

# Communicating Emotion

## Social, Moral, and Cultural Processes

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**CAMBRIDGE**  
**UNIVERSITY PRESS**

& Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme  
*Paris*

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom  
and EDITIONS DE LA MAISON DES SCIENCES DE L'HOMME  
54 Boulevard Raspail, 75270 Paris Cedex 06, France

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

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First published 1999

Printed in the United States of America

*Typeface* Palatino 10/13 pt. *System* DeskTopPro<sub>UX</sub>® [BV]

*A catalog record for this book is available from  
the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Planalp, Sally, 1950–

Communicating emotion : social, moral, and cultural processes /  
Sally Planalp.

p. cm. – (Studies in emotion and social interaction)

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 0-521-55315-6 (hardcover). – ISBN 0-521-55741-0 (pbk.)

1. Expression. 2. Emotions. 3. Interpersonal communication.

4. Emotions – Social aspects. I. Title. II. Series.

BF591.P57 1999

302.2 – dc21

98-49524

CIP

ISBN 0 521 55315 6 hardback

ISBN 0 521 55741 0 paperback

ISBN 2 7351 0795 7 hardback (France only)

ISBN 2 7351 0816 3 paperback (France only)

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# 1. How Important Is Emotion in Everyday Interaction?

A world experienced without any affect would be a pallid, meaningless world. We would know that things happened, but we could not care whether they did or not.

Tomkins, (1979: 203)

What role does emotion play in everyday talk? One view is this: You're having a perfectly normal conversation, and everything goes along just fine until some emotion disrupts things. You're talking about work with a friend and you happen to mention a sensitive topic (such as how he just lost his job), and he gets upset. He says something insulting to you (such as how you don't really deserve yours), and you have a hard time maintaining your composure. Another person enters the room and tells you that he has been offered a job (though one you know is not very good). He is thrilled. Talk to him? Forget it. There is no way you can carry on a rational conversation now. He is too emotional.

As Cochran and Claspell (1987: 2) say: "Emotion lurks about upsetting well-ordered lives, disrupting rationality, and dividing a person with paltry and degenerate demands. . . . An emotion is a commotion." Most of the time we are free of emotion; it rarely occurs in everyday conversation, and blessedly so. When an emotion does occur such as when one person yells at another, someone "breaks down" in tears, or laughs "hysterically," it is a BIG DEAL! "Tears are stupid, tears are childish, tears are a sign of weakness, important people don't cry, clever people don't cry" (Carmichael, 1991: 186). Normal patterns of interaction stop when emotion erupts, and everyone responds one way or another. We may confront the feelings, try to cope with them, or try to pretend that they didn't happen (as we do with many social

disruptions). What we are unlikely to do, however, is to take the emotion into account and continue to talk, make decisions, and go about our business.

Yet there is another view of the role that emotion plays in everyday conversation. Emotion is what gives communication life. A conversation between emotionally involved partners is bright and lively, but a meeting without feeling is deadly dull. Without feelings, we might be like Mr. Spock, the Vulcan on *Star Trek*, who has no emotions and participates in conversation rationally, but more likely we wouldn't care enough to participate at all. We would be without pathos – *apathetic*. If other people had no feelings, they would care no more about us than they care about the chairs we are sitting on; they would be without *compassion* or *empathy*. Without emotion, nothing makes any difference; we are indifferent. Life goes on, but we are removed from it. We feel like spectators in our own lives, not participants. Conversation does not touch us; it is removed, as if it is taking place on another plane of existence or happening to someone else.

In fact, people who have injured parts of their brains that are associated with emotion or have gone through experiences that have left them emotionally drained report exactly what I have described. Emotionally impaired people seem normal on the surface and are pleasant in conversation. Their emotions are not inappropriate; they simply don't exist. These people approach life as “uninvolved spectators” (Damasio, 1994: 44). For people who are emotionally drained, any feelings, even feelings of anguish and pain, are often preferable to no feelings at all (Cochran & Claspell, 1987: 118). Fortunately, this is a rare state, so most people take feelings for granted.

Social life is sometimes described as a fabric, with the threads of individual lives woven together through interaction. The social fabric can be tightly woven, loosely woven, or even torn by misunderstandings or intentional disruption. If society is a fabric, then emotion is its color (Lazarus, 1991: 19). We can imagine a primarily gray social fabric interspersed with occasional bursts of color (bursts of emotion) or we can imagine a fabric suffused with color (emotion) interspersed with rare streaks of gray. Which fabric we imagine depends on how we think about emotion and, either way, we can find theorists and researchers who agree with us (Berscheid, 1990). In either case, emotion is an important part of the fabric of daily life and its colors are woven into everyday talk. Emotional colors enliven and give meaning to the lives that we weave together. The metaphor of social life as fabric,



