The Sociological Study of Emotions: Interactionist Analysis Lines

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Abstract

The main goal of this article is to trace some guidelines for a sociological study of emotions. By using the scientific approach of the Symbolic Interactionism, the main features of the interactionist study of emotions will be presented focusing on the processes that characterize the emotional experience of the daily life: naming, experience and construction of the emotional reality. In this context, we will go through the 'four-factor model of emotion' as well as the process related to the emotional socialization.

Keywords: sociology of emotions, Symbolic Interactionism, everyday life.

1. The interactionist approach related to the study of emotions

In the last 30 years, the trend related to the sociological studies named 'sociology of emotions' has grown significantly conquering a relevant role in the USA (where it was born in the 70s) but even in the vast majority of the European Universities, where, beyond specialized handbook and international scientific sections, the first courses start to rise (Cerulo, 2018; Bernard, 2017; Harris, 2015; Stets, Turner, 2014, 2007; Kleres, 2009; Turner, Stets, 2007; Flam, 2002). However, if we have reached this point it is above all thanks to the work done in the last decades by symbolic interactionists, who, as explained by Sandstrom, Lively, Martin and Fine in their fundamental handbook (2013), interest in emotions has exploded. While emotion was once

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viewed as inherently biological or outside of individual control, sociologists now recognize the social relevance of human emotion, which is subject to norms and acts of management, just like behaviors, and inherently tied to issues of identity (see McCarthy, 2017; Thoits, 1996). Emotion has become central to interactionist thought. As a result, scholars have been asking new questions, including: What role does emotions in human social life? How do experience emotion, both socially and within the body? What implications does emotions have for self? How does emotion differ both within and across groups? How does it differ within and across society? And how do individuals manage their emotions in order to adhere to groups norms and social role expectations? Given the pervasive role that emotion plays in almost every area of social life, its study has become one of the most dynamic fields of inquiry within symbolic interaction (Sandstrom *et al.*, 2013).

Through these studies, the emotion is considered endowed with a visibility and a weight external to the inner reality of the subject: it can be modelled, controlled and managed basing on the cultural roles of the context that the subjects act in, from time to time (Hochschild, 1979; see Bolton, 2005; Francis, 1994).

Thus, we can identify a series of factors that resume some feature of emotions if studied from an interactionist point of view:
- the emotions, like other aspects of the human conduct (attitude, ideas, behaviors), are subject to the social effect;
- the emotions are activated directly by social interaction;
- there always is a regulatory component basing on what any society has its own rules to judge the emotions as acceptable or not, about how they can be exhibited according to situations, public or private. Those laws regulate the exhibition and the control of emotions (*coping*) so that each social organization gets its own uniformity in expressing emotions;
- emotions and their own exhibitions change from time to time according to specific context of daily life as well as to relational practices and to mental constructions that accompany them change;
- the emotions have to always be distinguished by their own exhibitions;
- the emotions have an important cognitive function.

According to the interactionist approach, therefore, the emotions become double hermeneutical tool: needed to study the collective and individual behavior in the social reality also crucial for the process related to the discovery of ourselves in order to approach to our own awareness.

A circular process between emotions and awareness is created: through the emotional expressions we can enter, act and exit from different social situations typical of our daily life: by controlling these states according to the context we live in, it is possible to interact with other subjects and, at the same

time, immerse ourselves in a self-reflexive process to discover ourselves (see van Zomeren, 2016; Fields, Copp, Kleinman, 2007). This process brings the researchers to consider emotions as 'social product': they are defined and re-defined within the interactions which take shape in society and according the subjective meaning that these interactions acquire basing on the different participants.

It is possible to distinguish the study of emotions according to the sociological approach used to analyze them, through a division of the possible approaches (Thoits, 1989; see Turner, Stets 2005):

1) *positivist*, it theorizes the presence of some universal emotions, meant as phenomena physiologically defined, more or less, as objective, predictable, of natural origins, that – however – can be influenced by the social context they are exhibited in;

2) *constructionist*, emotions are seen as exclusive products of the regulations and historic-social-cultural contexts, which thus differ from a social organization to another (see Harré, 1986). According to this approach, the feeling is entirely constructed by social influences and the biology does not have any causal approach with emotion (this trend is a minor one in the US sociological landscape);

3) *interactionist,* that mediates between the positivist and the constructionist, it identifies emotions as element of the human being (feeling), but that assume different shapes basing on the social interactions that take shape in times and spaces culturally defined (interpretation). Such as something that models simultaneously to their interpretation and to the awareness of the subject: the social construction of emotions coincides with the exhibition of emotions itself and so it changes continuously.

2. The emotional experience

The interactionist trend is the most important in the sociological studies of emotions, so, I think it is important to clear some elements that characterize the study of emotions basing on this specific approach.

