

Where do our emotions come from? What purpose do they serve in a socially constructed environment? Why are even slight discrepancies in expected emotional responses so disturbing? The sociological perspective on the origin of emotions states that as the brain grew in size and more neural pathways formed, our capacity for emotional intelligence grew in stride. Emotional attachment to seemingly mundane events allowed ephemeral connections to be made and through those connections, religions and belief systems were born. As these belief systems coalesced throughout human society, we saw the birth of the “collective consciousness”.

The “presentation of the self” is a concept touched upon by Erving Goffman. He describes the self as a performance everyone takes part in throughout any given social scenario. In his description of self there is a “front stage performance” and a “back stage performance”. This “front stage” is a collectively produced social situation where everyone has a part that they play. The “back stage” is any social space where people prepare for the front stage performance. According to Goffman, the origins of embarrassment come from the discrediting or failure of someone's performance. This leads to feelings of awkwardness as everyone is invested in these performances.

Throughout my life, I have witnessed time and time again the superfluous emotional reactions people will create in response to events. I contrast these observations with my own reality, and in doing so they are utterly alien. When I look at the emotional reactions I have had in my life and the value I draw from them, I see them as little more than a way to cathartically release pent up feelings. This mainly expresses

times in my life when serious relationships I had been in came to an end, one way or another. For a couple days after these ended I remember being quite sad. For me however, this was a time of reflection. What did I do wrong? How can I avoid this from happening again? Ironically, the answers to these questions eluded me entirely during my days of emotional indulgence.

These emotions I experienced were purely a solitary thing. I spoke with close friends throughout in order to ground my thoughts and generate new ideas but the true sorrow I felt was not something I would ever dream of “performing”. This is where the source of my interest arises, as I see these events used as stages for people to perform.

What does an “expected reaction” look like? What purpose do these emotional performances serve in the social? These are questions I have asked myself for a long time. As I ponder these questions, 2 events come to mind. The first is a conversation I had with a close friend of mine. He talked about how his grandmother was recently diagnosed with a terminal illness, and how this was an event that saddened him. However, he logically believes that there is no real value in having a large emotional stake in this. There is nothing he can do to change the situation he is in, as he has a good relationship with his grandmother. He spoke to me about the reactions he got from others when talking about his situation with them. When they learned of his grandmother, they themselves displayed a deep emotional reaction. This in and of itself I find interesting as they don’t know nor have ever even met his grandmother yet it

he does not share such a reaction.

This is truly where things get interesting to me. Why does my friend's apparent callousness evoke such a response? I have a few theories. The first is a reaction based on a perceived difference in personal values. "I would be upset right now, so why does it appear he is not?" This, I believe, stems from the "expected performance". We as a society have deemed certain circumstances to be sad, and expect those who find themselves in said circumstances to act as such. I believe the true reason behind the reactions people have to this apparent callousness is one of sheer selfishness. When someone is sad, it makes you feel better to comfort them in a time of need. Someone coming to you and expressing vulnerability, giving them words of affirmation, and as a reward getting their thanks is itself very rewarding. When someone is not "sad" about a "sad event" these feelings of disconcertion arise as it is almost like an opportunity to feel good has been taken away from you.

The hand in hand nature through which both emotions and society evolved has created very peculiar requirements upon how those emotions "should" be manifested. Goffman's description of the Presentation of Self and its role in the formation of collective consciousness outline the stage on which we all conduct our performance. Within the nebulous nature of our societies collective consciousness lies certain unspoken rules that those who exist to perform all intrinsically understand. Any slight deviation from these rules can instantly out an individual as a "deviant".

As I seek to understand these notions through the lens of sociology, I juxtapose what I personally deem important with how I perceive society to deem importance.

for me, this just means the pursuit of my individual happiness. I personally believe that all humans capable of rational thought do the same, but have drastically different ways in which they plug that framework into society. I believe that the society in which I exist is for the most part created through a “will of the masses”. I think individuality has for the most part been lost, though only in the sense of what I view to be the current state of society. I tend to see a movement towards appeasement of the largest and loudest group, and non conforming individuals are swallowed by the storm.

I gain my happiness through ways disconnected from larger society, or at least I try. I find that in almost every group I am in, I am a vastly different person than the rest. Individuality is a core part of who I am as through my hedonism I will always do what I want; what makes me happy, regardless of perceived backlash. I believe Goffman’s stage is a foolish construction built to take agency from the individual and create justification for the discrimination of outcasts as they “failed their part to play”. The vast majority of emotional displays are desperate attempts at a moment in the spotlight, and those attempts are enabled by the desire of the onlookers to feel good about comforting another person.