

1994

# The Social Construction of Emotions: New Directions from Culture Theory

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## Recommended Citation

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## THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF EMOTIONS: NEW DIRECTIONS FROM CULTURE THEORY

E. Doyle McCarthy

### INTRODUCTION

A majority of sociologists and many other social scientists working in emotion studies identify their work with the approach called "social constructionism." However, there is a fairly wide range of perspectives and working assumptions that this term encompasses, almost to the point where the term no longer clearly identifies where one stands on such basic matters as defining emotions, studying emotions, and how precisely emotions are socially circumscribed. Furthermore, this approach is coming to mean things other than it did when sociologists began to map out the terrain of the sociology of emotions more than a decade ago.

After a brief elaboration of these points, I will examine where the social constructionist approach appears to be moving in sociology and related fields. In the course of this examination, I will also explain why these directions have far-reaching implications for sociology. To anticipate the direction I am headed, it is my view that constructionists will be taking their lead from "culture theory," a term that designates a diversity of new studies from

humanities and social science, whose focus is the interpretation of culture and its operations (e.g., Munch and Smelser 1992; Alexander and Seidman 1990; Denzin 1992) and which represents a revolution of sorts in the ways that social scientists conceptualize and study their objects of inquiry. Culture theory has already begun to alter how emotions are conceptualized. But its future impact on the sociology of emotions promises to be considerable.

### EARLY CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACHES

Constructionism's most prominent feature is an emphasis (one that varies considerably from study to study) on cognitive and cultural features of emotion. This emphasis it shares with many cognitive psychologists working in emotions and with those identified with the social constructionist movement in psychology (Gergen 1985; Gergen and Davis 1985; Averill 1980, 1982, 1986; Harré 1986), as well as with a number of works in cultural anthropology (e.g., Lutz 1988; Shweder and LeVine 1984) and philosophy (de Sousa 1987; Rorty 1980; Solomon 1984).

In most cases, proponents of this approach argue that emotions cannot be divorced from the sociocultural meanings in which they are experienced and expressed. That is, while we can *analytically* distinguish emotions from bodily and cognitive functions and processes, emotions are in fact best grasped as objects of investigation within the domain of cultural forms and meanings. Furthermore, constructionists argue that the linkages of affect and cultural form are vital for both conceptualizing emotions and for studying their operations. It is in this sense that emotions cannot be divorced from a whole host of cultural and social phenomena: from language in the form of words, from what Austin (1962) first described as "speech acts," from "vocabularies of emotion" (Geertz 1959) or the rules governing expression and feeling, from the idioms (both pretheoretical and theoretical) within which they are experienced and expressed (and the degrees of refinement each of these take), and from the cultural patterns and interactional processes within which they emerge and are sustained (Gordon 1990). In each of these different senses, emotions are described as cognitive and evaluative phenomena, even as "language forms" (Perinbanayagam 1992), for they *communicate* and "signal" things about self and society in the larger sense of these terms, or in the immediate, situational sense of, say, Goffman's "interaction order" (1983).

Steven Gordon (1981, 1989), one of the very first to systematize a sociology of emotions, identified what he termed the "socially emergent properties of emotion that transcend psychological or physiological explanation." Reasoning as Durkheim did, these emergent dimensions, he argued, are explicable only in relation to other social phenomena. Emotions combine features of body, gesture, and cultural meaning. The sociology-of-emotions

project involves how emotions are differentiated, socialized, and managed socially. Today, Gordon's thinking can be seen as representative of a number of different constructionist approaches, each viewing emotions as inextricably social or cultural, precisely because they are emergent properties of social relations and sociocultural processes.

Despite this emphasis, sociologists do not usually go as far as to define emotions entirely as cognitive categories, or to deny what is distinctive about the domain of human feeling and emotionality. Hochschild's work (1983, pp. 201-22), for example, is explicitly critical of those who subsume emotion under other categories. However, in some cases, approaches appear to do precisely this and verge on a kind of cognitive reductionism where the *processes* of human understanding and evaluation in which emotions play a vital and formative role, are reduced to conceptual schemes. (See a discussion of this by Gergen and Gergen 1987, p. 43.) To date, most constructionists, and people of other persuasions too, would agree that there is strong support inside and outside social science for distinguishing emotion and cognition, while at the same time stating that emotions are vital players at every step and in every aspect of human knowledge and understanding. Again, this is not to equate emotion and cognition, nor to reduce emotion to cognition. Emotions are not merely cognitive functions. At the same time emotions *are* inextricably *cultural* (which is not the same thing). Perhaps this last point is best stated by Catherine Lutz (1988, p.5) who argues that emotional experience "is not precultural but *preeminently cultural*."

