whereas Philippot et al. (2002) conducted their study in Belgium. The respiratory patterns of anger, fear, and sadness appear similar across those two cultures. Similarly, Filippelli and colleagues (2001) studied laughter in Italy and found results similar to what Bloch and Santibanez-H found in Chile. There are conflicting findings for tenderness. There do not seem to be recent studies on the respiratory pattern of eroticism.

## The Expressive Patterns

Another criticism by Ekman (1988) to the report by Bloch et al. (1987) was that “much of what they claim to be the facial muscular actions involved in happiness, anger, fear, and sadness disagrees with the published findings from dozens of investigations” (p. 202). In light of this criticism, it is worth reviewing recent findings on facial expressions. Tables 1 and 2 summarize such findings, compared to the descriptions by Bloch and Lemeignan (1992). As indicated in Table 2, recent studies use the word “amusement” rather than joy-laughter. As noted earlier, amusement is a good word for the emotion referred to as joy-laughter in the Alba Method. Also, I am considering “love” as used by Campos, Shiota, Keltner, Gonzaga, & Goetz (2013) as closest to tenderness.

Table 1

Facial expression of aversive emotions according to various studies. Bold letters indicate elements from Bloch & Lemeignan (1992) that were replicated.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Emotion | Bloch & Lemeignan, 1992 | Jack, Sun, Delis, Garrod, & Schyns, 2016 | Cordaro et al., 2017 | Keltner & Cordaro, 2017 |
| Fear | **Raised upper eyelids; tense lower eyelids; outer and inner brow raised; eyebrows raised**, tensed; unfocused, moving gaze; **mouth open vertically, tense** | **Upper eyelids raised, jaw dropped, mouth stretched, outer and inner brow raised** (fear/surprise) | **Eyebrows raised,** **upper eyelid raised, eyelids tight**, **lips parted, jaw dropped** | **Eyebrows raised** and pulled together, **upper eyelid raised, lower eyelid tense, lips parted and stretched** |
| Anger | Semi-closed eyes, **tensed eyelids, vertical brow wrinkles,** frowned eyebrows, focused, tense gaze; **mouth clenched, lips tight** | Nose wrinkled, upper lip raised, **eyelids tight**, lips funneled (anger/disgust) | **Brows furrowed, eyelids tight** | **Brows furrowed**, eyes wide, **lips tightened and pressed together** |
| Sadness | **Semi-closed eyes**; **tense lower eyelids; vertical and horizontal wrinkles in the brow**; inner corners of the eyebrows raised; unfocused, downwards gaze; **mouth** semi-closed, **corners down** | Lowered brow, **lips stretched and pressed**, eyes closed | **Brows furrowed**, **semi-closed eyes** | **Brows knitted**, **eyes slightly tightened,** **lip corners depressed**, **lower lip raised** |

Table 2

Facial expression of pleasant emotions according to various studies. Bold letters indicate elements from Bloch & Lemeignan (1992) that were replicated.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Emotion | Bloch & Lemeignan, 1992 | Campos, Shiota, Keltner, Gonzaga, & Goetz, 2013 | Cordaro et al., 2017 | Keltner & Cordaro, 2017 |
| Eroticism | **Semi-closed eyes**, unfocused, varied gaze; **lips parted, smile** | - | Duchenne **smile**, **lips parted** (sexual desire) | Tongue show, **lips parted**, jaw dropped, **semi-closed eyes** (desire) |
| Tenderness | Gaze directed at an object; **semi-open mouth, corners up** | Cheeks raised, **corners of lips pulled, lips apart** (love) | - | - |
| Laughter | Semi-closed eyes; lower eyelids tensed; eyebrows slightly lowered; gaze focused, then varied; **mouth open laterally, corners up** | **Cheeks raised, corners of the lips pulled, lips apart, jaw dropped, mouth stretched** (amusement) | **Duchenne smile, lower lip and jaw dropped, lips parted** (amusement) | **Duchenne smile, lips separated, jaw dropped** (amusement) |

The studies summarized in tables 1 and 2 used a variety of methods and were conducted in several countries. It should be noted that authors use different approaches to describing facial movements. For example, Keltner and Cordaro (2017) report that, in sadness, the lower lip is pressed. If readers do this movement, they will notice that this causes the corners of the mouth to point down, as described by Bloch and Lemeignan (1992). As can be seen, recent findings are generally consistent with the descriptions that are part of the Alba Method. More specifically, there are elements that are repeated across studies (such as the upper eyelids raised in fear or the lips parted in eroticism), and other elements that appear in some studies but not others. This suggests that some elements of facial expressions are more strongly associated with their respective emotions, whereas for other elements the association may be weaker. It is interesting to note that the Alba Method includes a description of the gaze in each of the emotions, something that apparently other authors have not studied.

