

## Conceptualizing Emotions Sociologically

It was not until the 1970s that sociologists undertook the systematic study of emotions (Heise, 1979; Hochschild, 1975, 1979, 1983; Kemper, 1978a, 1978b; Scheff, 1979; Shott, 1979). In hindsight, this late date is remarkable in light of the fact that emotions pervade virtually every aspect of human experience and all social relations. How could sociologists have turned a blind eye to emotions? Not all sociologists did, of course, but with only a few exceptions, sociologists had studied just about every aspect of human behavior and somehow given comparatively little attention to the dynamics of emotions.

Moreover, with just a moment's thought, it immediately becomes evident that emotions are the "glue" binding people together and generating commitments to large-scale social and cultural structures; in fact, emotions are what make social structures and systems of cultural symbols viable. Conversely, emotions are also what can drive people apart and push them to tear down social structures and to challenge cultural traditions. Thus, experience, behavior, interaction, and organization are connected to the mobilization and expression of emotions. Indeed, one of the unique features of humans is their reliance on emotions to form social bonds and build complex sociocultural structures.

Why sociologists underemphasized the study of emotions for many years is less interesting than how sociologists have theorized about emotions over the last three decades. Although sociologists were late to recognize the importance of the topic, they have made up for lost time (Thoits, 1989). In fact, the study of emotions is now at the forefront of microsociology (Stets, 2003a; Turner, 2000, 2002), and, increasingly, emotions are seen as a crucial link between micro and macro levels of social reality.

In this book, we outline and analyze the various approaches that sociologists have taken to explain emotions. Other disciplines, particularly psychology and neurobiology, have long been interested in the nature of emotions, but as we will come to appreciate, sociologists bring new insights

to the conceptualization of emotions. In general, whereas disciplines such as psychology focus on individual processes that bring about emotions, sociology places the person in a context and examines how social structures and culture influence the arousal and flow of emotions in individuals.

Given the diverse fields that now focus on emotions, one immediate definitional problem emerges: What are emotions? Moreover, what do we mean by notions of sentiments, moods, affect, feelings, and other terms commonly associated with the study of emotions (Gordon, 1981; Heise, 1979; Hochschild, 1983)? Surprisingly, there is no definitive answer to these questions (Van Brakel, 1994). Indeed, there are almost as many answers as there are theoretical approaches explaining the dynamics of emotions. In emphasizing the term *emotions* in this book, we are asserting that this concept subsumes the phenomena denoted by other labels – sentiments, affect, feelings, and the like – which are often employed by theorists and researchers.

## ELEMENTS OF EMOTIONS

### Social Construction

For most sociologists, emotions are socially constructed in the sense that what people feel is conditioned by socialization into culture and by participation in social structures. Cultural ideologies, beliefs, and norms as they impinge on social structures define what emotions are to be experienced and how these culturally defined emotions are to be expressed. Emotions are thus social constructions. This emphasis on the “construction” of emotions is understandable in light of sociologists’ interests in explaining how emotions influence, and are influenced by, the flow of interaction in social structures regulated by cultural norms, values, and beliefs. The most extreme advocates argue that *all* emotions are socially constructed, being defined by culture and practice. For example, Steven Gordon (1990) asserts that the origin of emotions is not in biology but in culture. Members of a society learn from others the vocabulary (linguistic labels), expressive behaviors, autonomic responses, and shared meanings of every emotion associated with different types of social relationships. For example, jealousy signals the intrusion of another into a valued relationship; anger marks harm imposed by another; grief represents the loss of a significant other; gratitude denotes relief stemming from assistance by another; and so on for all human emotions. Thus, emotions emerge from situations that are intimately social, with individuals learning the appropriate emotions and how to use them in different types of relationships.

The culturally approved linguistic labels that individuals apply to their emotional arousal are an important element in the constructionist perspective. Early on, Gordon (1981) maintained that emotional arousal was

socially interpreted and based on *sentiment vocabularies* that have evolved in a society. Through the socialization process, individuals learn an emotion vocabulary that enables them to name internal sensations associated with objects, events, and relations that they encounter. For example, we learn to apply the label “love” to situations where autonomic symptoms such as the flow of epinephrine (adrenaline) and an increased heart rate occur in the presence of another whom we see as attractive. Furthermore, these vocabularies of emotions may differ among subcultures in a complex society (e.g., women are more likely than men to differentiate between liking and loving). In general, social constructionists would argue that physiological arousal is so diffuse and nonspecific that there can be no emotion until actors label it as a specific feeling, mood, or sentiment. For constructionists, these labels come from culture rather than biology.

