

The puzzle of human emotions: some historical considerations from the 17th to the 19th centuries

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DOI: 10.1111/j.1469-8749.2008.03006.x

Emotions are both central to life experience itself and highly pertinent to various disciplines, including neuroscience, psychology, social studies, philosophy, and the arts. The definition of emotion lies at the interface of nature and culture reflecting an understanding of the components that shape emotional states and experiences across time and cultures. This review describes how the concept of emotion developed in Western thought, from the Renaissance notion of the passions to the 19th century idea of 'emotion'.

In 1884, William James (1842–1910) famously asked, 'What is an Emotion?'¹ Such a question still resonates today. If asked what an emotion is, most of us would have an idea based on our own experiences of fear, anger, or happiness, and we may recognize these emotions in others (whether in their expression, or reactions). Emotions are integral to the perception and construction of the self, as well as being part of the bargaining material of social interactions, shaping how we relate to others, and affecting the way we move in and relate to the external world. Yet, it is contentious whether emotions are uniquely determined physiologically and psychologically or whether sociocultural components also affect the emergence and manifestation of emotional states. Without entering the debate on the definition and functions of emotions, the focus of this review is on the significance of the sociocultural components in the experience of emotions across time, and within different theories of the body and the mind in the Western tradition. The purpose is to suggest the relevance of the cultural, social, and political contexts in the manifestation and understanding of psychological states, including emotions.

The sociologist Sara Ahmed suggests that emotions are key in defining body boundaries because they help to shape how we relate to each other, creating a cycle of affective actions and reactions. Ahmed's relational model removes the distinction between the psychological and social, individual, and collective nature for emotions arguing that, 'emotions are not "in" either the individual or the social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects'.² From historical and cultural perspectives, the boundaries described by Ahmed are interwoven with the meanings and associations attributed to the feeling of fear, sadness, or anger, and to the appropriate ways of

showing one's feelings. By considering the cultural and historical dimension of emotions, this article presupposes an interaction between biology and culture and describes some of the aspects of the historical coming into being of the concept of emotion. The limited scope of this review constrains it to only a few authors belonging to the Anglo-Saxon tradition. Though restricted, this tradition is nonetheless indicative of relevant historical changes and trends and the importance of not regarding emotions to be uniquely natural. The review first considers the etymology of the term 'emotion' and relates it to the 17th century understanding of the passions. It further looks at the secularization of the passions in the 18th century theory of the nerves, and 19th century perspectives on the theory of emotions as described by authors such as Charles Bell, Alexander Bain, Herbert Spencer, and Charles Darwin. The contribution of these authors was influential, especially within an Anglo-Saxon context, and it is representative of the broader contextual framework of the emergence of the modern concept of emotion and its cultural significance.

From passions to emotions

The categorization of 'emotion' as a set of morally disengaged, bodily, and involuntary feelings is a recent creation.³ According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the etymology of the term emotion derives from the mid-16th century French *émotion* from *émouvoir*, 'to excite', based on the Latin *emovere*, 'to move'.⁴ The first three obsolete meanings signify respectively: to move by migrating from one place to another; to move in the physical sense of stirring, agitating, or perturbing an object; and political and social agitation. Only in the late 17th century did the term begin to acquire the meaning of 'any agitation or disturbance of mind, feeling, passion; any vehement or excited mental states'.⁴ The etymological shift from a physical act of movement and state of perturbation, which can acquire social connotations, to a psychological state is still echoed in the modern meaning suggesting a perturbation of the mind as a movement from one state to another. The changing meaning of the term also alludes to an increasing interiorization, a shift from the physical to the mental, and reflects the spheres in which emotions act: the physical, the mental, and the social. The interaction of these three spheres is already present in the notion of the passions, the most common term for emotions until well into the 19th century.

Understood within the Galenic theory of the four temperaments (sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric, and melancholic), the passions were commonly considered faculties of the sensitive soul, together with appetites, perception, and movement. Their quality, however, depended on an interaction between the inner temperamental texture of each person and the external environment, as if they acted as intermediary between the two. Hence, a posture could betray an emotional state as much as influence it. Moreover, as Thomas Wright suggests in his 1604 treatise on the management of the passions: 'divers sorts of persons be subject to divers sorts of passions, and the same passion affecteth divers persons in divers manners'.⁵ These differences can be traced both individually and socially, drawing temperamental distinctions between ethnic groups, such as the stereotypical recognition of a more sanguine character that affects

southern Europeans, such as Italians and Spaniards compared with northern Europeans.