First of all, the emotions and their exhibition are considered as 'cultural products' (Shott, 1979: 1319-1320; see Mead, 1982): because they will be interpret, named and communicates basing on the rules of that culture, belonging to both the subject involved and the specific situation. The emotional experience is, then, made of two separate moments: 1) physiological activation of a feeling and 2) resulting cognitive definition. For instance, if we feel excitement it can be read as joy, anger or anxiety basing on

the social situation we live. The social structure we live – cultural level, social role, rules, etc. – will help us to interpret it.

The subject, even if involved by physiological sensations from one side and structural features of the society on the other, keeps his/her own space of interpretation and definition of the feeling and consequent expressive modality. The emotions are then configured as physiological element but are also affected by the interpretation of the subject and the social influences that the subject can suffer or exercise (Shott, 1979).

Basing on this interpretation, the emotions work as regulatory and informative signals for the subject who acts from the inside of the social circles that he/she belongs to: they tell us if our social identities have been confirmed or not by the others or by the social context, if our behaviors are considered correct basing on the 'emotional culture' available in that context (see Gordon, 1990). The lived and named emotions, come from the self-interaction that the subject build with him/her self. This is how that 'emotional intersubjectivity' is created, that is an interactional exchange, permeated by emotions, felt and exhibited (Denzin, 1983; see Lively, Heise, 2004). In this process, there is the application of a social way of acting which implies a judgement: towards the self and towards the others.

The emotions configure, then, as tools useful both for the interpretation of the social reality that one lives, and for individual presentation towards the others; as well as elements that allow the common construction of an interaction and, yet, as factors of social control that the society uses to guarantee the respect of the social rules.

Obviously, the emotions involve biological processes; it includes physiological sensations and bodily experiences. We feel things 'in our gut' or 'in our hearth' to respond to specific situations. In some circumstances, we literally quake with fear, shake with rage, or feel overwhelmed by grief or excitement. Even when we feel less intense emotions, we often experience noticeable bodily changes, including an accelerated heartbeat, increased blood pressure and perspiration, and a rush of blood to the face. Yet, although our emotions have these biological aspects and implications, it is important to emphasize that they are ultimately grounded in and mediated by social rather than physiological factors (Sandstrom *et al.*, 2013).

These reflections, also based on empirical studies, have brought the interactionists to structure the main prerequisites that characterize the emotional experience as well as the guidelines for a sociological study of emotions (Sandstrom *et al.*, 2013):

1. Emotions originate in and arise out of our participation in social life.

2. The emotions we feel as a consequence of our action and interactions are embodied – that is, they are connected to physiological processes and reactions that take place in our bodies.

3. Our emotions are self-feelings; they are experiences that refer to and have implications for the self.

4. While emotions involve the self, they are identified, shaped, and expressed in accord with social definitions and expectations provided by the groups to which we belong.

5. As we learn how to manage various emotions in consideration of feeling rules, we develop the ability proactively to shape and control our bodily sensations and emotional experiences.

3. Four-Factor model of emotion

The guidelines listed above clear how the emotions are made by a sort of 'double presence': from one side, they are connected to physiological processes and reactions that take place in the body, so the emotions we feel as a consequence of our action and our interaction are experienced, fundamentally, in the body. From the other side, in order to become emotions, these processes and reactions must be interpreted in terms of symbols and social categories: according to the theory of Symbolic Interactionism, they must be *named*, and we must make meaning about the physical sensation, as well as our surrounding environments (Sandstrom *et al.*, 2013). The process of naming allows us to organize particular sensation and give a meaning to them. It also allows us to see ourselves as 'emotional man' (angry, joy, happiness, sadness, etc.) and to act upon ourselves in light of that definition, reflecting on and deciding how or whether to express that feeling in a given situation.

In light of what has been cleared so far, in terms of Symbolic Interactionism, is possible to propose the best definition of emotion as research and study tool. We will use the 'four-factor model of emotion' of Peggy Thoits to explain that, although dated, turns out to be the best model for an interactionist analysis of the emotional experience[1] (cf. Redmond, 2015; Charon, 2007; Lively, Heise, 2004).

According to American sociologist, the emotion has to be considered like a subjective experience made by four interconnected components: a) situational stimuli, b) physiological modifications, c) expressive gestures, and

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[1] There are not, so far, relevant developments of such model.

d) a definition of the emotion that serves to identify this specific configuration of components. According to the following scheme (Thoits, 1990).

