The social dimension of emotion

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Joint winner of the Presidents' Award, **TONY MANSTEAD,** *describes his research.*

EMOTION colours all our lives, but until relatively recently it had not been a focus for psychological theory and research. Things began to change in the 1980s, with the establishment of specialist journals, the formation of a society (the International Society for Research on Emotion) and a gradual move away from the dominant cognitivism of the 1960s and 1970s. Social and personality psychologists have been at the forefront of emotion theory and research: Stanley Schachter, Richard Lazarus, Paul Ekman and Klaus Scherer are some of the names that spring to mind. So why is much of modern emotion research so individualistic in its approach?

Why emotion is social

Take appraisal theory, the dominant theoretical position in the study of emotion. In essence, appraisal theorists argue that emotion arises from the meaning that an individual attaches to an event. Something happens (you hear a strange noise coming from your kitchen in the middle of the night). The sense you make of this event determines whether and how you will react emotionally. Interpreting the noise as caused by a human intruder will give rise to a very different set of emotions than will interpreting the noise as caused by your cat or by the wind blowing something from the window sill. Another important factor, in the view of appraisal theorists, is your sense that you will be able to cope with any threat to your well-being. A young, physically able person will experience less threat under these circumstances than will an elderly or disabled person.

One can take issue with some aspects of the theoretical argument (see Zajonc, 1980) or the empirical evidence (see Parkinson & Manstead, 1992, 1993) offered by appraisal theorists, but that is not my purpose here. Rather, my complaint is that it fails to pay sufficient attention to the social context. Returning to the noise coming from your kitchen in the middle of the night: if you have company you will probably ask your companion whether he or she also heard the noise and what he or she made of it. And both your appraisal of the event and your reaction to it are likely to be shaped by the companion's responses. A parallel can be found in the literature on the attitude–behaviour relationship, where for several decades the focus of attention was on whether attitudes could predict how someone would behave. The failure to find strong relationships between attitude and behaviour led to a lot of soul-searching on the part of attitude researchers: if attitudes are not predictive of behaviour, why study them? Part of the solution to this conundrum was the realisation that there are also normative influences on people's behaviour, and that these could go some way to accounting for the puzzling failure of attitudes to predict behaviour (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). With hindsight it seems surprising that a subdiscipline in which some of the 'classic' experiments – Asch, Milgram, Sherif – were demonstrations of the ways in which situational forces influence individual perceptions, judgements and actions, could have ignored the power of social norms when it came to the attitude–behaviour relationship.

Henri Tajfel (1972) wrote a well-known paper with the title 'Experiments in a vacuum', referring to the tendency on the

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part of psychologists in general and social psychologists in particular to study the individual as if he or she were in a social vacuum. The same argument can be levelled at emotion theorists and researchers. There are some honourable exceptions (see de Rivera, 1977; Parkinson, 1996), but the general tendency has been to study emotional phenomena at the level of the socially isolated individual. This seems odd, given the strongly social quality of emotion. This social quality is evident from three simple observations.

First, emotions are 'intentional', in the sense that they are always 'about' something: they have an object, and that object is very frequently social. It is a person (a rival for your loved one's affection), a social group (an organisation that does inspiring work in developing countries), a social event (Wales winning the Grand Slam in the Six Nations rugby tournament), or a social or cultural artefact (a piece of music). Of course, we sometimes experience emotions in response to non-social stimuli (fear of heights or of spiders, for example), but social objects are much more likely than non-social objects to be the source of our everyday emotions (Scherer *et al*., 1986).

Second, many emotions are either inherently or functionally social, in that either they would not be experienced in the absence of others, or they seem to have no other function than to bind us to others. Emotions such as compassion, sympathy, maternal love, affection, and admiration are ones that depend on other people being physically or psychologically present. Fear of rejection, loneliness, embarrassment, guilt, shame, jealousy and sexual attraction are emotions that seem to have as their primary function the seeking out or cementing of social relationships.

Third, when we experience emotions we have a strong tendency to share them with others. In an extensive programme of research Bernard Rimé and his colleagues have studied what they call the 'social sharing' of emotion. Using a mixture of questionnaire, diary and experimental methods, they have shown that the overwhelming majority of emotional experiences are shared with others, are shared with several others, and are shared soon after the triggering event (Rimé *et al*., 1991). Moreover, this sharing of emotion with others elicits emotional reactions in the listeners, which is itself an interesting phenomenon, depending as it does on the listener's tendency to empathise with the sharer. And the emotions experienced by the listeners tend to be shared with third parties, a phenomenon that Christophe and Rimé (1997) call 'secondary social sharing'. There is an interesting paradox here. We tend to share our emotional experiences, some of which may be painful or shaming, with intimates because we trust them not to share our secrets with others. And yet these intimates are the very ones who are likely to empathise with us and therefore to experience emotions themselves as a result of listening to what we divulge. This makes it likely that they will engage in secondary social sharing.