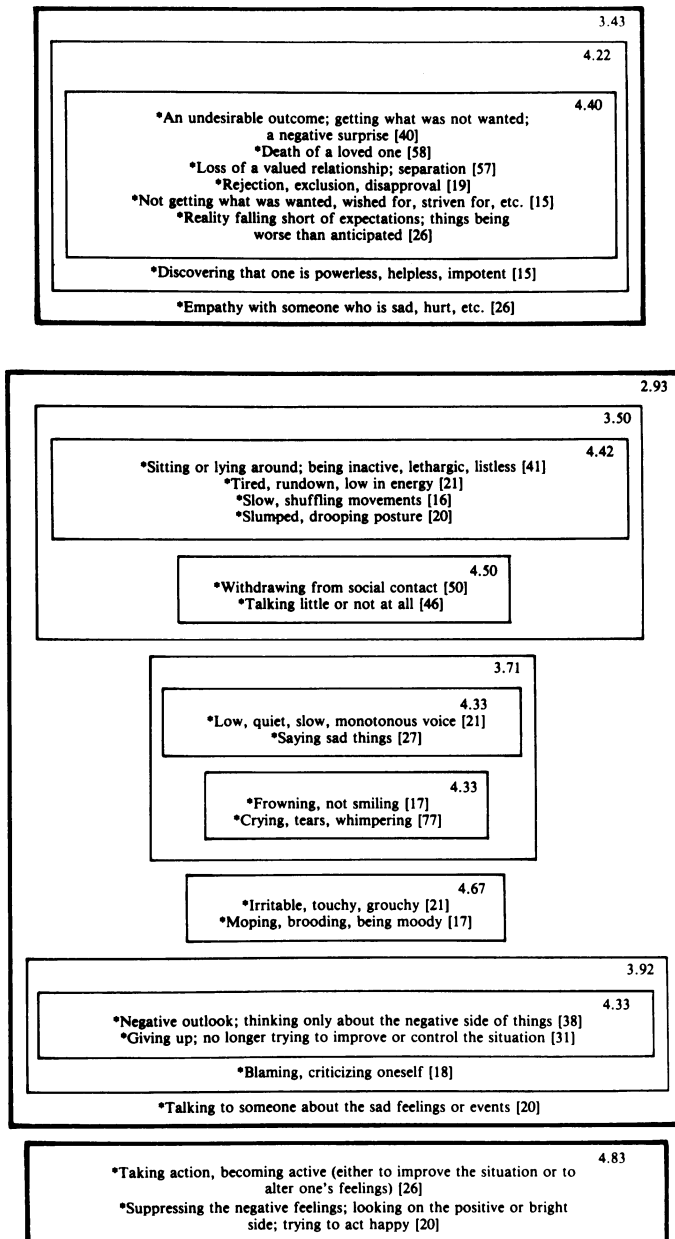
communication as weaving, and emotion as color will be used throughout this book to explain and explore a number of implications about emotional communication.

For example, if we think of emotion as the occasional and problematic burst of color, advice about how to handle emotion in interaction can follow the troubleshooting model (that is, if X goes wrong, try Y). Deal with it, and maybe it will go away. Cope with it, and things will return to normal. But if we think that emotion is an ongoing quality of conversation, we can observe the constant ebb and flow of emotion as conversation unfolds. And maybe it is always there because it is serving some useful purpose. Rather than “dealing with” or “coping with” emotion, perhaps we should be listening to and appreciating it. Better yet, perhaps both perspectives are valid. To explore how they might be understood and reconciled, we turn to process theories of emotion.

### **Emotion as Process**

Process theories of emotion can be formally represented in several ways – with diagrams of prototypes, flow charts, or simple verbal descriptions – but they all describe emotion as a process made up of several definable subparts or components that operate together to produce emotion. Although theorists may disagree about what specific components are essential to emotion, five appear in most theories in one form or another: (1) *objects, causes, precipitating events*, (2) *appraisal*, (3) *physiological changes*, (4) *action tendencies/action/expression*, and (5) *regulation*.

A prototype of sadness is a good starting point for illustrating all five components (Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O'Connor, 1987). The emotion process starts with an event that precipitates the emotion. For sadness it is an undesirable event such as losing a loved one, being rejected, or not getting what you want. To produce sadness, the event must be appraised not only as negative but also as one that you cannot do anything about (otherwise it might be anger or fear). Characteristic actions and expressions are sitting around, slumping, talking little or not at all, withdrawing from contact, and a host of others. Physiological changes produce a less aroused state, reflected in being tired, rundown, low in energy, and lethargic. Regulation processes include talking to someone about the sad feelings or events, taking action, looking on the bright side, or trying to act happy.



Prototype of Sadness, reprinted from Figure 5 in P. Shaver, J. Schwartz, D. Kirson, and C. O'Connor (1987). Emotion knowledge: Further exploration of a prototype approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52, 1077. Copyright © 1987 by the American Psychological Association. Reprinted with permission.

Alternative versions of process theories emphasize different components, but the basic elements are roughly the same. For example, action tendencies are central to Frijda's process theory, emphasizing the fact that the *urge* to act in certain ways (or not to act, in the case of sadness) is more characteristic of emotions than action is (or lack thereof) (Frijda, 1986; Frijda, Kuipers, & ter Schure, 1989). Stein, Trabasso, and Liwag's (1993) formulation emphasizes the many steps in appraisal and the planning and goal-directed nature of action and regulation. Ekman (1993) emphasizes expression, especially in the face.

Process theories handle discrete categories of emotions by specifying what precipitating events, appraisals, action tendencies, actions and expressions, physiological reactions, and regulation processes characterize the basic categories of emotion such as sadness, joy, or fear. But they also can handle an almost infinite variety of other emotions, including subtle differences between similar emotions (the difference between guilt and shame over ignoring a panhandler), blended emotions (blends of joy and fear when your son leaves home), and emotions for which we have no name (the feeling of being socially overwhelmed – the opposite of loneliness). They capture our sense that emotions are processes that occur over time, ranging from the brief rush of fear when a car drives too close to your bike to the enduring joy of watching your child grow up (Frijda, Mesquita, Sonnemans, & van Goozen, 1991).

