

## Chapter 3

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# Emotion, emotion concept

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The term emotion, stemming from the Latin *emovere* (to move out or agitate), broadly refers to those affective upheavals in experience that are directed at events or objects in the world and that often prompt us to act in specific ways vis-à-vis these events or objects. Since antiquity, these episodes have been branded by labels like shame, anger, fear, joy, embarrassment, or disgust, and classed into categories. Historically, Darwin's (1872) *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* was one of the most influential scholarly works to inform prominent understandings of emotion in many academic disciplines. Across disciplines, there is broad consensus that emotions are discrete in kind; that is, they are characterized by specific configurations of phenomenal experience, bodily changes, expressions, and action tendencies. Emotions are also widely thought to be adaptive, insofar as they are purposeful and meaningful for an individual, and reflect an evaluative engagement with the environment that helps one prepare for specific actions. Related to this capacity, emotions are generally presumed to fulfill communicative purposes, for instance through facial or vocal expressions, which is why they are deemed essential to social interaction.

Following Darwin's work, two major debates have refined contemporary understandings of emotion. William James (1884) held that emotions are, first and foremost, a specific class of feelings, to be distinguished from related concepts such as moods, sensations, and sentiments. Emotions according to this view are the subjective feelings associated with bodily changes and expressive behaviors. Hence, as James (1884, p. 190) famously put it, "we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble" – and not vice versa. An almost diametrically opposed shift in understanding emotion is linked to a well-known experiment by Stanley Schachter and Jerome Singer (1962), based on which they proposed that only thoughts and cognitions, specifically the interpretation and labeling of events (including bodily changes), can bring about a specific emotion. More recent scholarship has increasingly sought to integrate key insights of these feeling-based and cognitive accounts, resulting in innovative perspectives that emphasize the embodied and socially constituted nature of emotion, which we outline in

detail in our own approach. Importantly, in this approach, emotions should be considered part of an integrated conceptual field that encompasses affect, emotion, and feeling. Roughly, whereas “affect” stands for pre-categorical relational dynamics and “feeling” for the subjective-experiential dimension of these affective relations, “emotion” signifies consolidated and categorically circumscribed sequences of affective world-relatedness.

### **Emotions as realizations and conceptualizations of affect**

Although there still are many different ways of understanding the concept of emotion and much disagreement remains as to its theoretical elaboration, a minimal consensus can be identified across traditions and paradigms. As a starting ground, this consensus has also proven to be exceptionally fruitful for an understanding of societies as affective societies. Emotions thus are conceived of as *object- or situation-directed* affective compartments that are sorted into culturally established and linguistically labeled categories or prototypes, such as, for instance, fear, anger, happiness, grief, envy, pride, shame, and guilt. These emotion categories mirror specific kinds of *evaluative world-relations*, for example a relation to imminent danger in the case of fear, to an offense in the case of indignation, or to a severe loss in the case of grief. Needless to say, these evaluations need not be unambiguous, but can be fuzzy, ambivalent, or even contradictory, often resulting in experiences of mixed feelings and emotions (e.g., Heavey et al., 2017). Hence, emotions also reflect concerns of various sorts, from more abstract goals and desires, for example for social status or recognition, to more basic needs such as freedom from harm or bodily integrity. Whatever theoretical differences are prevalent among researchers, we hold that a workable understanding of emotion must accommodate this category-specific directedness to salient classes of events or objects.

Emotions thus are inherently *relational* categories. They are cognitive and affective processes unfolding along the lines of a categorically circumscribed evaluative relation, linking an actor or a group to specific matters of concern. Thus, for example, the emotion type fear comprises those affective processes and appraisals for which individuals or groups are affected by an imminent danger; anger comprises those thoughts and affective dynamics that relate an individual or a group to a harmful offense or transgression, while grief comprises dynamics that relate an individual or a group to a situation of significant loss (cf. Helm, 2001). Hence, emotion categories cannot be said to denote processes “inside” individuals or capitalize on some social or material “outside.” Rather, they are indicative of *situational entanglements* and the relational co-constitution of actors, situations, and evaluative orientations. This constitutive embeddedness is also reflected in recent works stressing the *enactive* nature of emotions (Krueger & Szanto, 2016; Slaby, 2014). The term

“enactive” suggests that emotions do not simply result from the passive representational processing of environmental information, but are an outcome of the dynamic embodied interaction between actors and their respective environments (Colombetti, 2013; Thompson, 2010).

The idea of emotions reflecting specific situational entanglements also suggests that emotions are episodic. In contrast to moods or sentiments (→ *sentiments*), emotion categories mirror situational – rather than the dispositional – affective world-relations. Importantly, situational here means “from the first-person-perspective” and is not limited to physical space or an ongoing interaction (Goldie, 2002). For example, recurrent depreciation can be seen as an unbearable situation and produce lasting shame about the self. Similarly, an insult in a face-to-face conversation provokes anger at someone else that is soon dampened by an apology.