This is the so-called Four-Factor model of emotion, which allows to symbolically and physically construct the exhibition and the expression of the feeling (Thoits, 1984, 1989). This model allows to name the emotion and organize specific expressions, also basing on the social context:

> This dynamic model of emotional experience is made up of four interdependent components: physiology, cognition (or the meaning we make), label, and expression. On the example of an experiencing angry, we know we are experiencing it not only by the increased blood pressure, the flushing of cheeks, and the tightness of our chests – which could also be lust or even fear – but also because of the meaning that we make of the surrounding environment, including our immediate social interactions. It is not until we label that emotion as 'anger' and express it accordingly that it is experienced as such. Notably, one persons's anger could be another's irritation. And, importantly, if we were to label our feelings as anger, and express ourselves in an angry manner, we will have a very different experience than if we'd labeled those same feelings as 'annoyance' and express them in a more constrained manner (Sandstrom *et al.*, 2013: 201).

FIGURE 1. *A model of the subjective emotional experience (Thoits, 1984, 1989).*
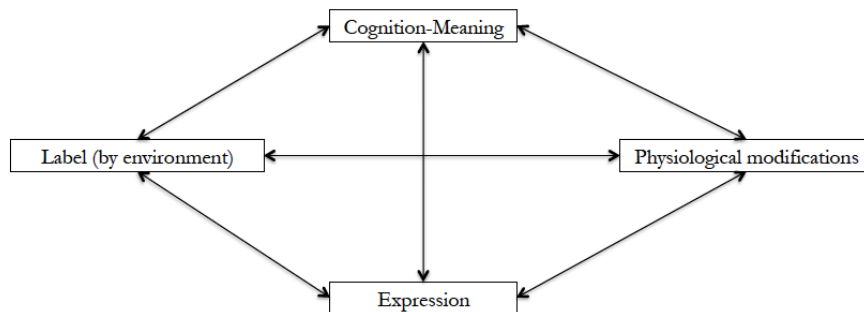
Let's start from the subjective and social perception of emotions. Being a sentimental reaction to a situational incentive, it is necessary that this happens. It can be an incentive internal to the context of the subject, like physical pain, unlinked to any social reference – memories, images, ideas –, or it can be something that happens outside the subject: in the natural and social environment he/she lives in (or has lived in: think of the memories which cause emotions). It is necessary to produce a further distinction between the stimuli which can happen in the external context, whether they are natural –

the rain, the sunset, the sunrise, etc. – or social, if equipped with subjective sense – singing under the rain, along with a person, kiss the partner on the beach at the sunset. The distinction, according to Weber, is useful to clarify how even in the case of a social event an affective reaction that has nothing to do with the concept of emotion, as outlined so far, could occur. I refer to the distinction between *cause* and *motivation* (Weber, 1920).

To clarify this difference let us think of the following filmic image: an almost deserted beach with a figure that appears in the distance, in the background a sunset on the sea, the noise of the wind and the lapping of the waves. A young woman, framed before at her shoulders and then closer and closer on her face, has narrow eyes and cannot stop her tears. The image lasts for a few minutes and the viewer may think that the subject is experiencing a particular emotion – sadness, suffering, nostalgia, joy – because of the memory that that sunset, that sea or that beach transmit. The memory of a summer relationship now finished or that is just started, the memory of a summer with a loved one that is now gone, nostalgia for the period of adolescence, etc. The examples could be infinite depending on the quality and the intensity of the emotion one imagines for the woman. In all these cases, we could thus speak of *motivations* that push the subject to express a specific emotion through tears, narrow eyes. There is an emotional reaction because of the memory produced by that beach or by the sunset, by the thoughts inherent to a social event that occurred in that environment.

After a few minutes the frame widens, until it is able to see the whole body of the subject. Thus, we discover that the young woman is seated with a pot in which she drops the slices of onion she is cutting. The change in perception is evident: the woman does not cry because she remembers a social fact that happened in that place, the tears are instead a physiological reaction triggered by the cutting of onions. Those are the *causes*: a natural reaction that is not connected to situations linked to social.

Following Thoits is possible to state that, in sociological terms, we use to speak of emotions mainly when the emotional reaction is produced by a natural environment related to those social events: situations that recall a social way of acting, an individual or collective act made of sense, happened in the moment in which we feel that emotion or we remember the event or we imagine how it can be.

The tears caused by the onion generates, instead, a physiological reaction: the woman of the example is subject to a chemical reaction caused by a specific chemical agent (another example can be the wind that causes the tears). We cry *because of* and not *for* the onion.

4. The emotional culture

Therefore, the motivations allow us to speak of emotions in sociological terms.

In order for the subject to feel a feeling that can be cataloged as emotion, it is necessary that he/she perceives an environmental stimulus and that this is associated with a belief owned by the subject him/herself. In fact, emotion is always culturally defined and categorized: from being identified as positive or negative according to the culture of belonging or the social context in which it is found, up to call it with different names depending on the perspective used by the subject that lives it and the consequent physical expressions he/she uses to manifest it (see Hassin, Aviezer, Bentin, 2013; Von Scheve, 2012; McCarthy, 1992). Thus, what I call sadness can be called anger, melancholy or even happiness by a friend of mine who interprets or lives the same situation from a different perspective.