Process theories also give us ways to understand experiences that are emotionlike but not exactly emotions. Moods, for example, do not have *objects*. We don't say, "I'm really moody at my boss today"; we say, "I'm not angry at my boss, I'm just in a bad mood." Other than having no object, bad moods are much like emotions. They are pleasant or unpleasant (*appraisal*), they sap our energy (*physiology*), they make us inclined to snarl and complain (*expressions and action tendencies*), and we try to control them as best we can (*regulation*). Another example is a sentiment, such as love, which describes a disposition to *appraise* an *object* (the loved one) in a particular emotionally relevant way (Frijda et al., 1991). Only in its most intense form is love a full-blown emotion (including *expression*, *physiological* reactions, and *regulation* processes); much of the time it remains a sentiment.

Process theories help us understand how emotions can be seen both as rare and as pervasive. On the one hand, textbook cases of emotions (complete with object, appraisal, physiological changes, expression,

and regulation) occur rarely in conversation. How often, for example, do you feel full-blown anger, such as you feel when someone (*object*) criticizes your report unfairly (*appraisal*), making your heart rate go up (*physiology*), making you want to throw your coffee at him (*action tendency*), but in response to which you say instead (*regulation*) in a firm but irritated voice, “Perhaps you should reread the third paragraph on page three” (*expression*). It happens, but rarely. On the other hand, we have emotionlike experiences (such as slight irritation or boredom) almost all of the time. If a conversation feels uncomfortable, there may be no clear object, just a general sense of unpleasantness, expressed through a slight frown, and a vague desire to be somewhere else. Or if you are interrupted, you may react physiologically, but you may not interpret it as either good or bad and you may not respond. In both of these cases, only some of the components are present, so they are not true *emotions*, but enough of the components are there to be emotionlike.

### **Components of the Emotion Process**

The most important feature of process theories is that they enable us to take apart the components of emotion, study them in detail, and put them back together again. In the section that follows, each component is analyzed in the context of face-to-face interaction, drawing on current theories and research to explain how it works.

#### *Objects/Causes/Eliciting Events*

Most often when you have an emotion it is *about* something – it has an object. You are happy *about* making plans to go boating; you are afraid *of* hearing the doctor’s report; you are sad *that* your friend has to work all weekend. When feelings or moods are detached and free-floating, they feel strange. They are difficult to understand, to do something about, or to explain to others. It is tempting to direct the feeling toward some convenient object just to have it make sense. It is hard to be angry at the world and life in general but very easy to direct that anger toward your roommate’s dirty dishes.

*The Problem with Causes.* One of the biggest problems for researchers studying emotion and for people experiencing emotion is how to determine its object or cause. If we define the object as the situation or

event toward which the emotion is directed, we can analyze it by looking to the other components of emotion. We know that Joan is angry at you, not me, because she thinks you are being unfair, not me, and she is yelling and swearing at you, not me. But, of course, even that is not simple. She could be thinking you are unfair because she loves me and cannot admit to herself that I am the one who treated her badly. She may yell and swear at you, not because she thinks that you are unfair, but because I am more powerful and yelling at you is a way of getting to me indirectly. So *you* may be the object of Joan's emotion from Joan's point of view, but with some extra information, we may understand that *I* am the real cause.

To complicate things further, *neither you nor I* may be the real cause of Joan's anger. She may be angry because her puppy dirtied her rug this morning, making her late for work, and she had too much caffeine before meeting us. *We* didn't make her angry because if these things had not happened, she wouldn't be angry at all. In this case, the object of Joan's emotion is different from the cause, as it may be in many cases. Aligning object and cause is no small feat, for Joan or for anybody else. In fact, years of psychotherapy may be devoted to searching for the true causes of feelings. Nevertheless, we are usually able to direct our emotions toward objects in more or less appropriate ways (if not in completely flawless or insightful ways).

The literature on emotion does not provide a full account of how objects of emotion are determined, but there is an extensive literature on causal attribution that helps. Several processes probably operate. For example, whatever is salient is likely to be seen as the object of an emotion (Taylor & Fiske, 1975). For example, after Joan arrived at work, she was still physiologically aroused and irritable, but she forgot about the dog. When we changed her schedule, however, the arousal and irritation were directed at the objects of her attention – us. In addition, Joan (like all of us) has certain beliefs about what causes emotions that she uses to find the appropriate object (Kelley & Michela, 1980). Helpless little puppies are not appropriate objects of anger, but people who change your schedule are. And for reasons indicated earlier, you are a better target than I am, so you become the object. Moreover, Joan noticed that she was angry right after she heard about her schedule being changed, so she inferred that her anger was caused by the schedule change. She also knows that having their schedules changed usually makes other people angry as well (Kelley, 1967).

Notice several things about this example. Even though it is may be

impossible for Joan to determine the true cause of her emotion, she has several heuristics available for making a reasonable judgment about it. Those same heuristics may serve as a basis for two or more people to discuss causes. For instance, if Joan blames me, I might say, "You know, I just read about a study linking coffee drinking to anger," to which Joan might reply, "But I wasn't angry until I heard about this schedule change and everyone else is angry about it too, whether they were drinking coffee or not," to which I might reply, "They weren't nearly as angry as you were," and so on. Thus, in a very real sense, causes make emotions discussible, negotiable, and perhaps changeable. By contrast, nothing is quite so frustrating as someone closing down discussion by claiming to be "just in a bad mood."

