Answering the Call for a Sociological Perspective on the Multi-Level Social Construction of Emotion: A Comment on Boiger and Mesquita

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Abstract

Boiger and Mesquita (2011) present a social constructionist perspective on emotion that argues for its multi-level contextualization through social interactions, relationships, and culture. The present comments offer a response to the authors' call for input from other disciplines in the social sciences. We provide a sociological perspective on emotion construction at each of the contextual levels discussed by Boiger and Mesquita, and discuss a model that can address interdependences between these levels. Our remarks are intended to identify additional literature that can be brought to bear on the idea of multi-level emotion construction and put forward some initial considerations for future research on the subject.

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Boiger and Mesquita (2012; B&M hereafter) make a compelling argument that emotion is socially constructed through unfolding interactions, ongoing relationships, and broader socio-cultural context. Their argument offers a useful bridge to a trans-disciplinary view of emotion construction, illustrating the concrete intersections between psychologists' and sociologists' interests. While the psychology of emotion excels at explaining elements of emotional experience at the individual level, sociological work takes a fundamental interest in identifying how social structures constrain and enable emotional experience and, in turn, how emotion can shape behavior, social context, and even culture (Smith-Lovin & Winkielman, 2010).

Following B&M's call for input from other social sciences, we first provide examples from sociological research on emotion that can elaborate each of the three social contexts the authors describe. Next, we focus on a sociological theory, affect control theory (Heise 1979; 2007), which adds to the framework B&M advocate by explicitly detailing the interdependencies between all three contextual levels. We close with some implications and remaining questions for the study of emotion construction.

Emotion Unfolding in Interaction

Micro-level sociological work provides bountiful evidence in support of the interactional embeddedness of emotion (for a review of early work, see Smith-Lovin, 1995). Kemper (1978) began this tradition by discussing how patterns of interaction and their associated attributions lead systematically to emotional experiences. A key example comes from research on justice and social exchange, which demonstrates how interaction structures based on status and power can generate systematic emotional outputs. Inequalities in task-related behavior develop out of group members' expectations about the value of their own and others' contributions to group tasks (Hegtvedt, 2005). When rewards for a task are lower than investments, interactants perceive injustice and experience negative affect. However, people acclimate to patterns of reward and experience negative affect when they receive less than expected (Molm, 1997), anticipating congruence between their status value within a group and the level of rewards they

receive (Hegtvedt and Markovsky, 1995). Thus, emotional responding in exchange-based interactions is tied both to the outcomes of those interactions and how those outcomes compare to expectations derived from the social context.

As emotional experiences are affected by beliefs about our interaction partners, they are also shaped by expectations about our own emotions and behaviors. Motives for self-verification generate emotional response both when identities are verified and when verification fails (Robinson and Smith-Lovin, 2006). When the affective expectations attached to an identity are not verified, social interaction is disrupted and negative emotion often occurs (Stets and Cast, 2007). Status beliefs are significant in established relationships, where knowledge of an individual spans far beyond role relations; for instance, spouses with lower status tend to defer to judgments made about them by higher status spouses, as measured by occupational prestige and years of education (Cast, Stets, and Burke, 1999).

Emotional Patterns in Relationships

Much of the sociological work on relationships deals with institutionalized social roles and their implications for emotional experience. "Structural emotions" are associated with particular social positions, resulting from the interactions in which a person of that position is routinely embedded (Kemper, 1978). As such, the process of maintaining a particular identity in interaction has implications for emotional outcomes (Robinson and Smith-Lovin, 1999;2006). As B&M point out, however, the process is not unidirectional. When interactions within a relationship do not maintain identities, the relationship is put under strain and is more likely to either end or be transformed through the relabeling of one or more interaction partners.

The exchange literature discussed above provides an example of how emotion can produce new group identifications. Goal-directed behavior can lead to sequential exchange that generates ongoing experiences of positive affect. Behavioral commitment and a sense of group identity can then develop within exchange relationships (Lawler, Thye, and Yoon, 2009), often overriding rational self-interest.

Emotion Construction in Culture

Emotional experience in interactions and relationships are importantly structured by societal vocabularies for and ideologies about emotion. Indeed, if we believe that identities and their maintenance powerfully shape emotional experience, then the "cultural theory of people" that dictates which identities are possible for which individuals will be central to one's emotional life course (MacKinnon and Heise, 2010). Further, shifting from enacting one identity to another can be a powerful mechanism for controlling one's feelings.

More concretely, emotion norms dictate how a person should feel and respond to particular types of social interactions and how dynamics of emotional exchange play out over time in relationships. Individuals engage in emotional labor, managing affect to comply with both cultural and institutional norms (Hochschild and Machung, 1989). For example, emotion norms shape our perception of who deserves to receive sympathy and how recipients of sympathy should respond both emotionally and behaviorally (Clark, 1987).

Some sociological work explores how societal norms influence emotional socialization. For example, cultures carry norms for the age and gender differentiation of emotional understanding and experience, deeming some emotions inappropriate for particular individuals to experience and structuring their exposure to these experiences accordingly (Gordon, 1989; Simon, Eder, and Evans, 1992). Thus, even the socialization of emotion norms carries a structure; a person's position in the social structure determines the emotions they will experience and the frequency and intensity with which they will experience them.

Cross-Level Interactions

The examples presented by B&M show how powerfully culture, relationships and interaction can interact to construct emotional experience. We argue that it is useful to think theoretically about how exactly the levels are connected. Affect control theory incorporates events, role relationships, and cultures to generate predictions about emotion and behavior (Heise 1979; 2007; Smith-Lovin and Heise, 1988; MacKinnon, 1994), many of which have been confirmed experimentally (see review in Smith-Lovin and Robinson, 2006). Beyond detailing

the significance of each level independently, the theory provides a means of integrating and exploring interactive relationships between the levels described by the authors.

Affect control theory is a model of how internalized affective meanings shape interactional behavior. Emotions result from interaction, with their character shaped by social understandings of interaction partners and their behavior. When emotions maintain the meaning of institutionalized role identities, they produce characteristic structural emotions associated with a social position and its typical interaction patterns. On the other hand, when interactions do not maintain identities in a relationship, they can lead to changes in that relationship (e.g., relabeling the interactants). Most importantly for tying together B&M's three levels of context, the theory is explicit about how cultural vocabularies for social actors, behavior, and emotions are brought into moment-to-moment interactions and ongoing relationships to shape individual experience.

Future Potential and Possible Problems

We thoroughly embrace B&M's call for detailed processual study of interactions as they develop over time. Both statistical techniques and measurement resources are more up to this task than ever before. We caution, however, that these techniques can produce so much data that interpretation requires a strong theoretical framework. Within the sociological tradition, cultural sociologists and symbolic interactionists have made major contributions in a more inductive, qualitative frame. Developmental and cognitive psychologists have contributed both natural and experimental observations. It may be time to do some serious theoretical thinking about how the contextual levels that B&M describe can be linked, and then to engage the international, interdisciplinary teams necessary to explore the new ideas generated.

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