

Workshop: Perspectives on Affectivity

## **Social Constructionism and Emotions: Is there really any constructionist?**

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# Background

Among emotion theories, we find social constructionist theories.

- “Emotions are social constructions”

What does this claim mean?

- How should we understand what these theories are actually claiming?
- Is what these theories are claiming the same as other forms of “social constructionism”?
- Are these claims scientifically tenable?

# Main claims

1. Most so-called “social constructionist” theories of emotion claim defend a weaker causal claim, not their alleged constitution claim.
2. Constitution claims are established analytically (by definition) instead of empirically supported.

**Upshot:** Social constructionism either does not differ in important respects from rival theories of emotion, or it is scientifically unsound.

## Averill's constructionism

Emotions are *transitory social roles* or *socially constructed syndromes*.

- *Syndrome*: A set of responses that covary in a systematic fashion.
- *Transitory social role*: A socially prescribed set of responses to be followed by a person in a given situation.

These syndromes (or sets of responses) include:

- Behavioral outcomes
- Physiological states
- Psychological states

## Averill's constructionism

In which sense are emotions socially constructed?

- Emotions are directed (i.e., intentional)
- Intentional objects get their meaning against a social background
- Emotion roles and syndromes get their meaning against a social background

Averill remains agnostic as to the (psychological) mechanisms underlying emotional behavior.

- Social roles are functional units, not psychological states.
- Social roles, not the mechanisms, distinguish between emotions.

## Boiger and Mesquita (2012)

Emotions are *socially constructed*, in that “(social) contexts *constitute, shape, and define* emotions” (p. 221; own emphasis)

[...] we take social construction of emotion to be an iterative and ongoing process that unfolds *within interactions and relationships*, which derive their shape and meaning from the prevailing ideas and practices of the larger sociocultural context. At different times, and in different contexts, the *resulting emotions will be different*. (p. 222)

## Boiger and Mesquita (2012)

Three levels of construction:

- Moment-to-moment interactions
- Relationships
- Sociocultural contexts

We develop **sequences** of interactions that influence appraisals, emotion perception, action tendencies, and affective experiences.

## Features of social constructionism

Social constructionism involves one or more of the following claims:

- (1) Social factors differentiate between emotions.
- (2) Social factors define specific emotions.
- (3) Social factors affect how emotions unfold.
- (4) Emotions affect social dynamics and interactions.

Claims (1) and (2) seem **constitutive**. (3) and (4) are **causal claims**.



## Two senses of social construction

Haslanger (2012) distinguishes two forms of social construction.

- **Causal construction:** Something is causally constructed iff social factors play a causal role in bringing it into existence or, to some substantial extent, in its being the way it is.
- **Constitutive construction:** Something is constitutively constructed iff in defining it we must make reference to social factors.

# Causal construction

Social factors *cause* something to be the way it is.

**Example:** Disability is socially constructed (Ásta)

- Society values certain bodies and excludes certain others.
- Because of these values, societies affect their physical space in specific ways.
- Some of these ways lead to certain persons not being able to access certain physical spaces.

# Constitutive construction

Social factors *define* what something is.

## **Example:** Money

- Certain physical or virtual objects may be exchanged for goods.
- These physical or virtual objects are money if certain practices are supported.

Very prominent in *debunking* projects (e.g., race, gender).

May intrinsically involve power dynamics (Haslanger) or social significance (Asta).

## The claims

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## Causal claims

Boiger and Mesquita's constructionism seems *causal constructionism*.

- Emotions (whatever they may be) have effects and are affected by our interactions, relationships and sociocultural contexts.
- Compatible with other theories of emotions (e.g., BET).
- Social factors may have effects on physiological and neurological variables.

**Analogy:** Buildings are still physical objects, even though they are affected by social dynamics.

## Constitutive claims

Averill's constructionism seems a better candidate for *constitutive constructionism*.

- Distinctions between emotions are socially determined.
- Emotions are defined by the social roles and behaviors they involve.
- Physiological variables are secondary and non-essential to emotions.

Emotions are *defined* by their social dynamics.

# Arguments for constitution

Arguments for constitutive claims fall under two families:

1. Argument from conceptualization
2. Argument from intentionality

Both arguments render social constructionism analytical, eroding its soundness as a scientific hypothesis.

# Argument from conceptualization

Emotions are understood through socially constructed concepts.

Mesquita & Parkinson (2025) distinguish two versions:

1. Emotions depend on applying SC concepts to emotion-provoking situations.
2. Emotions depend on SC representations of those emotions.

M&P reject (1): all cognition applies SC concepts to reality, making SC trivial.

They accept (2): emotions require intersubjectively shared representations.

- Individual emotions?
- What is representation (if not the aggregate of individual representations)?
- Collective emotions as primary?



# Argument from intentionality

Emotions are intentional, and intentional objects are opaque and require social context to interpret.

- Averill's definitions of social roles
- Lutz's (1988) definition of *song* (vs. anger)

Mallon (2007) calls this the *semantic individuation* strategy.

- Defended by Geertz: inviting *thick* descriptions.
- Renders SC purely analytical, i.e., true by definition.

# Is there a scientifically sound constitution claim?

Constitution claims fail theoretically for two reasons:

1. Overly demanding

- Makes SC representational
- Makes representation problematic

2. Trivial

- Forces SC true by definition
- Offers no empirical hypotheses

There are currently no scientifically sound social constructionist accounts.

# The Argument

1. Social constructionism about emotions claim that:
  - Emotions are affected and affect social dynamics
  - Emotions are constituted by social dynamics
2. Social constructionist claims can be divided into *causal* or *constitutive*.
3. Many social constructionist claims about emotions are *causal*.
  - This is a weaker claim than what most social constructionists want.
4. Constitutive social constructionist claims are problematic.
  - Challenge core assumptions of SC.
  - Make SC analytical (i.e., trivial or true by definition)

# Consequences

At worst, SC is theoretically unsound.

- There is no way of defending an interesting SC account of emotions.

At best, SC remains to be defined soundly.

Two specific requirements for a sound SC account:

- Make a constitutive, not a causal claim
- Abandon representation/offer a collective account of representation

# Consequences

Existing SC accounts are compatible with other theories.

- Compatible with emotions having specific and consistent underlying mechanisms (e.g. traditional BET).
- Compatible with emotions being functionally individuated
- Compatible with psychological construction accounts

Perhaps SC is an account of emotions that does not bear on the issue of what emotions are.

# Thanks!

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