Because the issue of causality is so complicated and indeterminate, emotion theorists often employ terms that dance around the term *cause* (for an exception, see Lazarus, 1991: 171–213). Various possibilities are: emotion-provoking or emotional stimuli, antecedents, emotion-eliciting events, precipitating events, and situational conditions.<sup>1</sup> Because no event in itself is capable of causing emotion without the other components playing their parts, events rarely if ever count as exclusive causes. An earthquake might provoke, elicit, precipitate, precede, or set up conditions for fear, but unless someone appraises the situation as dangerous and is inclined to run, hide, freeze, or do *something*, there is no fear. Generally these terms refer to *apparent* or *perceived* objects or causes, usually determined either by asking people to describe the emotion (including its object) or by assessing what events or conditions precede and co-occur with emotion. That is probably as close as we can come to determining true causality, so careful theorists avoid the term *cause*, although avoiding the term does not solve the problem.

*Causes of Emotion in Conversation.* It is especially difficult to determine the objects or causes of emotion or feelings in conversations because emotions can be about or caused by practically anything. In conversation, objects of emotion can be verbal (jokes or even the topic of

<sup>1</sup> Frijda (1986) refers to *emotional stimuli*; Lazarus (1991) to *situational conditions*; Stein et al. (1993) to *precipitating events*; Summerfield and Green (1986) to *emotion-eliciting events*; Izard (1991) to *antecedents, causes* (psychological or phenomenological), *elicitors*, and a variety of other terms.

conversation), nonverbal (gestures), people (your partner or yourself), thoughts (daydreams), or even emotions themselves (*guilt* about *enjoying* the ethnic joke or *anger* about your partner's *jealousy*). They can be something as microscopic as a compliment, an insult, an interruption, or a touch or, alternatively, something as macroscopic as a stressful interview, an exciting argument, or a lifetime of frustrating interactions.

In analyzing communication patterns, we distinguish between the *content* of a message and its *relational* meaning, a distinction that is useful in analyzing the causes of emotion (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). The content level carries information about the topic or subject of the conversation; the relational level carries information about the relationship between speaker and hearer. An emotion may seem to be caused by the content of a message when in fact it is a response to relational meanings. That is sometimes why we overreact to what appear to be trivial incidents. On a relational level they are anything but trivial. "The Cadbury Egg Incident" reported by a student of mine is an excellent example. At Easter, her sister sent her a basket full of jellybeans, various goodies, and one Cadbury egg. Her boyfriend came over, looked eagerly at the basket, and asked if he could have the Cadbury egg. She casually told him no, that her sister had sent it to her and that there was only one Cadbury egg. He was joking around, not taking her answer seriously, and started to unwrap the egg. She yelled at him to knock it off. He laughed and took a bite. She then "lost it," began ranting, and screamed at him to leave. Now, was this all worth it for one Cadbury egg? Obviously not. But later she realized that the issue was not the Cadbury egg (the content of the message and apparent cause), but rather whether she had authority over what was rightfully hers and whether her boyfriend respected her wishes (the relational issue). What's more, the incident was part of a pattern of behavior by her boyfriend. Now, *that* may be worth anger, confrontation, and relational negotiation.

*Social Situations as Eliciting Events.* In order to be comprehensive, research on causes or objects of emotion in interaction tends to analyze general types of causes rather than details. We know that emotion flourishes in social situations (Andersen & Guerrero, 1998c: 57–64). For example, U.S., European, and Japanese students reported experiencing joy, sadness, anger, and fear most often when they were with one other person, second most often when in a group, and least often

when alone (except for fear, which was experienced about equally often in all three situations) (Scherer, Wallbott, Matsumoto, & Kudoh, 1988: 18). Relations with others were the most commonly reported antecedents of joy, sadness and anger (but not fear) in Japan, Europe and the United States (Scherer et al., 1988: 12). Residents of Glasgow representing a variety of occupational groups reported that other people's actions were the most likely elicitors of their own happiness, sadness, anger, disgust, and fear (with the only close second being fear elicited by one's own actions) (Oatley & Duncan, 1992: 271).<sup>2</sup> But not all types of social situations are equally evocative of emotion. People with whom one has a close relationship are more likely to evoke emotion than are strangers. Friends, in particular, are important to students. Students from eight countries reported feeling joy most often when meeting friends (not relatives or strangers), feeling sadness most often when they had problems with friends, and feeling anger most often when friends failed them (although traffic accidents provoked more fear than anything friends did) (Summerfield & Green, 1986).

From other studies, we can piece together some ideas about what happens in interactions to elicit emotions. Threats of social rejection elicit fear. Loss of relationships, rejection, exclusion, and disapproval elicit sadness. Insults elicit anger. Receiving esteem, praise, love, liking, or affection elicits joy. Exceptionally good communication elicits love (Shaver et al., 1987). Many kinds of speech events can be hurtful – accusations, evaluations, advice, and simple information, to name a few (Vangelisti, 1994). Some of these examples illustrate an important problem that researchers confront in trying to find more specific causes of emotion. Causes may not be logically separate from the emotion being caused. For example, threats of social rejection may be interpreted as threats at least in part *because* they elicit fear. A threat is not a real threat unless it is scary. On the other hand, many speech acts that take the form of a threat are not really threats. For instance, if I “threaten” to dismiss class early unless students do the readings, it is not a threat if they don't believe I will do it or if they would be happy if I did. Or saying that “exceptionally good communication”

<sup>2</sup> Other categories were (1) self's action, (2) something remembered, (3) something imagined, (4) something read, seen on TV, etc., (5) not caused by anything, and (6) other elicitors.



elicits love may be nothing more than saying that we define communication as exceptionally good if it elicits love.