Social appraisal

Given these social attributes of emotion, the relative neglect of the social dimension of emotion seems all the more surprising. In my own research on emotion I have tried to redress the balance, starting with my doctoral dissertation research on embarrassment, which later served as a platform for collaborative research with Gün Semin (Manstead & Semin, 1981; Semin & Manstead, 1982). In subsequent collaborative work with Hugh Wagner (Manstead *et al*., 1984; Wagner *et al*., 1986) I focused on the way in which emotion is communicated between people through nonverbal channels and cues. With one of my PhD students, Roselyne Edwards, I examined the ways in which children's ability to recognise emotions from facial expressions (which would nowadays be regarded as an aspect of 'emotional intelligence') influenced their social acceptance or rejection by their peers at school (Manstead & Edwards, 1992). In later work conducted with Agneta Fischer I examined the ways in which cultural values influence the experience and expression of emotion (Fischer *et al*., 1999) and the ways in which facial displays during emotion are shaped as much by the social context in which they occur as by the emotion being experienced (Manstead *et al*., 1999).

My most recent research on emotion has examined different facets of the social dimension of emotion. The first concerns what I call 'social appraisal' (Manstead & Fischer, 2001). Here the argument is that as well as appraising the significance of an event for our personal well-being ('What does this mean for me and mine?'), we also appraise the reactions of others, including the emotional responses of others to the same event, or the (expected) implications of one's own emotional response for others.

Our concern with others' emotional responses to an event has deep roots. What developmental psychologists call 'social referencing' is a phenomenon in which infants who are faced with an uncertain or ambiguous situation look to their caregiver for clues as to how to proceed. The original work on social referencing (Klinnert *et al*., 1983) made use of the 'visual cliff', a piece of apparatus with a 'shallow' side and a 'deep' side, the latter covered with plexiglass. The net effect is to create the appearance of a drop. Children were placed at the shallow end, and their mothers stood at the deep end. A 12-month-old child is normally hesitant about crossing the 'cliff'. Those whose mothers smiled were much more likely to do so than were those whose mothers looked anxious or cross. So from a very early age we make use of others' emotional reactions in interpreting the emotional meaning of situations and events. A comedy viewed in the company of a friend who seems not to find it funny is much less amusing than it would be if the friend found it hilarious. In short, our emotions are subject to social influence, just as our thoughts and behaviours are.

A second aspect of social appraisal is how we think others would react to our emotional behaviours, if we were to behave emotionally. Will they find our reaction excessive or inappropriate? And how might such a negative evaluation of our emotional behaviour affect our relationships with them? These kinds of consideration are especially relevant to the emotion of anger, because expressing anger to the person who has evoked the anger can be seen as confrontational and as a potential threat to the relationship with this person.

Men and women tend to have different concerns when they have been angered by another. Men are typically keen to assert themselves and to exert control over the

Smiles can get a baby across the 'visual cliff'

situation. Women typically think about the way that their anger will be seen by the other and by the possible damage that would be done to the relationship with the other. It is not surprising, then, that when women are angered and have the chance to express their anger to someone other than the person who angered them, they are more likely to express their anger than when they have the chance to express their anger to the person who angered them. For men, exactly the reverse applies: they are more likely to express their anger to the person who angered them than they are to a third party (Timmers *et al*., 1998).

In recent research we (Evers *et al*., in press) have taken this line of work one step further. Men and women who were angered by negative feedback they had received on an essay from a fellow participant in an experiment were given the opportunity (under the guise of a separate experiment concerning taste perception) to choose how much of an uncomfortably spicy sauce to allocate to this same fellow participant, knowing that the latter would have to eat everything that was allocated. This is the so-called 'hot sauce paradigm', originally used by Lieberman *et al*. (1999).

One further variation in our study was that participants either expected or did not expect to meet the fellow participant at the end of the session. Men tended to allocate more hot sauce to the fellow participant than women did, but this trend was especially apparent under one specific set of circumstances: when participants had received negative feedback from the other and expected to meet the other later. Here women were especially inclined to allocate less hot sauce than their male counterparts did. Moreover, we were able to show that the tendency for males to allocate more hot sauce than females did was partly mediated by differences in how much participants thought that negative things would result from giving the hot sauce to the other participant. Here, then, is the influence of social appraisal on the expression of anger. Women were less likely to express their anger precisely because they were more likely than men to think that negative social consequences would follow from expressing their anger.

DISCUSS AND DEBATE

To what extent are our emotional experiences shaped by the actual or anticipated reactions of other people?

To what extent is anger a 'male' emotion?

Are gender differences in emotion shaped by gender stereotypes or by biological factors?

Is facial behaviour during emotional episodes a 'window' into someone's subjective experience?

What are the likely short- and long-term effects of expressing anger during a negotiation?

