

THE EXPERIENCE OF EMOTION: SITUATIONAL INFLUENCES ON THE ELICITATION AND EXPERIENCE OF EMOTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The experience of emotions and affects is a pervasive aspect of our life. We all feel well or moody on a particular day, are impatient or pleased with something we are doing and experience happiness at a compliment or anger at a slight. The present paper discusses the social context influences on the elicitation and experience of emotions from the point of view of appraisal theories. Appraisal theories of emotions posit cognitive evaluations of such aspects of the emotion eliciting event as its novelty and pleasantness, the degree to which it helps or hinders ongoing plans and goals, the degree to which the individuals believes to be able to cope with the event, the degree to which what happened appears just and unjust, etc that can be considered to underlie the emotion process. Yet, the outcome of these appraisals as well as the behavioral consequences of the outcomes are not the same for everyone and a number of situational influences have been found to be of importance in this context. In this paper I argue that these factors not only exert influence the display and labeling of emotions but also modulate the appraisal process.

1. Introduction

The present paper discusses situational influences on the elicitation and experience of emotions. Specifically, such influences as cultural emotion norms and roles as well as the relationship between interaction partners in terms of power or gender are considered. These situational aspects may influence the emotion process at different points. First, they may influence the perception of the situation and thus act as a filter for those elements of the situation that enter the appraisal process. Second, they may influence the appraisal process as such. Third, they may influence the emotion display and the labeling of the subjective feeling state. The former two are influences on the elicitation of emotions, whereas the latter refer to the experience of emotions.

This definition presupposes a specific view of emotions, which should be stated explicitly first. I will then briefly discuss functions of emotions and in particular the interpersonal functions of emotions. Following this, I will address the question of whether emotions are social constructs before going on to discuss

some empirical data illustrating situational influences on the elicitation and experience of emotion.

1.1. *What is an emotion?*

What is an emotion and how differ emotions from other affects such as moods, affective disorders, or personality traits such as anxiousness? In everyday language, emotions simply refer to feeling states such as happiness, excitement, love, fear, or hate. In fact, many people consider love and hate as the best examples for emotions (Fehr & Russell, 1984). In the present context, the term emotion will be reserved for short term, intentional states. Emotions are intentional states because they – unlike moods – have an evaluated object. Thus, we are not angry or surprised in general – but we are angry or surprised at something – the object of the emotion. This notion is central to appraisal theories of emotion (e.g., Frijda, 1986; Scherer 1986).

The notion that emotions are linked to evaluations is old and can be traced back as far as Aristotle. Spinoza (1675) also referred to emotions as "accompanied by an idea of an external cause." Appraisal theories of emotion are usually traced back to Magda Arnold who defined emotion as: "... a felt tendency toward an object judged suitable and away from an object judged unsuitable, reinforced by specific bodily changes according to the type of emotion" (Arnold & Gasson, 1954, p 294).

Appraisal theories view emotions as short term reactions to an internal and external event that is evaluated along a series of features such as pleasantness, goal conduciveness, ability to cope, justice, etc. (e.g., Scherer, 1986; Frijda, 1986). A distinctive feeling state as well as bodily changes, expressive behavior, and actions tend to characterize emotions, but none of these is separately necessary or sufficient for a state to be considered an emotion.

1.2 *Functions of emotions*

In considering the situational influences on emotions it is important to first consider the impact of emotions on the situation, that is, the intra- and interpersonal functions of emotions. Intrapersonal functions refer to the functions of emotions for the individual that experiences them. In Western society emotions are often viewed as disruptive or destructive. The notion that emotions pervert reason and should be tightly controlled goes back to Plato and has been sustained through the centuries in Western philosophy and religion. From this view, emotions are described as irrational, disruptive and to be distrusted as the following citation by William Penn (founder of Pennsylvania) illustrates, "Passion is a sort of fever in the mind, which ever leaves us weaker than it found us (William Penn, 1644-1718)." On the other hand, evolutionary points of view underline the importance of emotions as means to fast action and as plans for action. In this sense the short-circuiting of cognitive processes in favor of rapid action, for example, by initiating a flight reaction in response to a perceived threat, is seen as adaptive - even when the perceived threat may turn out on occasion to be one's own shadow.

