EMOTION: BEING MOVED BEYOND THE MAINSTREAM

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We will start with common sense, since it is often said that emotion is hard to define despite the fact that most of us know - quite intimately - what it is. Artists, for instance, devote themselves not only to its expression, but also to stimulating and cultivating the ‘emotions’ of their publics. A piece of music, heard at the right moment, might make us shiver with nostalgia or melancholy, and a good novel might make us weep, fume and despair at the joys and sorrows of its characters. What we intuitively call ‘emotion’ is the collective name for this multitude of feelings (sentiments, passions, affections) through which we are affected by actual, imaginary, remembered and anticipated events, and on the basis of which we affect the world around us.

From commonsense to art

The emotions associated with art works are in turn related to those experienced in the ordinary (and extraordinary) lives both of artists and their publics. The great French novelist Marcel Proust devoted some 3,700 pages to a novel whose guiding theme was an exploration of his own emotions, including his own jealous mode of loving. Here is how the
young Marcel describes the moment he discovered from his servant (Françoise) that his live-in lover Albertine had abandoned him:

Françoise, having heard my ring, came into the room, rather uneasy as to how I would take what she had to say... ‘I was very worried,’ she said to me, ‘that Monsieur should be so late in ringing this morning. I didn’t know what I ought to do. This morning at eight o’clock Mademoiselle Albertine asked me for her boxes. I dared not refuse her, and I was afraid that Monsieur might scold me if I came and waked him. It was no use lecturing her, telling her to wait an hour because I expected all the time that Monsieur would ring; she wouldn’t have it, she left this letter with me for Monsieur, and at nine o’clock off she went.’ Then – so ignorant can we be of what is inside us, since I was convinced of my indifference to Albertine – my breath was cut short, I gripped my heart in my hands, which were suddenly moistened by a perspiration I had not experienced since the revelation she had made to me on the little train with regard to Mlle Vinteuil’s friend, and I was incapable of saying anything else but: ‘Ah! very good, Françoise, you were of course right not to wake me. Leave me now for a moment, I shall ring for you presently’ (Proust 2000, 473).

We can probably all recognize the many emotions alluded to in this little interaction, from the uneasy worry felt by Françoise (on account of the delicate nature of what she must communicate), to Marcel’s quickly concealed shock of heart-stricken panic (in the face of a transformative event that would mark him for the rest of his life). A novelist like Proust draws upon the stock of his own life-experience to portray how such events are
‘subjectively’ experienced as more or less meaningful in the context of the unfolding texture of a life interwoven with that of others, and as part of a ‘now’ that is also defined by a past lodged in a broader historical epoch. Mainstream psychologists, on the other hand, have for the most part been influenced by the idea that a properly scientific account of emotions must concentrate upon observable (and preferably measurable) externalities. They have concerned themselves with providing ‘objective’ descriptions which are supposed to hold good regardless of the ‘who’ the ‘where’ and the ‘when’ of an emotional experience. The most obvious examples are neuroscientific theories that reduce emotions to specific neural circuits in the brain (e.g. Hyman 1998). These scientific theories and descriptions of what are, at best, abstract pictures of other people’s emotions from the outside often strip away the sense of immediate subjective experience in concrete unfolding contexts that is so pertinent to our emotions. As a result, they typically end up dealing in artificial abstractions which are then re-presented as if they were more real than what is expressed by the intuitions of non-scientific thinking. As Harré (1986: 4) puts it, the tendency is for psychologists to abstract an entity and call it by an emotion word (perhaps ‘anxiety’ or ‘shock’), when what really exists is always a concrete flux of activities in context: a Françoise becoming anxious about reporting a disturbing fact to a Marcel, and a Marcel concealing in turn his shocked response to the news of Albertine’s departure, for instance.