The third element of the emotional patterns described in the Alba Method is body posture, which includes the quality of movements. Studies on body posture are scarcer than studies on facial expressions. Tables 3 and 4 present the patterns described by Bloch and Lemeignan (1992) compared to those described in recent research. Eroticism is not included, as there are no recent studies on the postural expression of this emotion.

Table 3

Postural pattern of aversive emotions according to several studies. Bold letters indicate elements from Bloch & Lemeignan (1992) that were replicated.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Emotion | Bloch & Lemeignan, 1992 | Shafir, Tsachor, Welch, Watson, & Allard, 2016 | Cordaro et al., 2017 |
| Fear | **General tension**; abrupt, fast movements; **backward attitude**; head retracted from body axis | Enclosing and condensing the body, **moving backward** in space**, retreating in the shape of the body, intense muscle activation** | **Bodily movement backwards** |
| Anger | General tension; **abrupt, fast movements; forward attitude**; head forward, low | **Advancing** with a strong **sudden** and direct effort | - |
| Sadness | **General relaxation**; smooth movements, closed, **vertical attitude; head downward** | Passive weight **(general relaxation)**, sinking **(vertical attitude)**, **head down**, arm(s) to upper body | **Head down** |

Table 4

Postural pattern of pleasant emotions according to several studies. Bold letters indicate elements from Bloch & Lemeignan (1992) that were replicated.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Emotion | Bloch & Lemeignan, 1992 | Campos et al., 2013 | Shafir et al., 2016 | Cordaro et al., 2017 | Keltner & Cordaro, 2017 |
| Tenderness | General relaxation, smooth movements, forward attitude, **head tilted sideways** | **Head tilt** (love) | - | - | - |
| Laughter | General **relaxation**; slow, uncoordinated, **saccadic movements**; open, vertical attitude; **head backward** | Head bounce (amusement) | Jumping, **rhythmic movements,** **lightness**, free flow (happiness) | Head up (amusement) | **Head back** (amusement) |

## Emotional Induction

The main claim of the Alba Method is that the intentional reproduction of each emotion’s respiratory-postural-facial pattern activates the corresponding emotion. Philippot et al. (2002) questioned the research basis for this claim:

In their work, Bloch et al. (1991) have demonstrated that extensively training actors to reproduce these emotional effector patterns results in the induction of the corresponding emotion feeling state. Unfortunately, in these studies, participants were explicitly (a) told that the aim of the training was to produce emotion through respiratory, facial, and postural changes, and (b) informed of which emotional effector pattern was intended to induce which emotion. Hence the effect of these manipulations on feeling states may simply be the result of experimenter's demand. Further, breathing was not manipulated independently from posture or facial expression, hence preventing estimation of the specific impact of each source of peripheral feedback. (p. 610)

It is true that Bloch and her colleagues told participants about the purpose of the manipulation. However, it is not true that they told them which pattern corresponded to each emotion. Bloch and colleagues (1987) clearly stated:

Firstly, the actors were instructed to adopt a particular breathing pattern *without being told the name of the corresponding emotion*; then the postural component was added and, finally, the facial expression. The complete configuration was always worked out for each emotion in the same order: breathing-posture-face. (p. 9, emphasis added).

It is also correct that Bloch and her colleagues (1987) did not manipulate breathing, facial expression, and posture independently. However, they noted:

The entire procedure was done in a very technical and methodical way in the sense that while the [participant] was doing the required breathing pattern, he was asked to tense or relax a particular part of the body and then to add the corresponding facial mimicry. In fact, we observed that *the facial expression appeared by itself as soon as the breathing pattern started.* (p. 9, emphasis added)

The Alba Method is the only one that uses the breathing-face-posture triad to induce emotions. However, other researchers have investigated the effects of each of these elements separately. The element that has received the most attention is facial expression. The idea that facial expressions induce emotions is known as the facial feedback hypothesis. Coles, Larsen and Lench (2019) performed a meta-analysis on 286 effect sizes derived from 136 studies on facial feedback. The results revealed that the overall effect of facial feedback on affective experience was small but significant.