Nico Frijda (1986) describes emotions as states of action readiness, that is, motivational states that engender a specific form of action. As such they are not so much interruptions of rational behavior but in fact part of it as they coordinate and provide goals. From a biological point of view emotions allow the recruitment of behaviors that are low in an organism's response hierarchy as they activate the physiological support systems necessary to deal with the situation at hand.

That emotions play an important role for both rational thinking and the ability to get along successfully with one's fellow human beings is illustrated by research by Damasio (1994). Patients with damage to the lower middle part of the frontal lobes, who show emotional blunting but no impairment of their intellectual abilities, tend to have massive problems in planning their life – they make bad decisions and can dither endlessly over trivial problems. Interestingly, they seem particularly oblivious to the impact of their actions with view to notions of politeness and sociability. According to Damasio, emotions can be conceptualized as somatic markers that help us to sort out options that result in social punishment and to strive towards solutions that are emotionally attractive. This elimination process allows us to reduce decision-making problems to manageable proportions. Further, emotions allow us to set priorities and therefore to be able to neglect certain problems (e.g., should I put my pencil into the left or the right drawer) in favor of other more relevant ones.

In the present context, the interpersonal functions of emotions, which are linked to the communication of intentions and the establishment and maintenance of social networks, are of particular interest. When we consider so-called social emotions such as regret, shame, guilt etc. but also anger and contempt we note that these emotions tend to reinforce social rules. Showing anger at a social transgression can serve as punishment while the display of shame signals acceptance of a moral code. Thus, emotions can help to regulate social norms. In this vein, Turner (1997) asserts that emotions evolved in part to provide the means for effective sanctioning and the enforcement of moral codes within groups of hominids. His basic argument is that the communication of emotions in humans was a necessary prerequisite for social bonding among, what he considers essentially asocial hominids. This notion refers to emotions such as anger, shame, and guilt that help enforce the social rules necessary for smooth interactions but also to emotions such as sadness that may recruit succor.

Emotion displays also serve to regulate power relationships. Ethologists have noted the importance of anger displays in primates for the negotiation of hierarchies. Averill (1997) posits that emotions follow rules that help establish emotion roles. He likens emotion roles to other social roles in that they confer privileges (e.g., we excuse actions that stem from extreme emotions), are subject to restrictions (e.g., notions of "excessive" grief), come with obligations (e.g., the angry person should show a desire to redress the wrong - otherwise the anger seems suspect), and have entry requirements. In the case of anger, he notes that both

social recognition and legitimacy are required. Thus, persons in higher authority have more "right" to be angry than those with less authority. Conversely, anger displays are perceived as dominant (Keating, 1985; Knudson, 1996).

The importance of emotions for social relationships is also obvious from research by Rimé et al. (1991) who found that the vast majority of all emotional experiences are told to others – usually within hours of the experience. Specifically, Rimé and colleagues asked people how often they had told others about an emotional event that had happened to them. These events include relatively trivial things like an exam or a dispute with someone as well as serious events such as the death of a partner. Over many studies they consistently found that between 80% and 90% of the participants retold the event at least several times. This was the case for both men and women and for individuals from different age ranges. They also found that people who have been told about an emotional event tend to retell this event to others at very high rates. According to Rimé, this social sharing of emotions serves to define and elaborate social relationships. The telling allows the individual who experienced the event to situate the event and to affirm the appropriateness of the emotional reaction in its social context. In sum, emotions have an important influence on social relationships and help regulate interactions on various levels. Yet, the social context in which an event takes place also influences the emotions experienced. Before going on to discuss these influences in detail, I need to situate the emotion concept I am working with more precisely in its theoretical context.