All this is to say that most events in the social world are impossible to disentangle from their interpretations, leading some theorists (such as Lazarus, 1991; Parkinson, 1995) to leave out causes and deal only with appraisals. There are few “brute facts” in social interaction, that is, facts that speak for themselves (Buck, 1984: 12–13; Searle, 1969: 50–53). Instead, most of what occurs in social interaction is meaningful only as it is interpreted through an elaborate system of personally and culturally defined meanings, and these meanings lie at the heart of emotion just as they lie at the heart of language, cognition, and culture. Making attributions about causes or objects of emotion is only the beginning; they must also be given emotional meaning. Mesquita and Frijda (1992: 183) use the term *event coding* to describe the process of relating particular events to event types that are socially shared. For example, bereavement seems to be a universal event type related to the death of a loved one, but shameful events can vary considerably from exposing bare feet or back of the hands to covering (not *uncovering*) the breasts (Parrott & Harré, 1996: 54).

### *Appraisal*

Emotional meaning is given to events through appraisal processes. Emotion does triage, directing our formidable cognitive and physical capacities toward stimuli in the environment that warrant our attention. That is why we would be not just cold without emotion; we would also be lost and bewildered. We would not know where to turn or how to prioritize. Simple as it may seem, determining what stimuli or events in the environment warrant emotion is a complicated process. To understand it, we turn to several theories of appraisal, where a number of common themes can be found but where controversies and unresolved issues also make things lively.<sup>3</sup>

*Concerns.* In the most general sense, emotion is generated by events that are important for our well-being or that relate to our concerns.

<sup>3</sup> For a brief history, see Frijda (1993); other recent influential papers are Ortony, Clore, and Collins (1988); Smith & Ellsworth (1985); Scherer (1988); Roseman, Spindel, and Jose (1990); all of *Cognition and Emotion*, 7, Issues 3 and 4).

An astute reader will think, “That could include almost anything,” and in principle it could. Most of us couldn’t care less about the 1,000th grain of sand that runs through our fingers, but a yogi might discover the essence of joy there. This is possible but not likely. In fact, human beings in large measure are moved by the same basic concerns – concern for our own physical well-being (tied to fear), concern for knowing what is going on (tied to surprise or anxiety), concern for close ties to others (tied to sadness, shame, love, jealousy), concern for achieving goals (tied to joy, anger).<sup>4</sup> Some of these concerns are so generally agreed upon that we might as well say that the events themselves elicit the emotions – but not always. For example, the loss of a loved one produces a strong emotional reaction in Americans, Europeans, Japanese, Balinese, and almost any other culture we can imagine. On the other hand, personal experience tells us that losing a job produces more emotion in some people than in others, depending on the meaning attached to the loss. If you lost a job that meant a lot to you, you would have strong feelings; if you lost a job that was of little concern to you, you would feel very little or nothing.

Concerns are tied to the goals and plans that we pursue in life, from basic goals such as physical survival and social belonging to more specific goals and plans such as making a friend or completing a project (Mandler, 1984; Oatley, 1992; Stein et al., 1993). Emotions occur when there is a significant change in the status of our plans, and they alert us to the need to adjust accordingly. Significant changes can be positive (We just won the race! – Joy), negative (I can’t seem to get this computer to work – Anger), or neutral (Who’s knocking at this hour? – Surprise). On the other hand, if our goals and plans proceed as usual, we do not feel much of anything, and we should be thankful for that. We cannot be continually on the alert. Lord Byron (whose name is almost a synonym for passion) said, “There is no such thing as a life of passion any more than a continuous earthquake, or an eternal fever. Besides, who would ever *shave* themselves in such a state?”<sup>5</sup>

The inability to sustain powerful emotional states has interesting implications for communication, especially in close personal relation-

<sup>4</sup> Concerns include drives, interests, and goals, but the term *concerns* best captures a wide range of biologically, culturally, and individually determined factors.

<sup>5</sup> Letter, 5 July 1821, to the poet Thomas Moore (published in *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, Vol. 8, 1973–81). Cited in *The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations*. (1993). New York: Columbia University Press.

ships. Everyday communication has little capacity to move us, which is probably just as well; it saves our energy for when we really need it. Novel information commands our emotions, such as getting fresh news or giving your first speech. Eventually, though, you get used to it, a phenomenon that emotion theorists call *habituating* – making it a habit (Berscheid, 1983; Mandler, 1984). A couple's first kiss, first big fight, commitment to drop all rivals, and help in a crisis are all common turning points in relationships, but after a while they start to be taken for granted (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Siegert & Stamp, 1994). You no longer feel passion at a regular old kiss, get hysterical over the usual argument, feel thrilled that your partner is free on Saturday night, or feel gratitude that he listens sympathetically. Habituation can make your feelings for your partner pretty bland (usually called "taking him for granted"). You may start to conclude that you do not love him anymore. What you may not realize is that because your joint communication patterns are so well oiled, he has tremendous capacity to disrupt them and produce powerful feelings. Your feelings for him are latent, not absent. If he leaves, you may be completely distraught when you are struck by the painful absence of normal kisses, evenings together, sympathetic talks, and even the usual arguments (Berscheid, 1983).

In fact, the more familiar things become to us, the less capacity they have to arouse us emotionally. That may be why conflict-habituated couples can have horrendous and ongoing arguments (described by one man as a "running guerrilla fight") that are perfectly normal to them but make others' blood curdle (Berscheid, 1983: 159–160). Habituation may also be the reason we can witness so many fictional and even real deaths on TV without being awfully disturbed. Similarly, benevolent links among people – trust, mutual concern, fair treatment, mutual respect – are so widely assumed that they form the foundation of social life. When they are disrupted, we experience not just powerful emotions, but trauma. Challenges to your beliefs about a close friend's honesty, loyalty, or commitment to stay in contact produce powerful emotional reactions (Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985; Planalp, Rutherford, & Honeycutt, 1988). Yet these pale by comparison to the betrayals of human decency that are a part of violence, sexual abuse, and other physical and emotional torture.