Constructionist approaches can also be identified by what they oppose or reject. Most notably these include a view of emotions as physiological states or as *natural objects*. Alternatively, emotions or emotional processes (including experiences, meanings of experiences, expression, and so forth) are best construed as acts or as kinds of symbolic actions, as social performances or, in Averill's terms (1986, p.100), "cultural performances" or "socially constituted syndromes," response elements that involve both cognitive and physical processes. Each of these formulations are intentionally employed to provide alternative views of emotions as principally bodily, experiential, or irrational phenomena.

But whether concerned with identifying what emotions are and how to study them or how emotions and cognition are related, the early debates addressed (explicitly or implicitly) the question: How *much* does culture matter? (see Thoits 1989, p. 319). While this question has represented sociology's approach to emotion until now, I think that soon there will be a new direction taken by constructionists, one in which the question will be, *How does culture matter?* I also expect that more of us will be divided in the years to come as this issue becomes the defining issue of social constructionism as it is in U.S. sociology.

This is because social science today is distinguished by a rethinking of what culture is, how it is construed, and how its operations are studied. The

disciplines most responsible for facilitating these changes are literary studies, cultural anthropology, studies of popular culture, and what Lynn Hunt (1989) calls the "new cultural history." These newer ventures into cultural studies have moved many of us to examine the conceptual implications of structuralism and semiotics. With them, greater attention is given to studies of *forms of signifying*—institutions, texts, images, ideologies, and so forth. Slowly our view of culture is undergoing change—a change that already signifies further change in the assumptions and presuppositions that have distinguished our discipline since its inception. Yesterday's "attitude of analysis" (Ricoeur 1986, pp. 255-56) was causal and explanatory and its privileged model was natural science. Today's attitude is increasingly interpretive and conversational and seeks to enlarge the universe of human discourse, "an aim to which a semiotic concept of culture is peculiarly well adapted" (Geertz 1973, p. 14). The semiotic study of culture is directed toward the study of symbolic and signifying systems through which a social order is communicated and reproduced.

### RETHINKING CULTURE AND EMOTION

As a semiotic process, culture is no longer seen as a "secondary formation" (Sahlins 1976) of social structure, social organization, and material life. Construed that way, which it has been throughout our discipline's history, the operations of culture were necessarily undermined and restricted. Culture, principally ideational, hung lightly, like gossamer, over hard material reality. Causality began in that solid and practical base of the economy or "social structure."

The age of structuralism and semiotics has shown that *society is an assemblage of signs to be deciphered; nothing exists outside of these signifying systems—neither material life, forces of production, and certainly not the enterprises of science and social science, themselves and their objects, cultural forms and forces*. The legacy of structuralism is the view that language and other cultural forms do not follow reality but signify it (Clark 1985 p., 188). The key problems then become how to make intelligible the operations of language and cultural meanings that underlie this or that aspect of reality; how the objects of our studies say things about a society; how they operate as signifying systems in their own right. Emotions are no exception.

Cultural studies emphasize the autonomy of culture from social structure, meaning cultural forms cannot be read or deciphered from social behavior or social organization. They are patterns in their own right. Among other things, they cannot be explained deductively by reference to a set of factors that are outside of culture. Accordingly, emotions do not exist as something apart from the cultural forms that describe them. For there are no "natural objects" of inquiry (Hunt 1989, p. 7). Emotions are cultural objects; they have

meaning within a system of relations. They "unfold in a world already symbolized" and are constructed as *what they are* "by the concept" we have of them, to borrow Marshall Sahlins's terms (1976, p. 123). Or, as "discursive objects," emotions emerge within a discourse, an organization of written and spoken forms, areas of language-use identified by particular historical groups and institutions—the discourses of professions like psychology and medicine, but also academic and theoretical discourses such as philosophy and literary studies, or metatheoretical discourses such as liberal humanism. The "truths" about emotions, the self, and so forth are contained within the operations of these discourses and are, in turn, experienced on the pretheoretical level by the subjects who live them as "truths." In this way, language and discourse are both the foundation and the instruments of the social construction of subjective and objective reality (Berger 1970, p. 376).