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Smiles all round

The way in which other people affect expressive behaviour during emotion is also the focus of a second line of my research. This builds on earlier work in which we found that the social context where an emotional event occurs has a marked impact on facial behaviour. Previous researchers had shown that when people are interacting with others and something pleasant or amusing occurs, they are more likely to smile than they are when the same occurs and they are alone (e.g. Fernández Dols & Ruiz Belda, 1995; Fridlund, 1991). Alan Fridlund (1994) argued that this social potentiation of smiling reflects a more general phenomenon, namely that the function of facial displays is to communicate motives or intentions to others. A smiling face signals the motive to appease or affiliate; a 'sad' face signals the motive to be comforted; an 'angry' face signals the motive to aggress; and so on. But no one, including Fridlund, had attempted to measure these social motives, or directly examine the role they played in shaping human facial displays during emotion.

This was the objective of another of our studies (Zaalberg *et al*., 2004). Participants arrived at a waiting room where they were seated with someone else who was apparently waiting to take part in the same study (but who was in fact a confederate of the experimenter). The experimenter used the excuse of having forgotten some questionnaires as a pretext for leaving the two participants together. While he was away the confederate told the real participant a joke. This joke had been preselected to be good or poor. We assessed both subjective and behavioural reactions to the joke. Not only did the good joke evoke more positive emotion; it also elicited more 'enjoyment' smiling (which entails contraction of the muscle around the eye, producing crow's feet, as well as an upward turned mouth) than 'polite' smiling (which only entails an upward turned mouth). The poor joke evoked precisely the reverse pattern: some awkwardness and embarrassment at the subjective level, and more polite smiling than enjoyment smiling.

The most important results for us concerned the role of social motives. We asked participants why they would smile or laugh in the situation they had just been in, and found that their answers showed consistent relationships with their facial behaviour. Those who said that they would smile to share their positive feelings with the joke-teller were more likely to show enjoyment smiles. Those who said that they would smile to protect the joke-teller's feelings were more likely to show polite smiles. Crucially, the relationship between subjective emotion and facial behaviour was fully mediated by these measures of social motives. This study goes beyond previous research by showing that the social motives of people in emotional settings have an important bearing on their expressive behaviour. We smile at jokes whether or not we find them funny; but how we smile reflects how funny we find them, and this in turn relates systematically to what we want to achieve in the situation.

Emotions and success

As we have seen, the social context – and more specifically one's relations with others who are physically or psychologically present – has a significant effect on how people express and communicate their emotions. But the relationship between emotion and social context is a reciprocal one. Emotion also has a significant effect on one's relations with others. Recent theory and research on emotional intelligence has made the point that one's success both in work and non-work settings depends on much more than one's raw intellectual ability (see Salovey *et al*., 2004). In their original paper on emotional intelligence, Salovey and Mayer (1990) defined it as 'the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and

emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions' (p.189).

There are many ways in which the monitoring of one's own and others' feelings and emotions can guide one's thinking and actions. One that I and my colleagues (van Kleef *et al*., 2004a, 2004b) have studied is the way that emotion can influence the course of a negotiation. Imagine that you are negotiating a deal with someone who appears to be feeling angry. Now contrast this with a similar negotiation in which the other appears to be feeling happy. We reasoned that negotiators would make use of this knowledge of the opponent's emotional state, inferring that an angry opponent is dissatisfied with how the negotiation is going and unlikely to settle for what's on the table, and that a happy opponent is basically content with the current offer and therefore likely to accept it.

To test these predictions we set up a computer-mediated negotiation in which participants believed that they were the seller of a consignment of mobile phones, negotiating with a potential buyer with regard to price, warranty period, and service contract. The buyer (in fact a computer programme) began by making an offer; the seller responded with a counter-offer; and so on, for up to six rounds. Our primary dependent measure was how demanding participants were (i.e. how much they insisted on a higher price, a shorter warranty period, and a less generous service contract). Participants were led to believe that the purpose of the study was to research how knowledge of one's opponent's intentions affects negotiation processes and outcomes. Consistent with this, participants received information about their opponent's intentions during the negotiation. This information also contained the manipulation of the opponent's emotion. An example is 'This offer makes me really angry. I'm going to offer 8-7-7', where the numbers represented different values on the variables of price, warranty and service contract.

How did knowledge of the opponent's emotional state affect participants' behaviour? An angry opponent led to greater concessions than a happy opponent did, with the control condition (in which participants knew their opponent's intentions, but had no knowledge of the opponent's emotions) roughly midway between them. This is a finding we have replicated several times. In other studies we have shown, amongst other things, that this effect is not due to the valence of the opponent's emotion (for example, a disappointed opponent has much the same effect as an angry one, and a guilty opponent has much the same effect as a happy one). What is important, then, is what the opponent's emotion tells you about his or her intentions, not its valence.

An intimate relationship

I have argued that emotion and social relations are intimately intertwined, much more so than is commonly recognised in theorising and research on emotion. On the one hand, the ways in which people express emotion are shaped by their social appraisals and their social motives. On the other hand, the emotions that people express carry information that enables others to make strategic adjustments to their social behaviour. So while emotions are regulated by social relations, they in turn help to regulate these relations.

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