Those psychologists that do attend to the ‘subjective’ dimension of other people’s emotional experience, on the other hand, are typically influenced by a philosophical settlement of the eighteenth century which held that the unity of the human mind can be divided into three parts: cognition (concerning such things as knowledge, thought, intelligence), affection (concerning feelings, passions, pleasures, pains) and conation
(concerning will, desire and other spurs to action). Consider the widely influential definition of Nico Frijda (1993: 256): ‘Emotional experience... can take three different forms: awareness of situational meaning structure [i.e. cognition], awareness of autonomic arousal [i.e. affection], and awareness of action readiness [i.e. conation]. Each of these can be taken to define emotional experience’. It is notable that what is absent from this definition is precisely that which most interested Proust: the place of emotion in an ongoing process in which a key ingredient is the lived experience of transition (being moved by the things which affect us and moving the things which we, in turn, affect). Cognitive, affective and conative aspects can nevertheless easily be abstracted from the ongoing totality depicted in our Proust quotation: Françoise’s worry and Marcel’s shock both presuppose a ‘situational meaning structure’ (‘cognition’). Françoise knows that Marcel may be upset and possibly angered by her news, and she is ‘cognitively’ aware that she might be considered culpable for not having delayed Albertine’s departure or woken Marcel; Second, the breath cut short and the perspiring palms indicate Marcel’s awareness of his highly aroused autonomic nervous system (‘affection’); Third, both Marcel and Françoise are caught in a dilemma of will whereby they must act out a socially expected role whilst simultaneously feeling an urge or ‘action tendency’ to do otherwise (‘conation’). Marcel, for instance, suppresses his urges to cry in despair and to run after Albertine, concealing them in the utterance ‘Ah! very good, Françoise...’.

From art to ‘science’

The tendency, first to separate (or take for granted the separation of), and then to integrate
cognitive, affective and conative factors has become something of a standard approach amongst those psychologists who define emotions as complex response systems or syndromes. These systems are thought to involve the coordination or organization of multiple components into a temporarily unified system to address some external or internal event. For Scherer (2009), for instance, emotion is a sequence of state changes in a number of organismic sub-systems. These include the motivational system which underpins the action tendencies which give rise to behaviour (‘conation’); the autonomic system which underpins felt arousal (‘affection’); and a system of higher cerebral processes which underpins appraisal (‘cognition’). These sub-systems, Scherer suggests, can function relatively autonomously, but in response to events that trigger emotions, they converge into interdependence. Under these circumstances, and along with a monitor system (which supplies the conscious feeling of emotion) and a motor system (which underpins expressive reactions like smiles), they can temporarily combine to generate intense felt experiences of emotions like jealousy, anger and embarrassment.

In a short chapter it is only possible to scratch the surface of the over 150 theories of emotion that have been proposed by psychologists (Gardiner et al. 1937). In a paper entitled ‘A Century of emotion theories’ Salzen (2001) reviewed almost 100 of these theories and divided them into five types depending on whether their prime focus is on a) adaptive responses (focus on ‘conation’ and observable behavior); b) response feedback (focus on bodily states involved in ‘affection’); c) appraisal (focus on ‘cognition’); d) neural systems (focus on cerebral states); and e) frustration and conflict theories (focus on emotions as responses to interruptions in organized thought and conduct). To simplify this vast tradition, the following are often taken as key moments in the history of the modern
scientific study of emotions:

- 1820: Thomas Brown used the relatively novel word ‘emotion’ to designate all feelings that are neither intellectual states (like thoughts or cognitions) nor sensations (like feeling cold or having an itch);
- 1872: Charles Darwin proposed a biological theory of human emotions as mostly residual traces of once highly functional animal expressions (the snarl of anger revealing canine teeth before a bite; ‘hair-raising’ fear as revealing the still discernable trace of a once much more hairy ancestor, etc);
- 1884: William James offered a feedback theory of the affective portion of emotion (i.e. it’s intensive feeling) as awareness of visceral changes (i.e. changes in heart rate, perspiration, trembling etc.) that occur as a function of the autonomic nervous system (ANS);
- 1895: John Dewey stressed that emotion is simultaneously a) ‘about’ an object and b) a subject’s response to it. He stimulated (along with Frédric Paulhan in France) a ‘conflict’ approach where emotion is theorized to result from tension between incompatible lines of conduct, or from interruptions, suspensions or breakdowns of ongoing activity sequences.
- 1921: Sigmund Freud re-stated a theory of libido (a term ‘taken from the theory of the emotions’ [Freud 1921: 90]) as an energy force ‘stored up’ in the ego but ‘invested’ in objects such that an emotion like love can be viewed as an object (the lover) cathected with libido.
- 1927: Walter Canon’s ‘central’ theory that emotions are patterned responses produced by specific parts of the brain (notably what we now call the ‘limbic system’);
1954: Arnold and Gasson’s appraisal theory which places a moment of self-referential 
judgement before the experience of emotion (e.g. the appraisal that an event bodes ill for
me will generate a felt tendency to escape its influence);

1962: Schachter and Singer’s ‘two factor’ theory that emotions result from a
combination of undifferentiated visceral intensity provided by the ANS, qualified by
cognitive sense making processes that occur in social contexts (such that intense ANS
arousal might be interpreted as pleasure in a fair-ground context, and fear in context of a
plane crash);

1963: Silvan Tomkins’ motivational theory of basic affects which proposes a small
number of universal affects (fear, anger, joy, distress etc.) whose mixtures and dynamics
form the basis of emotional experience. Each basic affect is thought to be a drive amplifier
hard-wired into neural circuitry and defined by its distinctive facial and vocal expressions.