Some goals and concerns are human universals; others are specific to personal circumstances; and many are of universal concern but more salient to some people than to others. Appraisal theories can

handle both commonalities and differences among people by taking into account themes and variations in what events mean to people. Consider how you might feel, for example, if you were very close to your mother and she had just died of lung cancer. There are any number of emotions you might feel, depending on your appraisal – anger (if you blamed her), guilt (if you blamed yourself for not convincing her to stop smoking), fear/anxiety (if you can't imagine getting along without her), or sadness (if you know she is gone and nothing can be done about it). Under certain circumstances you might feel relief (if she was suffering terribly), pride (if you helped her find meaning in her death), or happiness (that she is in a better place). Such a wide range of emotions is possible not only between people, but within the same person feeling the mixed emotions that occur with complex appraisals (Dillard, 1998: xxi).

*Appraisals Unfold Over Time.* Some theorists divide appraisal into primary appraisal, which determines whether and how the event is relevant to one's well-being, and secondary appraisal, which is concerned with one's resources and options for coping (Smith & Lazarus, 1993). It is only sensible that primary appraisal precedes secondary appraisal because determining the extent and nature of the event logically precedes assessing how one can cope. Other models postulate somewhat different processes. For example, one could start at an even more basic level (when something novel happens), divide the unfolding appraisal process differently (into four parts), or add an additional type of appraisal (such as compatibility with internal or social norms) (Scherer, 1988). Most theories do agree, however, that the early stages involve relatively simple judgments that are made very fast and usually automatically (that is, without conscious awareness or control) (Lazarus, 1984; Zajonc, 1984).<sup>6</sup> Later stages of the process may be more complex, slower, and often involve conscious thought processes. Finally, appraisal seldom occurs instantly and is over and done with; instead, as time goes by, as new information comes in, or as we think and talk about emotionally charged events, the appraisal process con-

<sup>6</sup> Frijda (1993) comments on the early stages of appraisal being linked to causes or antecedents, whereas later stages elaborate an already operative emotion. As Frijda says, the two "coalesce into a sense of reality," but this raises the interesting question of whether we would have worked ourselves up into a frenzy about the trials and tribulations of do-it-yourself carpentry without the original, very simple impetus – hitting one's thumb with the hammer.

tinues. Appraising an event that is as intense, complex, and important as the death of your mother may go on throughout the rest of your life.

Whether appraisal occurs instantly or takes longer, there is no doubt that it commands resources that have been developed over one's lifetime – knowledge, beliefs, experiences, plans, and sense of self and others (see Lazarus, 1991, for knowledge; Markus & Kitayama, 1991, on self and others; Oatley, 1992, on plans and experience). Your feelings about your mother's death draw on all the knowledge that you have about her life, on your deepest beliefs about the nature of life and death, on your experiences together, on your thoughts about your relationship with her, on your plans for a future without her, and on your sense of self as your mother's son or daughter. If you are very young, her death can shake the foundations of your social world, undermining your confidence that people are responsive to your needs (Bowlby, 1969a, 1969b). It is hard to capture these complexities except to say that emotional appraisal draws on the deepest aspects of our beings. Appraisal is not only a matter of deciding whether an event is good or bad, your fault or mine, frightening or manageable; it is also the process of understanding the meaning of events in the broadest and deepest sense.

Appraisal processes also give us a way of viewing emotion as social (Van Hooft, 1994). Meaning is not created by people living on their own private planets; it is created by people who talk with one another, live in groups, and experience a social world in part inherited from their forebears. We live in societies that offer us ways of interpreting life. The meaning of your mother's death, for instance, may be found in talking with your father, your siblings, or other people who knew her. It may be found by reading a religious text, by consulting a shaman, or through a culturally based ritual such as a funeral. It may be found in a renewed appreciation for your own children or in a commitment to cure cancer.

*Appraisal in Conversation.* With this brief sketch of appraisal processes, we can begin to address the question of why social interaction is such a ripe domain for emotion. Several theories start emotion with novelty – something new happens, new information comes to light, or the world is seen in a new way. By its very nature, conversation is supposed to be about something new. Conversations develop as new information is added to what is already taken for granted, and you

violate a basic conversational rule if you tell people things they already know (Clark, 1992; Grice, 1975). Sometimes we do talk about the same old things, but that is to maintain social bonds, to try to find a new angle on an old issue, or perhaps just to avoid silence. But, let's face it: those are not our most emotionally charged conversations.

Emotion also comes from events that are relevant to our concerns. And since we can talk about anything, we can talk about our deepest concerns and have the intense feelings that come with them whenever we want. Of course, sometimes we choose to do this and sometimes we do not, as anyone who is grieving can tell you. Sometimes the weight of feelings is too heavy to bear, and a little light-heartedness is needed. Emotions are involving, to be sure, but they can also be draining.

What makes conversation especially rich in emotion, however, is the simple fact that it involves two people who have to coordinate with one another and whose concerns may or may not be the same (Oatley & Larocque, 1995). When the topic of discussion is an important concern for everyone, the conversation can be an emotionally powerful one, as it often is in important decision-making meetings or in support groups. But when one person dominates the conversation with issues that are of concern only to herself, the conversation is boring to the other (Jones, Hobbs, & Hockenbury, 1982; Leary, Rogers, Canfield, & Coe, 1986). If each person has important concerns that compete and interfere with the concerns of others, the conversation can be charged with anger or hostility. And this assumes that people's concerns are set in advance, which they obviously are not. One person can bring on guilt, jealousy, love, hate, or joy by bringing up old concerns or by producing new ones.