1.4. *Are emotions biological based or socially constructed?*

In the present context, emotions are viewed as having a biological basis. That is, emotions are seen as having an evolutionary history and as grounded in the biological functions of the brain. This is not to deny that human society has a profound influence on the emotions process. In fact, this influence is the topic of this paper. Yet, this position is contrasted by other points of view. Social constructivist views of emotions tend to deny emotions their biological basis and to view them as purely social constructions. In this context, the social pre- and proscriptions and the rights, obligations, and conventions associated with the experience of emotions are seen as their primary features. To illustrate this point, I have listed here what Harré (1986) considers the five basic features of emotions: (1) the repertoire of language games available in a culture; (2) the moral order within which the moral appraisals which control both the meaning and the occasioned use of emotional terminologies are themselves meaningful; (3) the social function (acts) which particular emotion displays and emotion talk perform in the dramaturgically shaped episodes of this or that culture; (4) the narrative forms that the unfolding of the situations revealed in 1, 2 and 3 above realize; (5) the systems of rules by which these complicated forms of social action within

which the emotional qualifications of actions and actors are maintained, changed, critically accounted and taught.

According to this view, members of different social groups differ fundamentally in their evaluation of emotion eliciting events and their consequences and these differences then lead to fundamental differences in emotional reactions (e.g., Kemper, 1990; Wierzbicka, 1995), and it is maintained that emotion words and their connotations dictate the way events are seen and reacted to. In fact, there is some support for the view that basic aspects of emotion eliciting events differ across cultures (e.g. Wierzbicka, 1995). In particular, research focussing on the language of emotions notes that some emotion words can be found only in some cultures. A good example is the German word "Schadenfreude" that denotes the amusement taken from the misfortunes of others. Other examples are the Ifaluk word "song" that denotes a type of anger that may lead to suicide. Further, it has been noted that emotions can become obsolete. For example, the term "accidie" refers to the emotion associated with the loss of intrinsic motivation towards one's religious duties. These observations have been interpreted as showing that emotions are actually socially constructed phenomena. On the other hand, one may argue that the lack of a word does not deny the existence of the state it refers to nor even its importance. For example, the English language does not have a word for "Schadenfreude" but it would be wrong to deny that the emotion plays an important role in the American cultural context as the genre of slapstick movies is based on this emotion. Also, while there is no simple English equivalent to "song" the notion of righteous anger that may even lead someone to suicide by, for example, hunger strike or self-immolation is certainly available.

Frijda, Markam, Sato and Wiers (1995) studied the relationship between emotion words and emotions and note that once one leaves the surface level of description and considers more fundamental aspects such as underlying appraisal categories, fairly stable cross-cultural emotion patterns can be found for many emotions. Other evidence suggests that the antecedents of emotion events are largely similar across a large number of cultures (Mauro, Sato, & Tucker, 1992; Matsumoto, Kudoh, Scherer, & Wallbott, 1988). For instance, Scherer (1997) based on a questionnaire study conducted in 37 countries on all continents (except Antarctica), notes how similar many appraisal patterns are - yet, he also notes interesting differences, especially as regards the attribution of agency.

In my opinion, the somewhat conflicting findings on this issue can be resolved by assuming that the basic emotion process is biologically grounded and universal, but that the type of events attended to, the appraisal of these events, and the relevant norms for behavior may vary as a function of culture, gender, relative power status, as well as the relationship between the interaction partners (see also Mesquita, Frijda, & Scherer, 1997; Frijda, Markam, Sato, & Wiers, 1995). Yet it is important to remember, as Frijda and Zammuner (1994) note, the way we label an

emotion can have an important impact on how we cope with it. If, for example, we label homesickness as a physical illness (as is done in the Tahitian culture) we may in fact face this phenomenon differently than when we label it an emotional reaction (sadness at being separated from those close to us). However, in both cases the state of the individual is due to a perceived loss that can not be readily remedied, that is, the appraisal pattern is the same but both the label given by the person who experiences the state and the option that can be considered for coping can be quite different.

Cultural norms may lead us to attempts at controlling or even suppressing certain emotions because we fear negative consequences. As Harré and Parrot (1996) put it: (emotions) ... are acts embedded in patterns of acts; their display is subject to rules and conventions; they are embedded in culturally specific moral orders and normative systems that allow for assessments of the correctness and impropriety of emotions. The emotions that are subject to these attempts can vary from culture to culture. As a consequence, certain emotions may be less frequently observed in certain cultures. For example, it has been noted that the North American culture calls for control of negative emotions and rewards the display of positive emotions.

In sum, cultural and social influences on emotions are quite central to any consideration of emotions, especially emotions in social context. These influences may be relevant to different aspects of the emotion process that I want to discuss in the following and illustrate with empirical evidence.