There are far fewer studies on the effects of non-facial body movements on emotional experience. Shafir et al. (2016) asked people from various countries to perform various movements and then report what emotions they felt. The results indicated that different types of movements induced the emotions of happiness, fear, anger, and sadness. Flack, Laird, and Cavallaro (1999) studied facial expressions and bodily postures, both separately and in combination, for those same four emotions. They found that "matching combinations of facial expressions and bodily postures result in more powerful feelings of the corresponding emotional feelings than do either expressions or postures alone" (p. 203).

Finally, to study the effects of respiratory feedback, Philippot and his colleagues (2002) asked their participants to reproduce the breathing patterns they had previously identified for joy, fear, anger and sadness. They did not tell the participants that this was a study about emotions, but rather that it was about cardiovascular characteristics. These authors found that the patterns of joy, anger and sadness induced the corresponding emotions, while the fear pattern induced fear and anger.

In sum, studies conducted by researchers not affiliated with the Alba Method yield convergent findings regarding the induction of specific emotions through respiratory, facial, and/or postural behaviors.

## Summary of the Research

In the preceding subsections, I have reviewed findings relevant to various claims of the Alba Method. Table 5 schematically summarizes the conclusions of these studies. As can be seen, the findings are in general consistent with the Alba Method’s claims. Recent theoretical and empirical work is consistent with the notion that anger, fear, sadness, joy/laughter, eroticism, and tenderness are distinct emotions. Recent work on their facial and postural expression is also consistent with the Alba Method’s descriptions, although there have not been new studies on the postural expression of eroticism.

The Alba Method’s descriptions of the emotional breathing patterns have been replicated for fear and anger. Results have been mixed for sadness and joy/laughter. The sole reported finding on the breathing in tenderness is at odds with that described in the Alba Method. More studies will be necessary to resolve the discrepancies between the findings of Susana Bloch's team and those of other researchers regarding the characteristics of the respiratory patterns of tenderness, laughter, and sadness. There does not appear to be new studies on the breathing in eroticism.

Finally, recent research also shows that the reproduction of respiratory, postural, and/or facial patterns can induce anger, fear, sadness, and joy. There have not been new studies on the induction of eroticism and tenderness.

Table 5

Summary of findings relevant to the Alba Method by researchers not affiliated with it

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Emotion | Is it an Emotion? | Face | Posture | Breathing | Induction |
| Fear | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Anger | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Sadness | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | +/- | ✓ |
| Eroticism | ✓ | ✓ | ? | ? | ? |
| Tenderness | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | x | ? |
| Laughter / joy | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | +/- | ✓ |

*Note*. ✓: findings consistent with the method, x: findings that contradict the method, +/-: mixed findings, ?: No studies.

# Darwinian and Jamesian, but not Ekmanian: The Alba Method in Historical Context

In this section, I would like to place the Alba Method in the context of three landmark publications in the study of emotions: Charles Darwin’s *The expression of the emotions in man and animals* (1872/1998), William James’s *What is an emotion?* (1884), and Ekman and Friesen’s *Constants across cultures in the face and emotion* (1971).

Darwin (1872/1998) highlighted the continuity of emotions across species, both human and non-human, suggesting that emotions have an innate component. He also noted that specific emotions serve specific evolutionary functions. Darwin’s book on emotions has been tremendously influential for the study of emotions as well as other fields. Regarding the Alba Method in particular, Bloch and Lemeignan noted that “joy/laughter, sadness/crying, anger/agression, fear/anxiety, erotic love and tenderness (...) were considered as basic because they correspond to universal invariants of behaviour – in a Darwinian sense” (1992, p. 32).

James (1884) noted the importance of bodily sensations in the experience of emotions, and specifically predicted that “any voluntary arousal of the so-called manifestations of a special [i.e., basic] emotion ought to give us the emotion itself” (p. 197). Bloch (2017) commented, “*The method I have developed is in fact an experimental demonstration of his* [William James’s] *theory*” (p. 51). As noted previously in the Emotional Induction section, subsequent studies have confirmed her findings. The Jamesian thesis is thus alive and well and is also consistent with other recent studies on the embodiment of emotions (e.g., Price & Harmon‐Jones, 2015; Volynets, Glerean, Hietanen, Hari, & Nummenmaa, 2019).