Coordination between partners in conversations occurs at many levels, and they are all grounds for emotion. Partners have to coordinate the chance to talk and to listen, which in itself is no small task and can lead to feelings of frustration if one person is constantly interrupted, never gets a chance to say anything, or cannot get his or her partner to talk (Wiemann & Knapp, 1975). Partners have to coordinate understanding and being understood, which is such a basic goal of interaction that, again, success can be exhilarating and failure can be painful, especially if the misunderstanding is about issues of great concern. As illustrated in the example about one's mother's death, the range of appraisals that are possible is wide, so the chance of misunderstanding is great.

Moreover, a virtually limitless range of other goals can be pursued

through conversation, and we know that emotions are tied directly to goal facilitation and interference. Goals that are typically pursued in conversation can be grouped into three basic categories: accomplishing a task, presenting oneself in certain ways, and managing social relationships. To complicate matters, all three goals are pursued simultaneously in most conversations – a coordination nightmare in itself. Tasks range from figuring out who will take out the garbage to deciding the fate of nations, and all can be facilitated or impeded by conversation. Conversations in which tasks are accomplished can be joyous (think of productive meetings); conversations in which tasks are impeded can be disappointing (think of having a proposal rejected); and conversations in which no progress is made can be frustrating or boring (think of unproductive meetings).

When people converse, they also risk their selves and their social identities. The self is nearly always bound strongly to emotion (Higgins, 1987), and support of or challenges to self-image and self-esteem occur almost constantly in everyday conversation. When we receive praise we feel proud, when we are blamed we feel guilty, when we are complimented we feel joyous, when we are insulted we feel angry. We apologize to try to forestall or mitigate the anger of others. In conversation, we try to present ourselves in a certain light – as competent, likeable, or powerful (Clark, Pataki, & Carver, 1996; Jones & Pittman, 1982). If other people respond as we wish – if they admire us, like us, or fear us – all is well. But if not, our very selves may be on the line, evoking strong emotions.

When you realize that emotion is grounded in the fate of personal goals, it is easy to see why close relationships command such profound and enduring emotions. Close relationships, by definition, require coordination on many issues of mutual concern over long periods of time (Kelley et al., 1983). Relationships that facilitate or interfere with so many important, long-lasting concerns are capable of evoking powerful emotions and are sources of our greatest delights and distresses. When they go well, they go very well. Friends, family, and other close connections are our greatest source of happiness, and love is a peak experience in life (Argyle, 1987: 14–15, 130). When they go badly, they are horrid. Conflict is dreaded, disruption is traumatic, divorce takes from two to four years to get over, and social isolation can be debilitating or even fatal (Atkins, Kaplan, & Toshima, 1991; Sillars & Weisberg, 1987; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989; Weiss, 1975; Wilmot & Hocker, 1998).

Yet it is important to remember that events are not appraised for emotional meaning just so that we can feel good or bad about them. If emotion stopped at appraisal, emotions would just roll around inside to no real purpose. We appraise events so that we can *do* something about them or at least make an informed choice not to do anything. The active side of emotion is to ready the body, to prioritize action, and to express this state to others.

### *Physiological Changes*

Emotion produces changes in the body that are far too extensive and complicated to consider at length here. For a sampling, there are changes in heart rate, blood pressure, blood flow, respiration, sweating, gastrointestinal and urinary activity, secretion, pupil dilation, trembling, hormonal reactions, brain waves, and muscle tension (Frijda, 1986: 124–175). Such physiological changes have long been considered an important component of emotion, but controversy still rages over just how important it is (Candland 1977: 22–39; Cannon, 1929/1984; James, 1884/1984). It is tempting to consider physiological change (especially arousal) *the* defining feature of a true emotion for several reasons. First, it produces a clean distinction between emotions and other related entities like thoughts, moods, and attitudes. Everyone knows that emotion is embodied, so if bodily changes occur, that's emotion. Second, physiological changes provide very reliable, high-quality data. The data are so pure that they can (and sometimes must) be gathered by machines, completely unsoiled by human hands. Third, early influential experiments showed that injections of epinephrine (adrenaline) could be interpreted as anger or euphoria, depending on the circumstances. Arousal produces emotion, so arousal must be the essence of emotion (Schachter & Singer, 1962).

If only it were that simple! First, physiological changes may distinguish emotion from cognition, mood, and attitudes, but they don't distinguish emotion from the effects of exercise, drugs, or sex (Berscheid, 1990; Cannon, 1929/1984; Reisenzein, 1983). Physiology saves us from some quagmires but gets us into others. Second, physiological data turn out to be much less solid than we would hope. Physiological changes may occur in some situations that evoke an emotion, but not others or in situations that evoke different emotions. They may occur in some people but not in others. They can be controlled, at least to some degree (as biofeedback instructors assume). And there are no



completely reliable or pure indicators of emotion (Frijda, 1986: 124–175). Third, early arousal-based theories have been criticized on a number of grounds, an obvious one being that emotion is not usually produced by shots of adrenaline in everyday life. If you adopt the process model, you can argue easily that arousal-based theories lop off the part of the emotion process that gives emotional meaning to events in the first place.