For constructionists, not only is the nature of an emotional response unclear until it is labeled by a name provided by culture, the behavioral gestures signaling to others the arousal of a particular emotion are also very much constrained by culture. Signs of embarrassment, for example, involve culturally specified “hiding behavior” such as covering all or part of the face, averting the gaze, and turning the head away from others (Scheff & Retzinger, 1991). Moreover, people often strategically control their expressive demeanor in order to conform to feeling rules (Hochschild, 1983) or to manipulate others in a situation (Clark, 1990).

Although it is useful to recognize that emotions are influenced and constrained by cultural norms, values, beliefs, and vocabularies, there is too much evidence supporting the universality of many emotions and their expression across cultures to sustain the claim that all emotions are socially constructed (Ekman & Friesen, 1975; Kemper, 1981). Despite this evidence, social constructionists like Gordon (1990) argue that emotions that are relevant to interaction in the modern era (e.g., sympathy, intergroup hostility, resentment) are unlikely to be universal because they will have evolved in response to the unique structure and culture of complex societies; consequently, the substance of emotions will differ across varying types of societies.

What the social constructionist perspective neglects is that the activation, experience, and expression of emotions are intimately connected to the body (Wentworth & Yardly, 1994). Although emotions are almost always constrained and channeled by sociocultural contexts, the nature of the emotion and its intensity are still driven by biological processes. Even though sociocultural contexts are typically what activate those body systems generating emotions like fear and anger (Wentworth & Yardly, 1994), these body systems, once activated, are not wholly constrained and channeled by cultural vocabularies and norms. Thus, we must always consider the biology of emotions as a critical element in understanding how they operate.

## Biology

Emotions always involve a biological component. William James (1884), the early Harvard psychologist, argued long ago that emotions are the outcome of physiological changes in the body. When a person perceives something in the environment, there is an immediate visceral change, such as activation of the sympathetic nervous system, which registers particular effects to the organs and parts of the body. These physiological changes lead one to link the bodily sensation to an emotion. For a social constructionist, the linkage is a purely cultural convention that labels certain body sensations as a particular emotion, whereas for those concerned with neurology, physiological changes per se generate particular kinds of emotions, regardless of cultural labels.

Most sociologists have been reluctant to consider the effects of biology on *any* social process. This rather parochial view about biology is particularly problematic in the study of emotions, where it is very clear that biological processes are involved in the production of human affect. It is generally presumed by sociologists that because humans have a large brain and can thereby generate culture to regulate social conduct and social organization, it is unnecessary to consider biological influences on human behavior and organization. If we think about the matter for a moment, however, we see that in social settings – from the subtle emotions arising in episodes of face-to-face interaction to large-scale events like collective mobilizations and mass protests – human biology is driving the arousal and flow of emotions. Although it is true that culture and social structure channel emotions, and indeed may even regulate their overt manifestation, sociologists also need to look deeper into the biology of emotional arousal for a more complete understanding of how emotions affect social life.

Emotions emerge as the brain activates four body systems: the autonomic nervous system, the neurotransmitter and neuroactive peptide systems, the more inclusive hormonal system (including neuroactive peptides), and the musculoskeletal system, which interacts with all of the other systems to generate observable emotional responses (LeDoux, 1996; Turner, 2000). These systems are more than passive motors that are driven by culture and social structure. They are engines that have independent effects on the arousal and expression of emotions.

For the study of emotions, the brain can be roughly divided into two general regions: the neocortical (newer cortex) and the subcortical. In Figure 1.1, the areas below the corpus callosum (the gap in the brain through which neuronets connecting the two sides of the brain pass) are subcortical, having evolved before animals had any or much of a neocortex. The neocortex sits on top of these older areas and envelops them. The neocortex is a comparatively late development in the evolution of animals (MacLean, 1990). For humans the neocortex is very large, much larger than