2. Levels of social influences on the elicitation and experience of emotions

In the present context, I will like to focus on the elicitation and experience of emotions, that is, the process that leads from the perception of an emotional stimulus to the expression and labeling of the resulting emotional state. Yet, as the social consequences of experiencing and displaying emotions plays an important role for the socialization of emotions, it is obvious that the same emotion norms that influence the first process also influence the decoding of emotion displays.

A given emotion-eliciting situation has to be perceived by the observer. Whereas some emotion eliciting situations are quite simple in structure (e.g., encountering a bear in the woods), many social situations are complex and allow for the possibility that interactants focus on different elements of the situation, both when appraising the situation and when attributing emotional states to others via perspective taking. For example, it has been noted that girls in general are more sensitive to social context than boys (Merrum-Terwogt & Olthof, 1989). Similarly, Suh et al. (1998) discuss evidence that members of collectivistic cultures are more likely to attend to external socially shared elements of an emotion stimulus whereas members of individualistic cultures pay more attention to internal cues.

Differences in emphasis regarding aspects of a situation essentially change the database for the emotional appraisal process. Whether internal cues are ignored or

attended to may lead to differences in appraisal. For example, Markus and Kitayama (1994) interpret findings by Levenson et al. (1992) that West Sumatrans show the physiological changes congruent with a facial feedback effect but -- unlike Americans -- do not report feeling the corresponding emotion, as due to the fact that for the former a situation where they are alone does not qualify as an emotional situation and the internal cues alone are not attended to.

Differences in the perception of a situation may also lead to differences in perspective taking, that is, the appraisal of a situation in terms of another person's emotional state. Hochschild (1983) describes an incident where a passenger threw a cup of coffee at a flight attendant and notes the difference in perception between the airline and the flight attendant. The described situation can be considered as threatening to self-esteem when one is attending to aspects of the situation relevant to the self but as simply tedious when attention is shifted away from the self. In Hochschild's example, the airline focussed on the situation as an example of public contract work (and thus not a possible source of anger) whereas the flight attendant focussed on the personal insult (and therefore felt angry).

Secondly, the actual appraisal process may differ as a function of situational emotion norms. In this context, Mesquita, Frijda, & Scherer (1997) suggest that cultural differences can be understood as differences in the practice, or propensity, to use certain appraisal dimensions. As mentioned above, Scherer (1997), based on data from 37 countries on different continents, concluded that although a sizable degree of similarities in appraisal profiles was found across countries, there were also some differences. He notes that those differences were most notable as related to notions of Agency (did the other person do this on purpose) and Justice. Similarly, Frijda and Mesquita studied appraisal processes in Dutch, Turkish, and Surinamese individuals who all live in the Netherlands. Their results point to a number of differences, including the attribution of Agency. For example, Dutch subjects attributed less agency to others in anger eliciting situations (inconsiderate behavior of others). Further, Frijda et al. (1995) found strong similarities in the use of appraisal dimensions between participants from the Netherlands, Indonesia, and Japan but also note that Japanese more often than Dutch or Indonesian individuals, appraised situations as immutable and inevitable and reported action tendencies of apathy and "desire to depend upon someone else."

Yet, culture is not the only source of social context influences on appraisal, gender and power have also been linked to differences in emotional experience and expression (see Henley, 1995). The influence of power on appraisal processes is illustrated by Cantin & Hess (1998) who randomly assigned high or low levels of decisional power to participants in a study designed to induce anger in a dyadic setting in which a confederate provoked the participant. The results show that decisional power was a better predictor of anger behavior than individual differences such as anger proneness, dominance, empathy, or endorsement of display rules. Specifically, low power participants appraised the confederate (who

always behaved in the same rude manner) as more pleasant and reacted with less anger than high power participants. Power also influenced strategy choice in managing the conflict with high-power participants showing more assertive conflict resolution strategies. They were also judged by outside observers as being more dominant and less affiliative.

Differences in emotion-antecedent appraisals for members of difference groups entrain likely differences in emotional behavior. For example, we may expect that the Japanese participants in the study reported above, would also display more apathy and in the Cantin & Hess study such differences were in fact observed. However, even in situations where appraisal patterns do not differ, behavioral reactions may – either because of constraints placed by display rules or because of the anticipated consequences of emotion displays.