 About a century after Darwin published his views on emotions, and around the same time as Bloch and Santibáñez were beginning the studies that would lead to the Alba Method, Ekman and Friesen (1971) reported persuasive empirical evidence that specific emotions share similar facial expressions across cultures. Cowen and colleagues summarize the study and its impact:

In 1964, Paul Ekman traveled to New Guinea with photographs of prototypical facial expressions of six emotions—anger, disgust, fear, sadness, surprise, and happiness. He sought to investigate whether those photos capture human universals in the emotional expressions people recognize. Having settled into a village in the highlands of New Guinea, Ekman presented local villagers with brief, culturally appropriate stories tailored to these six emotions. His participants selected from one of three photos the facial expression that best matched each story. Accuracy rates for children and adults hovered between 80% and 90% for all six expressions (chance guessing would be 33%; Ekman & Friesen, 1971). It is not an exaggeration to say that this research would launch the modern scientific study of emotion. (Cowen, Sauter, Tracy, & Keltner, 2019)

A recent survey of emotion researchers (Ekman, 2016) testifies to the impact of Ekman’s work on the field, showing that that 80% of emotion scientists believe that anger, disgust, fear, sadness, and happiness are associated with universal nonverbal expressions. Unlike other late twentieth-century emotion research programs, the work related to the Alba Method does not derive from Ekman’s. Ekman and Friesen published their influential study in 1971, when Bloch and Santibáñez’s original studies were already underway. (They published the first article on what would become the Alba Method in 1973.) Both Bloch’s and Ekman’s works reflect Darwin’s (1872/1998) influence. However, there are significant differences between the Alba Method and Ekman’s approach.

Ekman has mainly focused on static facial expressions of four “negative” emotions (anger, disgust, fear, and sadness) and one “positive” emotion (“happiness”). Scholars have recently pointed out the need to expand this focus (e.g., Cowen et al., 2019). Below I will argue that the Alba Method does not suffer from the limitations associated with Ekman’s influence.

First, the Alba Method distinguishes three, rather than one, pleasant emotion. The distinction among tenderness, eroticism, and laughter is important because these three emotions serve distinct evolutionary functions (Beall & Tracy, 2017). Tenderness in particular was neglected in the literature for a long time, but its study has seen a resurgence in recent years (Schaller, 2018).

Also, recently, scholars have pointed out the need to move beyond static emotional expressions to study dynamic movements of the whole body (Keltner, Sauter, Tracy, & Cowen, 2019). This has always been integral to the Alba Method. For example, Bloch and colleagues’ 1992 study used videos of actors expressing emotions with their whole bodies. Earlier in this article I reviewed recent research on dynamic and whole-body expressions of emotions.

Obviously, there are good reasons why Ekman’s work has been so influential. However, contemporary emotion research would do well to draw inspiration from the unique aspects of the Alba Method.

# Some Applied Considerations

At the applied level, the most obvious and direct use of the method is in acting. The research reviewed in this article does not directly address the question of whether the Alba Method improves acting. However, the research does answer whether Alba meets two basic requisites: First, are the expressions from the method consistent with the way people actually express emotions? Second, does the method induce real, genuine emotions? The research reviewed here provides positive answers to both questions. I should, however, point out something that actors already know: acting is much more than expressing emotions. Thus, the Alba Method is just one out of many useful acting tools.

Just like Alba is not by itself a method of acting, it is also not by itself a method of psychotherapy. The present review has not focused on the question of whether the Alba Method has psychotherapeutic benefits. The relevance of the present article for the field of psychotherapy is in establishing that the Alba Method is consistent with current emotion science. This is important for future evaluations of Alba as a therapeutic tool, as it shows the Alba Method as credible and its applications as worthy of serious empirical investigation. As previously noted, there is significant anecdotal evidence of the usefulness of Alba in therapy (Kalawski, 2013). Additionally, we have recently shown that training in the method can improve emotion recognition (Kalawski et al., 2019).

Finally, the information presented herein should be useful to people who already practice or teach the Alba Method. They should note that some aspects of the method are more strongly supported than others. For example, in my experience teaching the method, I have noted that, for some students, smiling seems to make it harder to learn the erotic pattern. The research reviewed suggests that this element may not be present for everybody.

I hope that this article has inspired readers to experience the Alba Method directly. I encourage interested readers to contact the Alba Method Association to find certified teachers.

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