In this pre-Cartesian view, the physiological and psychological components were considered interdependent to what may be defined as ecological and moral components. Inherent, in this period, to the concept and understanding of human passions is also their constitution within a Christian framework, and the spiritual and moral connotations ascribed to them. Though distinctions existed between Catholic and Protestant Christian beliefs, both the physiological and psychological description of the passions revolved around notions of moral propriety and control that were articulated in terms of the soul and the relationship between the individual and God. The ethical meaning ascribed to the passions remained important to the cultural understanding and centrality of emotions in the definition of the self. However, the diminishing dominance of the religious discourse in favour of science also affected what may be seen as a transition from the early modern concept of the passions to the modern notion of emotion.⁶ In the 17th century, the body was increasingly conceived in mechanic and chemical terms, and the realm of the mind, which was still the study of moral philosophy, was equally subjected to analytical observation. In other words, 'Emotions connected together with sensations and thoughts, in chains of cause and effect modelled on Newtonian physics and subjected to analysis on the model of the new natural science of chemistry, replaced the passions and affections of a classical Christian soul'.⁷ Hence, during the 18th century, in European thought and medicine, the understanding of emotions was intertwined with the growing study of the brain and the nervous system that played a key role in the definition of 18th century sensibility. The physiology of humours moving through the body was gradually replaced by one of vibrations and energetic impulses that were transmitted by the nerves that the brain translated into sensations and ideas.

The development of the modern psychological concept of emotion that gradually emerged in European thought from the 17th century onwards coincided, with among others, the development of the modern notion of the self and matched what the historian Norbert Elias defines as 'the civilizing process'.⁸ From the 16th century onwards, this process was, broadly speaking, characterized by the framing of the body and of its sensorial, emotive, and physical expressions within rules of containment and acts of self-control expressed in manners, speech, and in the monitoring and restraint of one's emotional manifestations within socially acceptable boundaries. This supported introspection, as the governing of the internal landscape of the self through self-scrutiny, containment, and the privatization of the sphere of emotions. Sex differences were also fostered by a duality between rational as masculine and emotional, hence irrational, as feminine attitudes. The theory of the nerves thus moved beyond the confines of neuroanatomy to account for the social unrest and cultural sensibility of an epoch. Embedded in the physiology of the nervous system were existing sex and social biases: 'If the discourses of the nerve continued to purport – as our brain theorists do today – that we *are* our neurophysiology, that we *are* synapses of our brain – sensibility develops the same possibility while affirming class distinction and gender differences'.⁹ Implicit in an understanding of emotion is the notion that their management can affect society, impinging

on class, sex, and racial distinctions. Throughout the centuries, women, children, the lower classes, and non-white people were considered less able to control emotions and, therefore, to be more subject to excitement and fluctuations.

This is relevant because it signals the encroaching of cultural parameters in the description, and possibly perception, of psychological states, such as emotions. To ask whether and how the passions differ from emotions implies a consideration of different categories that do not regard the body only, but also the social and political connotations ascribed to the individual at any given time. What and how people feel is part of the production of social and cultural boundaries on which notions of norm, and acceptability are built. The value ascribed to different emotions in different historical periods and societies also varies, with both historical and political implications. Hence, the question whether the shift from passions to emotions also meant a change in the experience of emotional states for the subject, whether, in other words, passions and emotions are distinct, is linked to an understanding of historical continuity and variation. In his analysis of emotions in the period that preceded the French Revolution (between 1650 and 1789), with a consideration both of anthropological and neuroscientific studies, William Reddy argues for a theory of emotion that accounts for both cultural variations and a universal core entity that allows for a consideration of emotion: 'With reference to this concept of emotions, historical change again becomes meaningful; history becomes a record of human efforts to conceptualize our emotional makeup, and to realize social and political orders attuned to its nature'.^{10a} The period on which Reddy focuses was affected by the transition from passions to emotions and the development of a new sensibility that was the result of new ideas, and modes of conceiving the inner landscape of the individual and its ways of relating with the external world.¹⁰ The history of emotion and of the theory that described them is, thus, entangled with the complexities of historical change and reflects the attempt to account for changes in individual sensibility as social, cultural, and political constructs. The process whereby the study of the mind and emotion was increasingly framed within the discourse of science is indicative of the convergence of an understanding of bodily neurophysiology within a mechanistic model and of the social management of the self as class and sex determined. This rooted a reformulation of a theory of emotion within modern psychology in the 19th century as part of an overall redefinition of the mind and of the relation between mind and body. Furthermore, the contemporary theories of evolution also positioned anew, as central to the debate on emotions, the relation between body and mind, in particular the role of the body in the mental production of emotions and the parallels between humans and other species in the manifestation of emotional states.

^aReddy uses the concept of 'emotive' to be understood as forms of speech and action that bring into being what they refer to. See also Johnson-Laird PN, Oatley K. Cognitive and social construction of emotion. In: Lewis M, Havilland JM, editors. *Handbook of emotions*. New York: Guilford Press, 2000: 458–73; Stearns CZ, Stearns PN, editors. *Emotion and social change: towards a new psychobistory*. New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1988; Stearns CZ, Stearns PN. Emotionology: clarifying the history of emotions and emotional standards. *Am Hist Rev* 1985; 90: 813–36.