1984: Klauss Scherer’s integrative theory of emotions as a syndrome involving the
integration of multiple factors (cognitive, autonomic, motivational, etc.)

These theories do not constitute a progression, but a collection of sometimes incompatible
conceptualizations. Where these approaches do not completely ignore subjective
experience, socio-material context and dynamic process, they attempt to ground these in
something more objective, predictable and controllable (like the repeatable pattern of a
facial expression, an autonomic response, an instinct, or a situational attribution). Debates
then rage about whether emotion is determined by central brain activity (as with Cannon)
or peripheral autonomic activity (as with James), or about whether cognition is fundamental
to emotion (as with Arnold) or a bit player to more fundamental ‘pre-cognitive’ organismic
responses (as with Freud or Tomkins).

Some key critiques

Critique is naturally endemic to the tensions and debates ‘internal’ to the mainstream traditions indicated above (Parkinson 2011). Here, however, we will concentrate on a number of more or less ‘external’ critiques of these traditions which emerged during the last few decades of the twentieth century, many of which cohered around the theme of the social construction of emotion. Classic examples here are Averill (1980) and Harré (1986). These in turn echo earlier general critiques of psychology informed by Marxism and phenomenology (e.g. Vygotsky 1927/1987, 1932; Sartre 1938; Canguilhem 1958/1980; Holzkamp-Osterkamp 1991). The constructionist critiques challenged the authority of scientific truth by affirming the partial (abstract) and partisan (siding with power) nature of psychological knowledge about emotions. They are informed by developments in the sociology of knowledge and by those forms of anti-essentialist, post-structuralist, or non-representational philosophy that emphasized the performative nature of language (e.g. Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Austin, Ryle, Derrida, and so on). To abstract an artificial entity (e.g. ‘anger’) from the contextual flux is not merely to ‘reify’ the emotions, but also to fall under the spell of a false ‘representationalist’ conception of language (assuming the word ‘anger’ represents a separable thing), which in turn neglects the reality constructing pragmatics of language (saying ‘I am angry’ does things in the communicative context of its concrete utterance).

The critiques also drew upon developments in anthropology suggesting the rather
local and specific nature of ‘western’ ways of thinking and acting about emotion (e.g. Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990), and developments in history which showed that key aspects of local and specific ‘western’ ways of thinking and feeling were also a relatively new historical development associated with ‘modernity’ (e.g. Elias 1994; Stearns and Stearns 1988). With respect to the latter, it is notable that the word ‘emotion’ was hardly used before the beginning of the nineteenth Century when English speakers talked instead of affections, passions and sentiments. Dixon (2003) shows that the growing use of the word ‘emotion’ was attributable to a new interest in scientific psychology amongst medics, scientists and early psychologists. He writes not of the discovery of emotion, but ‘the creation of ‘the emotions’ as a psychological category’. In short, the concept of emotion must not be taken-for-granted since it was crafted and put to use as part of the early development of the modern discipline of psychology.

The ways in which ‘modern Westerners’ construct emotions also embodies particular values and stakes associated with distinctively modern forms of social selfhood which are associated with European capitalism and colonialism (Lutz 1996) and which are highly gendered (Cancian 1987; Crawford et al. 1992). Modern Western psychology of emotions ignores this specificity by stripping away the vitally important social and political context and offering instead an authoritatively scientific translation of human emotions based on a reification which ultimately reduces them to the level of the self-interested biological or cybernetic individual. This is not a neutral discourse that represents an independent reality, but a constitutive part of how modern westerners are enjoined to construct and ‘do’ their emotions (Curt 1994; Stenner and Stainton Rogers 1998; Despret 2004). It is inseparable from the ‘hope’ that, with scientific knowledge, the responses of
these human automata can be predicted and controlled – always in the name of their own wellbeing - through biological modifications (e.g. pharmaceutical) and psychological interventions (e.g. cognitive restructuring). The way in which this supposedly scientific knowledge is in fact shot-through and saturated with social values and political and economic stakes is clear in the following quotation from Walter Cannon’s famous central theory:

*The thalamic patterned processes are inherent in the nervous organisation, they are like reflexes in being instantly ready to seize control of the motor responses, and when they do so they operate with great power. They can be controlled, however, by the processes in the cerebral cortex, by processes conditioned by all sorts of previous impressions. The cortex also can control all the peripheral machinery except the viscera. The inhibited processes in the thalamus cannot set the organism in action, except the parts not under voluntary control, but the turmoil there can produce emotions in the usual manner, and possibly with greater violence because of the inhibition (Cannon 1927).*

In this highly influential theory, emotions are identified with neural processes in the thalamus that are symbolically associated with a militant working-class. Parodying Marxist language, these potentially violent forces are presented as if ready to seize control of the means of production (in this case, the means to produce motor responses) from a ruling class associated with the rational control circuitry of the cerebral cortex. Emotions here are made to play the role of those supposedly violent insurgents, irrational children, hysterical women
and savage non-westerners that an authoritarian state takes it as its duty to inhibit and otherwise repress. Ribot, a positivistic French psychologist, went as far as to describe emotions as ‘the gypsies of our mind’ – a ‘dying breed’ that can be likened to a ‘state within a state’ (Vygotsky 1987).

Averill (1996) refers to this tendency to associate emotions with biologically basic and primitive mechanisms as a form of ‘psychophysiological symbolism’ that should not be confused with what emotions ‘in fact’ are. A long Western tradition treats affectivity as a bestial, bodily and subjective source of irrationality and distortion: the ‘flip side’, as it were, to a high value placed on rational, deliberate action. This symbolism reflects a split between mind and body that is not simply epistemological, but also normative since it concerns questions of power, governance and control. In the Cartesian dualism, mind (associated with transcendent spirit) should exercise complete power over body (associated with meaningless materiality). If reason gets associated with white, European, bourgeois masculinity, and if emotion with all other categories of humanity, then this is because – in practical political reality - the latter were made systematically subservient to the former during the apex of western modernity. This is why, to put it bluntly, much early psychology of emotion embodies the prejudices and preoccupations of a Victorian gentleman – complete with stiff upper lip – at the height of the British empire (Stenner and Greco 2013).

As this empire collapsed and the US became the new superpower, so the symbolism changed and took on a character tinged with the revolutionary spirit occasioned by a break with ‘old Europe’, and influenced by values of mass consumerism with its seductive advertising, ‘go get it’ attitude and imagery of expressive liberty. In this context - at least in so far as they motivate consumption and do not challenge the economic order - emotions take
on a positive spin. The basic emotions tradition inspired by Tomkins and developed by Ekman, for example, is saturated by the biases of a romantic and revolutionary strain of thought – derived from Rousseau - for which the spontaneous emotional animal stands in positive contrast to the inauthentic rational human being weighed down by artificial convention (Fridlund and Duchaine 1996).

Evaluation of critiques

The positive agenda of this wave of constructionist critique was to theorize and study situated affective practices in their full diversity as discursive and dialogical phenomena inextricably rooted in cultural and historical power relations, and played out interactionally according to the symbolic resources of a culture (Curt, 1994). The ‘non-representational’ epistemology shifted the empirical focus to emotion talk which is considered to be a constitutive part of social reality and emotional experience rather than simply reflective of it (Stenner 1992).

This turn to language and text, however, has arguably become a limitation. The positive attention to relationality, power and context comes at the cost of a defensive adherence to an ontology that bifurcates the world into matter (assumed to be the province of the natural sciences), and meaning (assumed to be the province of the social sciences and humanities). Language is taken to be the primary medium of meaning and hence the basic stuff of any serious social scientist. This bifurcation is most clearly expressed in Harré’s (1997) distinction between two ontological ‘grammars’: a p-grammar applicable to persons and an m-grammar applicable to molecules. M-grammar concerns the causally deterministic
interactions studied by natural scientists, whilst p-grammar concerns the intentional actions of persons construed as more or less skilled performers subject to normative constraints. The social constructionist critique of emotion research can be seen as part of an argument that emotion ‘belongs’ to the social sciences and not the natural sciences, since emotions, when seen in proper context, are best understood in relation to p-grammar (m-grammar constraints notwithstanding).

Things become more linguistically entrenched when this ontological commitment is converted into a methodological axiom, as occurred with forms of discursive psychology which explicitly limited its attention to a ‘conceptual analysis’ of the uses ‘emotion categories’ are put to in ‘emotion discourse’ (Edwards 1999). This reality-agnostic tendency towards a linguistic hardening of social constructionism has led to a flood of critiques of ‘linguistic imperialism’ - critiques that are increasingly going under the name of an ‘affective turn’ (Clough and Halley 2007; Blackman and Venn 2011; Cromby 2007). Such critiques ‘speak up’ for the ‘non-linguistic’ and ‘extra-discursive’ as if social constructionism were the imperialist dominator and organic vitality the subjugated abject whose experience is silenced and denied (Stenner and Moreno 2013).