It all depends on what is called emotional culture in sociology (Gordon, 1990, 1989, 1981; see Mills, Kleinman, 1988). The names given to the emotions and their expressions are culturally codified: they depend on the socialization and interaction habits existing within a given historical-social context. The specific culture of an environment (group, city, nation, etc.) influences both the beliefs that people have for emotions and the laws that regulate their own expression. This emotional culture is not, therefore, innate, but it is learned by the subjects in the course of their experiences of socialization, from infancy to the existential paths that are experienced in adulthood. You then become emotionally competent on what emotions can be exhibited basing on your cultural origin and the historical-social context in which you act (in such a process, emotional culture can also generate a series of prejudices, for example on the basis of gender construction: women are more sentimental than men, or man is the strong sex and should not cry in public, etc.).

In short, to analyze the concept of emotion in sociological terms, it is therefore necessary to perform a work of multiple interpretation:
1) symptoms and sensations tested according to the event that occurs;
2) social context and historical epoch in which we find ourselves (beliefs, habits, expectations, etc.);
3) emotional expressions implemented according to the biographical trajectory of the subject interacting and/or the feeling experience, etc.;
4) emotional culture of reference (both in the context in which we act, both the subject who acts or with whom we have an interaction). But this is not enough yet.

Subjective example: the sensation of an empty stomach felt five years ago at lunchtime, when I started to meet with my wife, could lead me think of the 'passion' felt for her and make me categorize the physical feeling as a *motivation:* the falling in love. The same sensation at lunch time, today, would probably make me think of a physical cause, since that emotion felt towards my wife has turned into a stable feeling. Yet – just because the emotional social life is not as irenic and obvious as it might appear at a superficial glance – I would find it difficult to define the same feeling experienced during a flight alongside my wife five years ago: falling in love, related to a belief, or a physical cause, because the turbulence of the plane caused me physical discomfort? The sociological answers to these questions can always be traced looking at the social behaviors of the protagonists of action, evaluating the relationship between motivations and actions that are at the origin of the emotional behavior object of study (see Izard, 1977). In other words, it is the society that suggests to us what belief to associate with that particular feeling and, consequently, with what name to call emotion. Summing up: according to Thoits' interpretative scheme, emotion depends on subjective beliefs, since its perception is linked to a social fact: to its occurrence and not only to its production through imagination. This perception is always bodily perceived and produces physiological changes (also basing on gender, ethnicity, emotional culture of reference).

5. Conclusions

According to Symbolic Interactionism, in addition to our emotions informing us how we have fared in a particular social interaction, whether our social identities have been confirmed or disconfirmed during the course of an event, or whether our relationships are 'fair', we also link our emotions to the self (Sandstrom *et al.*, 2013). Our emotions arise out of and reflect our self-interactions as well as our interactions with others: emotions are self-feelings because they have implications for the self in other ways as well, just as they tell us how we are faring in a particular social interaction, they also provide us insight into what kind of person we are (Denzin, 1983). Because emotions are inextricably linked to the self, we sometimes use them not only to understand what type of person we are, but also to understand what kind of people others are (Sandstrom *et al.*, 2013).

At the end of this short article, it should therefore be clear how one's emotional culture is directly dependent on the type (or types) of emotional socialization that the subject has experienced in the course of his/her life. This occurs because, while emotions involve the self, they are nonetheless

identified, shaped and expressed in accord with the social definitions and expectations provided by the group to which the subject belongs. For these reasons, emotions become social objects that one can manipulate and act toward much like other social objects. One can manage, express and use emotions in various ways to realize our goals for self and to negotiate meaningful interactions with others: through the interactions with others in the socialization process, one learns a set of expectations about what emotions are appropriate to feel in given situations and how one ought to express or display them (Sandstrom *et al.*, 2013; see Clark, 1987; Hochschild, 1979, 1990, 2012).

In conclusion, we can therefore summarize how, according to the interactionist perspective, the subject does not react 'simply' to situations based on physiological processes that take place within him. Rather, one learns how to interpret these processes and translate them into emotional experiences and actions that adapt to the demands of specific social situations. One also learns to formulate emotional actions in ways that involve both suppression and evocation of different emotions. In turn, emotions are used not only to model actions in order to meet the expectations of others, but also to influence and guide the responses/reactions of others. From this perspective, thus, emotions become a fundamental part of the processes of communication, role-taking and self-presentation. They act as an essential channel of communication through which the subject defines others, him/herself and his/her social situation in which he/she finds him/herself and acts. For all these reasons, the process of constructing and negotiating meaning is not entirely cognitive: rather, thoughts (reason) and emotions work hand in hand, influencing each other, in a continuous construction of forms of social action.

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