It seems then that physiological changes have no special status as indicators of emotion and instead must find their place among other components within emotion theories. Ideally, we would find a distinct physiological profile for each basic emotion that we could use to discriminate among different emotions. Reviews of the evidence show mixed results. Emotions have somewhat distinct profiles, but they are not distinct enough to discriminate neatly, and they are too variable within each emotion to fit the ideal (Frijda, 1986: 161, 164; Lang, 1988: 180–181). At the least, arousing emotions (like anger) should be different physiologically from those that make the body less aroused (like sadness). Unfortunately, volumes of studies on arousal have failed to pin arousal down to a general, diffuse, and unitary physiological arousal. The best that can be said is that the jury is still out, awaiting further data (Lazarus, 1991: 75–78).

A coherent theory of physiological change as part of the emotion process probably also awaits a firmer connection between physiology and emotion. Depending on the theory you consult, physiological changes may precede other components, may feed into action tendencies, or may be largely epiphenomenal. There can be little doubt, however, that physiological responses to emotional stimuli have their own dynamics. For example, the body may become accustomed or habituated to an emotional stimulus and weaken over time, or it may become sensitized and strengthen over time. Physiological responses may take time to come on and time to go away; worse yet, how long they take to go away may depend on factors that change (Frijda, 1986: 141–142).

*Physiology in Conversation.* Certainly there are many communicative situations in which physiological reactions play major roles – intense speech anxiety, marital quarrels, or episodes of passionate love (Leary & Kowalski, 1995: 128–155; Levenson & Gottman, 1983). Some people argue that emotion occurs only when physiology plays a role, but others argue that this is emotion only in its fullest, most prototypical

form. Emotionlike experiences, such as moods and feelings that do not produce dramatic physiological changes, probably occur more often, especially under mundane circumstances such as talking about the events of the day (Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1994).

Physiological reactions may be an important factor, however, in the more subtle, emotional or emotionlike processes by which people adjust to each other's nonverbal cues indicating involvement. Several theories of communication, including expectancy violation theory (Burgoon & Hale, 1988), discrepancy arousal theory (Cappella & Greene, 1982), and arousal-labeling theory (Patterson, 1983) address physiology from somewhat different perspectives, but for all, arousal is central to explaining approach and avoidance tendencies in moment-to-moment interaction (Cappella, 1981). In one study, for example, when one person in an interaction changed from moderate involvement to either high (e.g., closer distance, more touch, more smiling and nodding) or low (pulling away, avoiding eye contact, or facing away), the other person registered this violation of expectation as a change in physiological arousal (as measured by heart rate and skin temperature) (Le Poire & Burgoon, 1994). Whether people are aware of feeling excited, anxious, or just uneasy is unclear, but they do tend to adjust their behaviors in response to those of the other person.

No one really knows exactly what physiological responses communicate to others. Many changes, such as changes in heart rate or changes in levels of adrenaline, are perceptible only from within. Others, such as changes in blood pressure, are not perceptible at all without special equipment. Neither of these two types of physiological response can be communicated directly to other people (except when lovers come close enough to hear each other's heartbeats or feel cold chills, for example). Other physiological responses, such as pupil dilation or sweaty palms, are too subtle to have widespread effects on social interaction (except in cases such as staring another down or shaking hands). Some physiological reactions, however, are blatantly obvious and may communicate important messages. Blushing, for example, may serve as an "involuntary remedial display," indicating to others that you know you have made a faux pas and feel embarrassed about it (Leary & Meadows, 1991), or it may indicate that you feel ambivalent about the attention you are getting when someone praises or flirts with you (Frijda, 1986: 167-168).

It is very likely, however, that the primary function of physiological

change is to prepare for action (communicative or otherwise) and sometimes inaction. Anticipating an important public speech, for instance, gears up the body in ways that can be used for good or for ill. One important mission for teachers of public speaking is to help students guide their physiological arousal toward dynamism rather than debilitation. Conversely, sadness gears down the body in ways that seem to be counterproductive but that may help to conserve and restore resources until priorities can be reassessed and new meanings found in renewed activity (Cochran & Claspell, 1987; Klinger, 1975, cited in Lazarus, 1991). But on the whole, it seems that physiological changes per se are less important than how they prepare us to act.

#### *Action Tendencies, Action, and Expression*

Emotion wouldn't be emotion without the urge to act and express (or the urge not to act, in the case of sadness). At best it would be lively cognition, but not anything that truly *moves* us, as the term *e-motion* implies. Because of emotion, we may be inclined to move toward or away from someone, to act or give up, to cry or sing, to help or hide. Action tendencies may exert subtle influences on communicative behavior that are not as overt as the more prototypical expressions of emotion such as facial expressions. For instance, the tendency to move toward or away from others has its communication counterpart in responsiveness (Davis, 1982), immediacy (Andersen, 1985), interpersonal warmth (Andersen & Guerrero, 1998a), communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1982), or shyness (Crozier, 1990). We can see the tendency toward hyper- or hypo-activity in animated or relaxed communicator styles (Norton, 1983). For instance, dynamic stage performers may have a whole cluster of tendencies that include nervous energy, enthusiasm, and extraversion.

Action tendencies are also manifested more concretely in communicative behaviors such as variations in eye gaze (toward or away), interpersonal distance (close or far), voice volume (loud or soft), amount of talk (loquacious or reticent), and any number of others. But such communicative behaviors are multifunctional and thus do not indicate action tendencies (and emotion) unambiguously (Patterson, 1983). Someone could stare at you, move closer, and yell because she is angry or because the party is noisy and she doesn't think you can hear her.

Approach and avoidance behaviors are a normal part of family life,