The turn to affect was partly influenced by the rapid growth of affective neuroscience which in turn contributed to a renewed interest in psychodynamic notions like the primary process (rapid and general unconscious processing) as distinct from a conscious secondary process (Salvatore and Freda 2010). With the help of PET and FMRI technologies, psychological questions, it was felt, can at last be posed in a properly scientific manner: i.e. as biological questions. Hyman (1998: 417) thus feels able simply to ignore the 200 years or so of psychological work on emotion, creating a new ‘year zero’ beginning with his own
tradition of neuroscientific research: ‘[emotion]... had largely been ignored as a field of study until recently. Then, several groups identified the anatomy, physiology and chemistry of the circuits that underlie fear in animals and humans...’. Since the excitement of the 1990s (the ‘decade of the brain’), however, the dream of being able to specify which clusters of neurons underlie which emotions has run up against a more complex reality. According to Pachalska et al. (2007), ‘nearly every brain function involves a complex network of brain regions and neuron clusters, sometimes widely separated from each other’ such that ‘most neurons or groups of neurons participate in a number of different brain functions, which do not always seem to be related to each other in any obvious way’.

**Progressive possibilities**

The dangers of a renewed biological construction of emotion are obvious from a critical perspective, particularly in a social context where affective difficulties associated with troubled, anxious and depressed lives are increasingly packaged as discrete psychological and psychiatric disorders and treated pharmaceutically on a massive scale (Rose 2006). The solution, however, does not lie in a bifurcated ontology where the insistence on p-grammar or discourse analysis simply invites a return pendulum swing to the biological. Indeed, the enduring fascination of the emotions is surely attributable to their unstable and liminal features as *simultaneously* organic, psychic *and* communicative; individual, pre-personal *and* social; conative, cognitive *and* affective; pre-conscious, conscious *and* unconscious; inherited, learned and deliberate; passive, active and neutral (Stenner 2004). The main challenge for critical scholars in this context is conceptual rather than empirical. It is the
articulation of a critical transdisciplinary approach capable of acknowledging and affirming the complexity and liminality proper to a non-representational approach, but without attaching sole significance to language. Particularly promising is the tradition of process thought articulated by Bergson, James, Whitehead, Langer, Serres, Deleuze, Stengers and others that has roots in the seventeenth century philosophy of Spinoza (see Brown and Stenner 2009).

In this Spinozist heritage one finds unexpected common ground between otherwise divergent traditions. What other philosophy is positively embraced by cognitivists (Frijda 1993); neuroscientists (Damasio 2004), psychoanalysts (Neu 1977), social constructionists (Brown and Stenner 2001), feminists (Braidoti 2003) and affect theorists (Masumi 2002) alike? Spinoza is interesting to critical psychologists precisely because of the way he treats experiential (affective), epistemological (cognitive) and ethico-political (conative) concerns as inseparable aspects of a political philosophy of experience grounded in a concept of power defined as the capacity to affect and be affected. Bader Sawaia (2003: 17), a Latin American feminist critical psychologist who works as an activist with urban slum dwellers, describes how her praxis lacked an adequate theoretical motor until she recognised the relevance of affectivity as ‘a microcosm in which the social and the psychological worlds meet in a process of transformation’ – a recognition which came with her explicit adoption of a Spinozist approach.

Neuroscientists too are coming to recognise that each event of experience entails a microgenesis entailing multiple phases such that even the most abstract flower of an intellectual thought emerges from an embodied ground and has affective roots (Brown 2012; Falmange 2011). Spinoza argues for the decisive political and ethical relevance of...
concrete, local and singular emotional experiences. Ethics is thus about affectivity, but affectivity is also about coming to know and act in the world more adequately, and of reconstructing our political systems on this basis. Through our encounters, we come to know the world by way of the affects. Much like Proust, when Spinoza thinks of affects, he has in mind the human being as a socially embedded relational whole undergoing encounters through which our powers are on-goingly modified or affected and through which we modify or affect the world. The message of a critical psychology of emotion is Spinozist: become active.

Further reading


Website resources
References


Scherer, K. R. (2009) ‘Emotions are emergent processes: They require a dynamic
computational architecture’, Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society, Series B, 364, 3459-3474.