Understanding emotions as situational and episodic is also in-line with the view that emotions are usually linked to feelings (→ *feelings*). When we say we are angry, sad, or proud of something, others usually have an immediate idea of *what it feels like* to be in a state of anger, sadness, or pride. In how far feelings are “at the core” of an emotion or in fact *necessary* for them is a question that reflects the different positions of James on the one hand, and Schachter and Singer on the other, and is still much discussed (e.g., Prinz, 2005). Instead of arguing that conscious phenomenal experience is a necessary ingredient of an emotion, we suggest a perspective from which emotions are predominantly realizations and conceptualizations of affect (→ *affect*). Aligning our understanding of affect with the domain of human bodies and phenomenal experience, we can interpret an actor’s situatedness as a specific “mode of being” and an evaluative bodily orientation toward the world. Affect in this view is related to the idea of finding oneself in the world amidst the forces that enable or hinder one’s thriving and one’s capacity to act. As a complex bodily stance, affective comportment is not necessarily focused on a specific object, but rather reflects an agent’s entire world-directedness in the sense of a specific “affective intentionality” (Slaby, 2008). Importantly, as part of an emotion, these bodily feelings may be directed toward objects and events in the world (expressing Goldie’s (2002) idea of “feeling towards”) and eventually become categorized and labeled as an emotion.

Contrary to some prominent proposals from the cultural studies branch of affect theorizing (e.g., Massumi, 2002), affect and emotion in this perspective are not systematically opposed. Instead, the relationship is that of a constructive interplay. Affect is a dynamic building block, potentially transgressing normatively prescribed and learned ways of relating to the world, eliding any “inside” versus “outside” distinction. Affect may bring about and intensify emotion episodes, for instance when grief, disgust, or anger build up to such a degree that little remains of the composure and sense-making capacities of the experiencing subject. Likewise, we assume that the conceptualization

of affect into an emotion category will have consequences for the intensity of the experience and for the bodily specificity of the overall episode.

The proposed perspective on emotion and how it links to affect in some ways tallies with approaches in social psychology. In particular, psychological constructionism and the “conceptual act theory of emotion” (Barrett, 2014) propose that emotions are situated and embodied conceptualizations of changes in the world that are relevant to an actor. Embodied conceptualizations essentially involve construals of affect or “core affect” as physical bodily changes with highly specific phenomenal and evaluative qualities and consequences for action. Also in this view, affect itself is considered to be non-conceptual and non-linguistic, and instead as primarily bodily and beyond volitional control. Psychological constructionism (as well as other psychological theories) also argues that affect can be measured and quantified on a number of experiential dimensions, mostly valence and arousal. Although this perspective is in some respects compatible to our proposed concept of emotion, it does differ in its understanding of affect. Whereas from the perspective of psychological constructionism affect is exclusively a property of the individual human body and its psychological functioning, our understanding is much broader in scope and decidedly not located at the level of an individual human body. Instead, it is conceived of as the *relational dynamics* between evolving bodies of different sorts and is more of a force, power, and intensity than a property of a biological body. Nevertheless, the *repercussions* of this sort of affect in the sense of a human body *being affected* resembles psychological constructionism’s account.

Understanding emotions as realizations and conceptualizations of affect also aligns with the widespread view that – as evaluative and object-directed engagements with the environment – emotions also prepare actors for actions in a given situation (Frijda, 2004; Döring, 2003). Because emotions reflect matters of concern, they also prompt actors into engaging with the things that are of import to them. This motivational impetus is directed at the relation between the self and the object of the emotion. We are often prompted to maintain or alter this relationship as we are frequently pushed towards or pulled away from an object in question. Importantly, emotions are associated with action *tendencies* rather than with specific actions. They serve to *decouple* the “stimulus” from the “response” (Scherer, 1994) rather than to initiate some fixed action programs, allowing for flexible ways to engage with what concretely matters.

Furthermore, emotions not only prompt towards action, but are a form of agency in themselves. Situations become *emotional* situations because emotions co-constitute situations through a range of behaviors, from body postures to facial expressions, vocal intonations, and gestures. In contrast to research that continues Darwin’s line of reasoning that specific sets of behaviors are inextricably linked to specific emotions, we acknowledge the extensive evidence pointing toward notable cross-cultural differences in

emotionally expressive behaviors and their meanings (Elfenbein, 2017). This does not imply that, for example, frowned eyebrows are an entirely meaningless communicative signal. But interpreting them as a sign of the emotion category of “anger” requires additional situational cues and culture-specific knowledge (Röttger-Rössler, 2004). The agency of emotions in conjunction with their action tendencies – which include speech acts and the verbal communication and social sharing of emotion – therefore are a powerful currency for social interaction, intersubjectivity, and the emergence of collective emotions (cf. Stodulka, 2017; von Scheve & Ismer, 2013).