In this context, it has been suggested that the presence of an audience in and of itself is determining for emotion displays. In fact, Fridlund (1991) suggests that emotion displays are not part of an emotion process but rather social signals. Thus, the actual or implicit audience determines emotional expressivity to a larger degree than underlying emotional states. As support for this notion findings by Fernandez-Dols and Ruiz-Belda regarding the seemingly emotion incongruent facial displays of sports medal winners as well as a study by Fridlund (1991) who varied the sociality of an emotional situation and found monotonic increases in expressivity as a function of sociality, can be summoned. In fact, Fridlund considers the notion that emotion displays are somehow caused by emotions and then modified by social rules as romanticist. Yet, the notion that emotional expressions are social signal is not inconsistent with the notion of emotional expressions as symptom, as is illustrated by findings by Hess, Banse, and Kappas (1995).

To turn back to social emotion rules, these rules, often referred to as display rules (Ekman & Friesen, 1969) are pre- and proscriptive norms for emotion displays that are pervasive and socialized early in life. Gallois (1994), in a recent review on emotion communication in interpersonal situations, concludes that not only are interpersonal situations involving verbal and nonverbal emotional communication, such as self-disclosure or conflict, highly rule-governed but the rules are perceived as normative for the interactions. Consequently, even minor violations of emotion norms can create substantial problems for the interaction process. Three types of emotion rules can be distinguished.

First, normative rules exist regarding the intensity of emotion displays or the overall emotionality of a group. For example, women are generally expected to be more expressive than are men, (see e.g., Brody & Hall, this volume) and Asian-Americans describe themselves as less emotionally expressive than other ethnic groups (Gross & John, 1995) and are perceived as less expressive by others as illustrated, for example, by Herrera, Bourgeois, & Hess (1998). Second, display rules pro- and pre-scribe specific emotion displays for specific situations (e.g., solemn appearance at a funeral), as well as specific modes of expressive behavior

(e.g., physically aggressive behavior in women). Finally, display rules regulate the level of emotionality for different types of social relationships. For example, Aune, Buller, and Aune (1996) describe how rules for the expression of positive and negative emotions change over the course of the development of romantic relationships and note sex differences for the display of emotions as relationships progress from dating to more developed relationships.

We have already discussed the influence of power on appraisal processes. Averill (1997) notes that social norms for anger generally allow more latitude in anger expression to individuals in positions of high power. Similar observations are made by Henley (e.g., 1977) to account for the fact that women tend to show less anger and smile more. In fact, smiling can be interpreted as a sign of appeasement. From an evolutionary perspective smiling derives from the silent bared-teeth display in primates, which is often used as a sign of appeasement. An interesting illustration for the influence of social context in a wider sense on emotion displays has been provided by Preuschoft and VanHoof (1997). They studied the use of the silent bared-teeth display in primates. As stated above, this display is mainly as a gesture of appeasement but also occurs in contexts other than appeasement. Preuschoft and VanHoof studied the variety of uses other than appeasement as a function of the power asymmetry in various species of primates and suggest that primates whose social groups tend to be less hierarchical tend to use the silent bared-teeth display in a wider variety of situations.

Finally, social rules on emotion may influence how an emotion is labeled which in turn influences how the event is coped with. We already noted the tendency in the Tahitian culture to label homesickness not in terms of an emotion such as sadness but rather in terms of a physical illness. In an interesting essay on the social control of negative emotions, Janet Landman (1996) notes that current popular wisdom denigrates regret as a useless waste of time and exhorts people to either suppress regret entirely or at least to re-label it in terms of a valuable lesson learned. She also notes that regret has a number of positive sides that are usually ignored, for example, feeling regret allows us to reaffirm that we have values even if we did once not live up to them - something that in the long run may be more valuable than the emotional equilibrium bought by labeling regret as some irrational fit of the blues.

In sum, an important function of emotions is their influence on social relationships. Conversely, the social context in which an event takes place also influences the experience of emotions. Appraisal theories of emotion provide a useful framework for conceptualizing these influences.

Acknowledgments

The present paper is based in part on research funded by the Conseil de Recherche en Sciences Humaines.

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