The concept of emotion

In considering the influential works of Alexander Bain (1818–1903), Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), and Charles Darwin (1809–82), Dixon notes that by their methodology and language they all pointed to the physiology and neurology of emotions: 'The implication of their texts was that emotions were the mental "side" of what was really and objectively an activity of the central nervous system'.¹¹ Bain in particular stressed the importance of the body in the production of emotions and recognized the brain and the nervous system as central in this process. The outward signs of the body, which were considered identical to internal mental states, allowed an objective knowledge of the inner happenings. Emotions had to be considered to be involuntary and non-cognitive feelings. They were understood as the mental manifestation of physical nervous activity.^b Bain is careful in suggesting the complexity of the interaction of organic, mental, and emotional experiences, for which he argues a developmental process and describes the learning process as a struggling experience. Herbert Spencer inscribed emotions within an evolutionary model. This implied that mental states and behaviours were not only the product of experience but also of heredity, as precursory of evolutionary psychology. These authors aimed to base a theory of emotion 'on positive facts about the mind, its relation to the body, its natural (evolutionary) history, its development in the individual and its objective manifestations in physiology and behaviour'.¹² The priority conferred to the brain rather than the soul shifts the parameters of the understanding of emotive states, rendering them the subject of psychology rather than moral philosophy.

These theories, however, leave unresolved the tension between body and mind that is traceable to the very formation of the concept of emotion and the limitations of scientific knowledge in defining the mind–body relationship. Late 19th century psychological theory recognized the limits of providing a description of consciousness that could be objectively validated and tried to overcome them by relying on the observation of outwards signs, such as expression and behaviour, as objective and, therefore, reliable data. Hence, viewing emotion as a purely physical state matches the increasing prerequisite to rely on observational methodology. This is exemplified for instance by the relation between emotion and expression. In 1806, in the *Essays on the Anatomy of Expression in Painting*, Charles Bell (1774–1842), known for his eponymous palsy, stated,

Expression is to passion what language is to thought and that in humans there seems to be a systematic provision for that mode of communication and that natural language, which is to be read in the changes of countenance; that there is no emotion in the mind of man which has not its appropriate signs; and that there are even muscles in the human face, to which no other use can be assigned, than to serve as the organs of this language...¹³

^bWilliam James and Carl Lange (1834–1900) challenged this model, holding that emotions are the feeling of responses produced in the body. For an extensive discussion of these different positions see Rylands R. *Victorian Psychology and British Culture, 1850–1880*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Bell's linguistic analogy is telling of a long tradition of reading of signs that presupposes a direct correlation between outer bodily manifestations and inner states. Bell stresses the communicative function of emotions as representation of inner states and carefully dissects the actions of muscles that intervene in facial expression to map anatomically the configuration and coming into being of emotive states. A gifted draughtsman, Bell illustrated his anatomical findings with his drawings. For centuries, artists had engaged with the representation of the passions, producing a telling synthesis between the physiological, philosophical, and moral theorizations and the visual codification of the representation of passions. Hence, Charles Le Brun's (1619–90) rendering of emotional states drew on Descartes's identification of the seat of the soul with the pineal gland and 'describes the motions of the features as these are pulled hither and thither by forces emanating from this central controller. In so doing, he provided a set of prescriptions with which all artists in the academic tradition had to reckon'.¹⁴

Bell's study of facial expressions is revealing of the cultural understanding of emotions that also informed later scientists such as Guillaume-Benjamin Duchenne (1806–75), who studied the neural mechanism of facial expression through electro-stimulation, and Charles Darwin's comparison of expression in humans and animals.¹⁵ Darwin postulates a correlation between the internal occurrence of an emotion and its physical manifestations, suggesting that emotions are innate and their expression universally readable. He establishes a correspondence of certain expressions with certain emotions, noting parallels in their occurrence and forms. This led to the underpinning of an evolutionary and universal basis for the understanding of facial expression in relation to internal emotional states.¹⁵ Darwin's contribution to the 19th century debate on emotion foreshadows and feeds into assumptions about sex, age, race, and ethnicity that mirror the social organization and management of late Victorian society. In 1860, Herbert Spencer openly criticized Alexander Bain for focusing the evidence of his influential treatise on emotion on the behaviour of 'civilized' adults. For Spencer, a 'natural history' of psychological phenomena has to take into account manifestations in animals and children, and 'differences between the lower and the higher human races' and one may 'regard as earlier and simpler those feelings which are common to both, and as later and more compound those which are characteristic of the most civilized'.¹⁶ The linking of emotions with racial and evolutionary theories is thus loaded with meanings that go beyond mere scientific accuracy. Culturally located within the sphere of the 'savage', the 'ancestral', and ultimately the 'irrational', emotion pointed to an unsettling since hardly accountable aspect of the self, but also of society at large.

In a time when sex and class boundaries are more fluid, as are the social and cultural parameters for self-definition, emotions are again in the foreground of contemporary 'sensitivity', as central to the construction of individual, as well as social, dynamics and policies. Emotive states, manifestations, experiences, habits, and practices are far from neutral both for the enactor and for the recipient. Recognition, continuity, and cultural differences are equally at stake to create our individual and social emotional landscape. The understanding of emotions is thus tied with broader cultural implications that are intimately related to definitions of the self and society at large. Hence, to ask what is an emotion is also to interrogate the social and cultural boundaries that define societies at any given time, and the formulation of individual experience within given standards maintaining an interface between biology and culture.

Accepted for publication 28th November 2007.

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