This rough conception of emotion bears several important points. First, emotions are episodic realizations of affect, sorted into culturally established and thus historically variable sets of prototypical categories. These categories encompass elements of conceptual knowledge and understanding beyond affective attunements, bodily processes, feelings, or sensations. Relatedly, emotions both presuppose and contribute to shaping an intelligible domain of value, including socially instituted and culturally codified domains of concern and significance at which the emotions are intentionally directed. This renders emotions relational phenomena that are co-constitutive of actors and situations. Importantly, categories such as anger, pride, shame, or disgust also refer to specific action tendencies and exhibit in themselves agentic powers. Emotions are closely related to reflective self-relations, providing sources of self-understanding, anchoring individual narratives of value and import, and providing default ways of making sense of actions, decisions, and commitments.

The intrinsic connection between emotion categories and valuations, situational entanglements, feelings, action tendencies, and communicative behaviors inextricably relates individual traits and experience to cultural repertoires and patterns of social organization. This relatedness is critical to providing actors with meaning, intelligibility, and accountability as they constitute social and communal life. Our proposed understanding of emotion brings to the fore an inherent tension that is deliberately built into the concept. On the one hand, emotion categories reflect socially shared (though historically and culturally diverse) forms of knowledge and experience, for instance through processes of socialization and acculturation (→ *Gefühlsbildung*). This also entails notions of praxis and normative expectations regarding the experience, expression, and valuation of emotions (→ *orders of feeling*) as well as the adequate ways to work on or manage them (e.g., what we find disgusting or praiseworthy, how to respond to specific dangers, or how to adequately deal with conflict, loss, mischief, and so on) (Scheer, 2012; Thoits, 2004). On the other hand, emotions also reflect individual predispositions, affections, biographies, and embodied experiences that do not always fit seamlessly into the socially circumscribed prototypicality of emotion categories (→ *affective disposition*).

This tension between the individual and the collectively shared aspects of emotion is reflected in the concept of emotion repertoires (→ *emotion repertoires*). Repertoires are the building blocks that link the emotional lives of

individuals to social structures, forms of social organization, domains of practice, ideology, and spheres of belonging. Emotion repertoires at the same time are collectively shared and individually available. From a socialization perspective, they reflect developmental processes of the appropriation of emotion concepts and their prototypical situational entanglements and valuations as well as of the norms and rules pertaining to, for example, expressive behaviors (e.g., Holmes, 2015). These processes include the learning and habituation of emotions as well as their enactment and performance, all of which comprise elements of novelty, change, and variability. From a cultural and societal perspective, emotions as concept-bound responses to shared concerns are intimately linked to various cultural practices, social institutions, and value spheres, as found in the arts, politics, education, religion, or the judiciary (e.g., Bergman Blix & Wettergren, 2015). These realms incorporate and promote specific understandings, representations, articulations, valuations, and practices of emotion, and hence influence subjects' actual emotional experience. This can happen in implicit and barely noticeable ways when emotions remain mere residuals, or in deliberate attempts at the strategic management, regulation, and manufacture of individual and collective emotions (e.g., George, 2017).

Emotions in this view are subject to constant social change while at the same time being significant agents of change themselves. As shared emotion repertoires change over time, so too, most likely, will actors' emotional experiences. And as actors' emotional experiences change, for example through rapid social structural changes or the occurrence of "cultural lags" (Ogburn, 1922), so too may emotion repertoires. This perspective allows for an understanding of emotions beyond the individual human actor. Emotion repertoires can be attributed to collectives and also to social domains or spheres of belonging, such as groups, organizations, or institutional domains, shifting the emphasis from individual enactments to collective or domain-specific performances of emotional behavior. Likewise, this opens up a perspective on how emotions move and undergo transformation independently from the comportment of individual actors. Repertoires with their symbols, formats, and practices circulate globally in mediatized form, enter into other cultures of emotion, and thereby lead to hybridization, change, but also potentially to tension and conflict within established orders of feeling.

### **Examples from research**

Given their associations with culturally derived categories, situational entanglements, affect, and emotion repertoires, emotions are at once constitutive of human sociality and contingent upon it. On this account, the concept of "emotion" speaks to at least two different understandings of relationality: those capitalizing on situated relations between human and non-human

bodies, in the sense of a “flat ontology,” and those that emphasize symbolic and structural forms of relationality, as in social stratification and social networks (Crossley, 2011). Emotions thus address long-standing debates in social theory over the “structure/agency divide” and provide novel perspectives to overcome that divide by hinting at how individual-level properties of actors interact with their social structural and cultural embeddedness. We can think of emotions not only from the standpoint of individual experience, but also in terms of emotional deviance, alienation, belonging, cohesion, or social exclusion. Emotions in this sense might be thought of in “full-duplex” fashion, that is, in a way that highlights the mutual contingency of emotion with different social formations such as groups, teams, organizations, social movements, or nation state societies. Two examples from existing research shall serve to illustrate this perspective.