The new theories of culture also set clear limits to inquiries into causes and into universal foundations, but they also undermine phenomenological views of subjectivity, since subjectivity itself is always given form and voice through discourse. Accordingly, language categories and cultural meanings are no longer viewed "subjectively." They share, in Richard Harland's words, "a kind of objectivity which is not the objectivity of things, [they share] a kind of idea which is not the idea of a subjective mind" (1987, p. 68). Far more significant, it is culture theory that allows us to examine how our own "languages" of selfhood and our own Western proclivity to divide up our worlds (and ourselves) into "subjects" and "objects," also implies a distinct idiom of emotion, one, incidentally, that is enshrined in our philosophies, psychologies, and social scientific categories.

### THE NEW SHAPE OF EMOTION STUDIES

What might some of this mean for emotion studies? How will our second decade of work be characterized? I do not expect discontinuity as much as a gradual but remarkable change in our empirical dispositions as culture theory comes to guide our thinking and research. As it does, our research will no longer focus on emotions themselves, but on the *discursive operations that constitute our "emotional lives," the cultural practices through which emotions are known, controlled, released, cultivated, and worked on*.

The emphasis on psychological phenomena as *forms of discourse*, has already inspired the works of many in both psychology and the social sciences (Perinbanayagam 1992; Shotter and Gergen 1989). But I expect that the studies of "emotionology" (Stearns and Stearns 1986), of "ethnopsychology" (Lutz 1988), and of "emotional culture" (Gordon 1989), terms identified with pioneering works in our field, will be given even greater emphasis and elaboration.

Two areas of social science where culture theory will undoubtedly affect our work in emotions will be in the areas of popular culture and politics (the latter, broadly conceived). Studies of popular culture will take on a greater importance in our work since the domain of culture is no longer construed holistically, but as *cultural practices*. The widespread use today of "cultural practices" is significant in several respects. First, as a term its intention is to locate "culture" in *acts* or practices dispersed throughout the social order, in what used to be called formal and informal institutional settings. Rather than in "consciousness" or in non-material social facts as traditionally conceived, culture is observable in practices.

"Cultural practices" in today's social science also connotes a relatively disorderly sociocultural universe in contrast to "culture" which implied a shared *universe* of meaning. "Cultural practices" are neither unified nor universal. They reveal a collective sense of *difference*, a various and disparate social reality, manifest in the range and the types of signifying systems from written texts of popular press and journalism to film, television, videos, and photographs, and to the varied fields of discourse used, say, within the institutions and regimes of business, police work, and medicine—what Stuart Hall has called the "heterogeneity of discourses" (1980), the multivarious languages and practices through which we come to understand what is real for us and for others with whom we live and act.

Difference is also manifest in the forms and numbers of written and spoken texts that provide us with an ongoing sense of our everyday worlds and of the realities that make those worlds up. Today's "culture" is diverse, many layered, and multicoded. And because of that, it is accessible for study in many forms and sites: in practitioners' settings, in family photos, in romance novels, in forms of talk, and in sports arenas just as it is enshrined in our laws, doctrines, our sciences and our literary texts. In the words of Raymond Williams (1981, p. 12-13), an early proponent of this position:

'cultural practice' and 'cultural production'...are not simply derived from an otherwise constituted social order but are themselves major elements in its constitution...it sees culture as the *signifying system* through which necessarily (though among other means) a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored.

As a concept, "cultural practices" does not discriminate between official and unofficial domains or between "high" and "low" forms of cultural production.

Accordingly, today's cultural studies are occupied in whatever fields and sites of cultural production there are, giving rise to studies of the observable properties of knowledges and symbols in texts, modes of communication, and forms of speech linked to specific institutional frameworks. Cultural practices are both disparate and diverse, available for study in different sites and settings: TV studios, scientific laboratories, medical clinics, bedrooms, schoolrooms,

therapists' offices, revealing this new heterogeneous conception of what culture is and how it operates.

Following the lead of studies of popular culture, I expect that emotion studies will gather its data in those many cultural sites and domains that resonate with emotional themes. And like many of the new studies of popular culture (Mukerji and Schudson 1991), I expect that sociologists of emotions will explore these sites as arenas where serious cultural dramas are played (and fought) out: TV talk shows and TV tabloids which serve up parades of forbidden and titillating social types or where scandalous "personalities" have their day in court; the settings of sports events and rock and rap concerts where emotional excitement is scripted and played out (Elias and Dunning 1986). "Emotional cultures" will be examined through support groups, advice columns, self-help books, tabloids, the culture of New Age, and the controversies over the recent censorship of museum displays and CD releases.