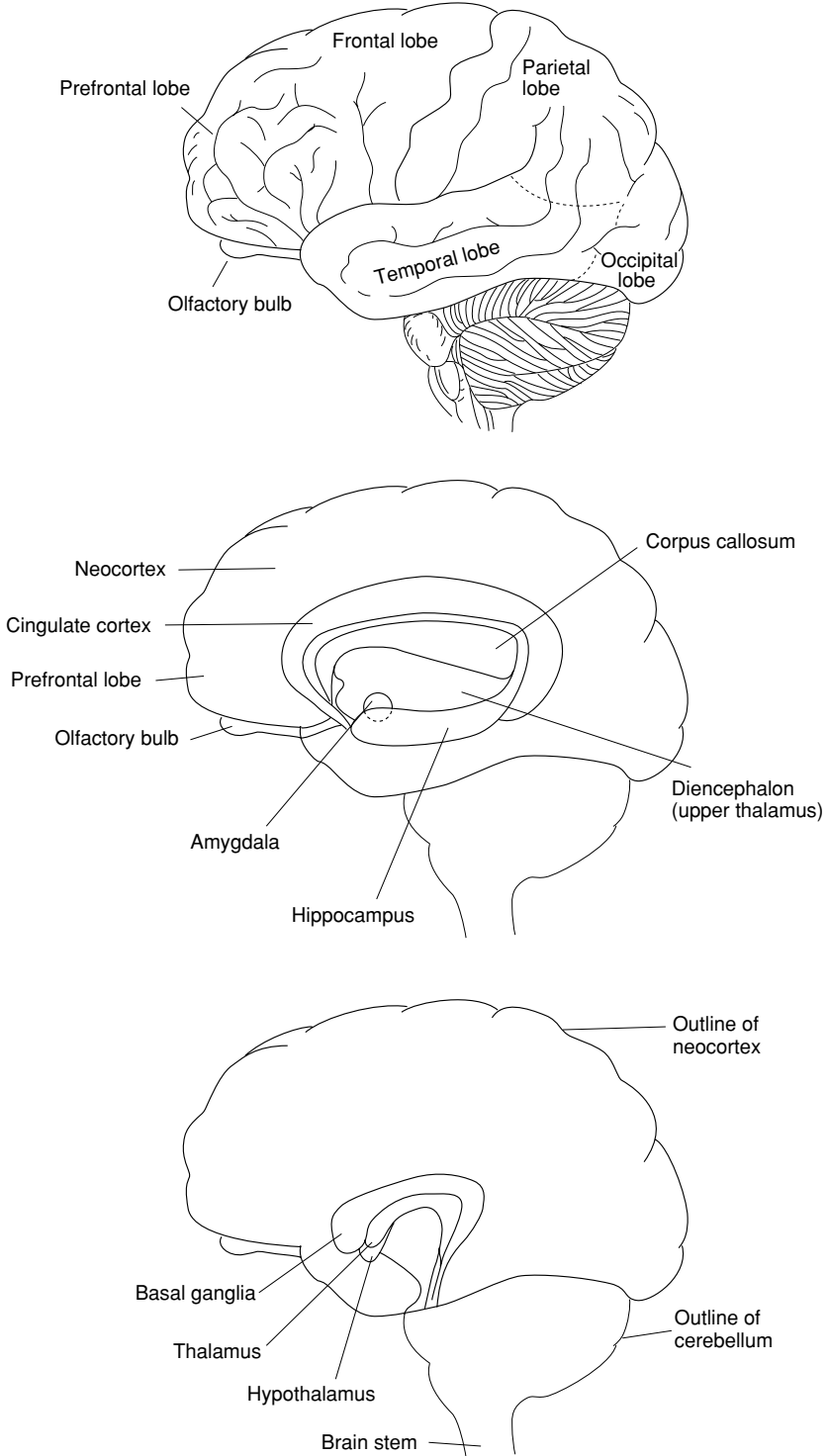


FIGURE 1.1. The human brain and emotions.

in any other animal, controlling for body size, which is roughly correlated with brain size.

It is in the subcortical areas of the brain that emotions are ultimately generated through the autonomic, neurotransmitter and neuroactive peptide, hormonal, and musculoskeletal systems. Like the neocortical region, subcortical areas activating emotions in humans are much larger than in other mammals, including humans' closest relatives, the two species of chimpanzees. Thus, as natural selection rewired the human brain, it not only enlarged the neocortex, enabling humans to develop culture, but it also rewired ancient emotion centers and, in essence, gave these more power as well.

For a person to have a "feeling" requires that the neocortex be stimulated by neuropathways emanating from subcortical areas of the brain. Moreover, not all emotional arousal reaches the neocortex to become a conscious feeling, for it is now clear that humans have unconscious memories (probably stored in the hippocampus) that activate body systems generating emotional responses. As a result, others often respond to emotions about which individuals exhibiting them may have little or no conscious awareness.