Transnational migration usually involves relocating from one social and cultural space to another, crossing not only language and nation-state borders, but also those borders related to customs, practices, worldviews, and value spheres. In addition, social and cultural perspectives on emotion suggest that transnational migration also means relocating across the borders of “emotion cultures,” or dominant practices, norms, and values associated with emotion categories. Looking at Vietnamese psychiatric-psychotherapeutic patients in the German capital of Berlin, von Poser and colleagues (2017) investigate the emotional consequences of transnational migration using a concept of emotion close to the one we propose. Their interdisciplinary approach – combining insights from social anthropology and transcultural psychiatry – promises an understanding of the migratory process from multiple affect-related perspectives. First, it allows for an investigation of *affective tensions* arising from potentially conflicting emotional orientations and affordances. Long-nurtured evaluative world-relations and modes of being might cease to provide meaning in novel social and cultural circumstances, instead leading to irritation, tension, and dissonance (→ *affective resonance*). This might also include distortions and adjustments to the ways affective compartments are sorted into emotion categories when culturally specific emotional prototypes become blurred and ambiguous. This points, second, to affordances resulting from cultural differences in the very meanings of emotion categories and in the emotional repertoires associated with these categories. For instance, situations that might be construed as “shameful” in one cultural context may well elicit shame in another context too, but the social expectations regarding situation and emotion might differ dramatically. Third, these affective and emotional challenges of transnational migration bear consequences at both an individual and societal level, impacting a range of conditions from individual mental and emotional health to the very social fabric of hosting societies and communities, as von Poser and colleagues (von Poser et al., 2017) illustrate.

From a notably different theoretical perspective, a second example highlights the situational entanglement of affect and emotions with their more

inert repertoires. Collective emotions are often conceived as spontaneous and involuntarily processes irrupting in crowds and gatherings without much cognitive involvement. Emotional contagion and facial mimicry are amongst the possible mechanisms responsible for this rapid transfer of emotions across individuals. Taking a slightly different approach, Knoblauch and Herbrich (2014) consider the case of audience emotions ( $\rightarrow$  *audience emotions*). In audience emotions, they suggest, collective emotions often stem from the close interplay of pre-existing declarative and tacit forms of knowledge related to specific emotion categories and situational affective comportments. Dedicated spatial arrangements such as the architectural layout of a large stadium, promote certain forms of social interaction, a common focus of attention, entrainment, and bodily affection. At the same time, actors engage in ritual practices that entail specific choreographies and performances such as chanting, singing, or gesturing. These choreographies are explicitly aimed at the generation and expression of discrete emotions, which are labeled, articulated, and socially shared. As such, they are part of an emotion repertoire that is learned and internalized over time through repeated enactment and situational exposure. This perspective on emotion allows researchers to disentangle affective upheavals of experience from their situational and material components, and from the emotion categories into which they are culturally labeled, branded, and enacted. Importantly, this view contributes to our understanding of the formation of different social collectives that share the same social space. Although patterns of bodily affection within a stadium may be shared by most actors present, their linguistic labeling and social sharing will be contingent on emotion repertoires that arise from and contribute to the formation of distinct social collectives, such as different groups of supporters (see also von Scheve & Ismer, 2013).

## Conclusion

The understanding of emotion we propose seeks to address a number of shortcomings and oversights in existing social science and cultural studies perspectives. On the one hand, there is an obvious danger to “over-intellectualize” emotions and to treat them as one would treat language, cognition, and conceptual thought. From such a vantage point, emotions are merely another form of discourse, compromising most of what one commonly associates with emotions, such as their immediacy, agency, affective phenomenology, and bodily dynamics. On the other hand, there is a risk of overlooking the importance of culture and sociality by reducing emotions to their affective and bodily qualities. Emotions are much more than sweating palms, racing hearts, or reddening cheeks. They are situation- and culture-specific conceptualizations and classifications of these bodily reactions, evaluatively directed toward specific objects, including the historically contingent norms, values, and social expectations to which they are related. This variety



of ingredients or dimensions of an emotion has important methodological ramifications for empirical social research. It seems almost self-evident that specific research methods, such as in-depth interviews, ethnographic observations, experiments, or standardized surveys will only be able to address particular aspects of an emotion at a certain time. For example, discourse analyses may help uncover the linguistic labeling or textual representation of different emotion categories, but they will fall short of providing insights into emotions' bodily, affective, and experiential dimensions. Empirical research therefore needs to take great care to avoid construing emotions reductively according to the particular epistemological limitations that every scientific method inevitably yields (cf. Stodulka, 2017).

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