It is noteworthy that the first decade of emotion studies found sociologists missing from many of the sites of collective political and social events. I am thinking particularly of events of cultural production and heightened emotional display like parades and political marches, large prayer meetings and religious conventions, scenes of natural and manmade disasters, and sports events like Superbowls (both the game and the massive celebrity displays of halftime). And what of that unique American cultural form the political convention? It has become (What was it before?) a slick and smooth blending of the cognitive and the emotional: a musical theater that assumes the form of a rational discourse while manifesting clear signs of an orgy of emotional display and manipulation. Its cognitive aspect also evident in the highly technical transmission of political rhetoric and narrative told via microphone and giant screen. Its procession of human emblems of womanhood, manhood, family values, national values is simultaneously geared to the manufacture of emotion through a cultural performance marked by a cult of celebrity laced with nostalgia for bygone days. Most recently, political conventions have come to serve as grand occasions for the enactment of "identity politics" for revelling in the victories and defeats of those with whom we feel "the same" and those whom we wish to exclude (de Swaan 1992).

Owing principally to the work of Michel Foucault, recent works in cultural studies have also come to share a concern with power, with a material and spatial view of the operations of power: with actual sites of power ("A whole history remains to be written of *spaces*—which would at the same time be the history of *powers*," Foucault 1980, p. 149.) and with the regulatory power of knowledge. Foucault's works speak to scholars in emotion studies, for it was he who first traced how "technologies of power" materially penetrate the body, the psyche, the emotions, how power operates to reproduce normal bodies, emotions, and psyches. Abram de Swaan's case studies reported in his book, *The Management of Normality* (1990), while more indebted to Norbert Elias

than to Foucault's notion of normalization through control, effectively addresses the politics involved in the treatment and management of emotions in medical contexts. Providing a cultural approach to emotion studies that is dynamic and historical, de Swaan uses a sociogenetic approach that is equally at home in psychoanalysis and in critical theory.

Until recently, sociologists of emotion have been remarkably silent about issues of both power and politics, more inclined to study the emotional interplay of microworlds or to observe the realm of "subjectivities." Yet social and political events and movements today are ripe with emotional themes and are steeped in the political: social movements that American journalists call "identity politics" (Blumenthal 1992; cf. Aronowitz 1992), where group politics are patently aligned with the project of an identity based on ethnicity, race, gender, or "sexual-orientation," and with issues of the body such as abortion politics, and movements linked to current ideologies of selfhood, what Anthony Giddens (1991, p. 214) calls "life politics" and the ethos of self-growth. Life politics, Giddens writes, "concerns political issues which flow from processes of self-actualization in post-traditional contexts, where *globalizing* influences intrude deeply into the reflexive project of the self, and conversely where processes of self-realization influence global strategies." Demonstrations today involving abortion rights and pro-life politics and political movements of groups (of class, nation, ethnicity, or race) seeking to affirm and to achieve political and personal recognition are some of the sociocultural sites where political passions are mobilized, passions whose intensity require multifaceted sociological inquiries to account for them, inquiries that examine how human identifications are structured and restructured socially and politically, moving between intense primary bonds of family and the "grand identifications" of nation and race (de Swaan 1992; cf. Anderson 1983/1991; Calhoun 1991).

Giddens (1991, pp. 217-18) contends that in the present social and political context it is difficult to distinguish "life-political" identity issues and concerns, and concerns focused on the body. For today, neither the body nor one's identity are commonly viewed as natural objects. Today, both are increasingly subject to discursive practices and reflexive action (self-help texts and techniques, therapies, exercise machinery and manuals, sex changes, plastic surgery for breasts and noses, organ transplants). The embodied self has become "a site of interaction," worked on by the techniques and the practitioners of high modernity. "The body itself," Giddens writes, "as mobilised in praxis—becomes more immediately relevant to the identity the individual promotes" (1991, p. 218) or an identity promoted by a society. The body is that last (and best?) domain of privacy and secrecy, that site of emancipatory acts and politics, that Western "code" of pleasure (Foucault 1980, p. 191):

this systematisation of pleasure according to the 'laws' of sex gave rise to the whole apparatus of sexuality. And it is this that makes us believe that we are 'liberating' ourselves when we 'decode' all pleasure in terms of sex shorn at last of disguise....

## EMOTIONS AS SOCIAL OBJECTS

Developments in emotion studies and culture theory have also opened up a wide range of developments in contemporary U.S. culture that reveal the preeminent place of emotions as motive forces in people's lives. The sociocultural context of these developments runs through the mainstream of contemporary life—the landscape of high modernity—and the reflexive features built into virtually all of its aspects: our particular forms of selfhood, particularly the unfolding and seemingly unchartered and ungrounded domain of people's identities, about which so much has been recently written (e.g., Aronowitz 1992; Gergen 1991; Giddens 1991; Lash and Friedman 1992). It is not an overstatement to claim that virtually all of the cultural developments with which emotion studies should be concerned, return to the problem of identity or self-identity. For feelings and emotions have come to serve as one of the principal experiences of self-validation, as the moorings, the moral and spiritual resources, from which to claim an identity and to build a self-conception. While an analysis of the social and political sources that underlie these developments is clearly beyond the scope of this paper, they are manifest in the broadest features of industrial capitalism and its secularizing thrust, and in the rise of what we moderns (and postmoderns) have come to call "personal life," the seemingly private domain of living where a sense of identity "built up," yet also "discovered," involves an attendant and similarly fashioned "emotional life." Within high modernity, the emotions have become preeminent objectifications of subjective experience, precious vehicles for rendering one's life and one's identity meaningful.

In the terms of social science, emotions are "social objects" (McCarthy 1989), having a two-fold capacity: first, as objects, they are referred to and acted toward; second, as *signs in their own right*, they can be used to signify something to self or to others, to "make statements" or to be used as props in the enactment of a role, to be signifying objects. All social objects have this dual capacity to serve as objects of action and as signs that enable action to proceed. Accordingly, emotions not only serve as objects of elaborate social ritual and practice, but emotions also serve as signs of who and what we are, as things we handle in our presentation of self. Freud (1923) and, most recently, Hochschild (1983) have written extensively about this signal function of emotions.

Turner (1976) and, more recently, Benton (1993) have described the contemporary tendency to value particular roles and actions that signify a "true" or genuine or impulsive self where "inner" or "deep" states, needs, desires, emotions, and impulses are articulated or expressed. Emotions, these authors

argue, have acquired a distinctly contemporary meaning where feelings of anger, depression, sexual longing, guilt, and so forth, have become significant objects of attention and action; emotions are "worked at" and "worked on," one has an "emotional life." Emotions are vital aspects with which the self establishes or discovers its authenticity; emotions have become a "language" in which the self discloses and confirms its identity.

In the terms and perspectives of culture theory, emotions and the identities they disclose are preeminently cultural phenomena, for they can only be grasped within the cultural systems and social worlds in which they are experienced and known, the political and religious systems, the various discourses, the collective practices, and the forms of selfhood that prevail. For it is in and through these cultural systems that emotions have come into being *as something*, that is, as objects of our experiences that *mean* something, and as a differentiated system of signs with which the self engages. To know how and what we feel, to be conscious of emotional experiences is, to cite Walker Percy (1958), to be "conscious of something being something." And this always returns us to the system of culture in which any object—an emotion, a person, an event—is known *as something*.

## CONCLUSION

When the sociology of emotions was begun about a decade ago, social constructionism epitomized the approach of those who were calling for an autonomous sociological perspective on self and emotion. It was quickly discovered that this project, which bore a striking and substantive resemblance to similar projects in psychology and anthropology, needed to refine the concept of culture, particularly Clifford Geertz's (1973, p. 89) influential formulation of culture as the symbols and meanings people use for communicating and perpetuating their knowledge about life, in all its aspects. Sociology's "autonomous" or distinctly social view of emotions, it turned out, moved many of us into close proximity with anthropology and theories of language. The point was to learn more about the *operations* of culture, the cultural and discursive practices that articulate emotions and the self. In the process, we have learned much more about our initial claim that emotions, like the self, are social constructs. Today, it is the newer studies in culture theory that push us further along the tracks we once designated as "social constructionism." Culture theory invites the sociologist to explicate the particular cultural and ideological contexts in which emotions are identified and constituted, the institutional and discursive moorings within which emotions and the self are experienced *as* what they *really* are, that is, how they are collectively thought and known to be and how they are supposed to be felt. Accordingly, emotions are neither strictly personal features of individuals

nor universal natural objects. Emotions are "preeminently cultural" (Lutz 1988, p.5) and, therefore, subject to social and political forces that render them "natural" (Crapanzano 1992, p. 12). The point then is not how *much* culture matters. For culture does not constitute emotions by degree. The point is *how* culture matters. For culture is the assemblage of those discourses within which emotions come to be.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Society for Research on Emotions at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh on August 20, 1992. The author thanks Carolyn S. Ellis for her helpful critical comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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