There is, then, a neurology to emotions that should not be ignored by social scientists. Indeed, with just an elemental understanding of how sensory inputs are processed by the brain, we can gain an appreciation for how important it is to understand more about neurology. All sensory inputs – hearing, seeing, touching, and smelling – first go to the thalamus, which is buried deep in the middle of the subcortical regions of the brain. Different segments of the thalamus process the signals for distinctive types of sensory inputs and then send two signals: one to the subcortical areas of the brain and another to the appropriate region of the neocortex (occipital lobe for sight; temporal lobe for hearing; parietal lobe for touch; and the olfactory bulb for smell, which is the only sense modality that remains in the subcortical portions of the brain).

Because the subcortical areas of the brain are closer to the thalamus, this area is activated before the appropriate sensory area in the neocortex is stimulated. This is why, for example, your heart is pounding (autonomic nervous system response) and you have already moved your foot (musculoskeletal system activated by neurotransmitters) before you become consciously aware of your fear of a snake that you now "see" in front of you (LeDoux, 1996). The amygdala – the center for fear responses in the subcortex – has received the message and got the emotional reaction going before you are consciously aware of the presence of the snake and, indeed, of your fear. The brain in this manner processes all sensory inputs from the environment. Thus, even in social situations, our brain has already activated subcortical areas and pushed responses before a person can put a cultural label on the bodily changes he or she is experiencing. Of course, when a cultural label is applied to the activation of body systems,

the emotional dynamics change, but the body systems continue to exert power over perceptions and actions.

The most ancient area of the brain devoted to emotional responses is the amygdala, in different parts of which the emotions of fear and anger are generated. The amygdala in humans is much larger, controlling for body size, than in our closest living relatives (Turner, 2000). However, much of this increase in size is due to extra areas for pleasure that have been added to the human amygdala, a rather curious rewiring of the human brain. Perhaps this adding of areas for pleasure onto the primary structure for two negative emotions – fear and anger – allows humans to exhibit more complex emotional states that involve both negative and positive elements, as is outlined in Tables 1.2–1.4 later in this chapter (see attending discussion).

Other emotions do not appear to be lodged in discrete centers like the amygdala, but it is now clear that the anterior cingulate cortex is responsible for some manifestations of happiness as well as empathy revolving around the ability to experience the emotional pain of others (Singer et al., 2004). The posterior cingulate cortex may be partly responsible for sadness and related emotions, although neurotransmitter reuptake and peptides as well as more general hormones are also very much involved. Even where discrete areas of the brain can be identified as a source of emotional activation, however, emotions are generated through systems of interconnected pathways within and between subcortical and neocortical areas of the brain. Additionally, much emotional arousal from various regions of the subcortex is routed through the amygdala to the prefrontal cortex, which is the front portion of the neocortex responsible for rational thought, planning, and control of emotions. This kind of routing indicates that the amygdala operates as a kind of neurological switching station that became more prominent in humans. What these examples of the wiring for emotions suggest is that neuroscience and social science can no longer ignore each other when studying emotions.

Thus, many human behavioral capacities, such as the production of emotions, are hardwired and cannot be explained solely by socialization into a culture and by the constraints of social structures. Moreover, emotions are generated by a complex interplay between the neocortex, where language and culture reside, and older subcortical regions of the brain, where emotions are ultimately generated. Emotions are ancient adaptations, and the areas of the brain producing emotions evolved long before animals had a visible neocortex, to say nothing of a neocortex capable of producing culture. It seems unlikely, therefore, that culture could easily supplant biological structures that had been evolving for millions of years in the mammalian line.

Indeed, we can see the independent effect of biology when people become so angry, sad, or fearful that they cannot “control themselves” even when cultural rules indicate that they should express different emotions

with less intensity. When people “lose it,” body systems are simply overwhelming cultural prescriptions and proscriptions. These kinds of intense emotional responses are only a dramatic case of an ongoing process whereby the experience and expression of emotions are being driven by body systems that have been activated by subcortical regions of the brain. Of course, when the emotions are less intense, culture can regulate and control them, but culture never completely overrides the biological processes at work.

These subcortical transformations suggest that the enhanced use of emotions to forge social bonds in humans is not purely cultural. There is a hardwired basis for enhanced emotionality lodged in the subcortical regions of the brain. The systems generating emotional responses were also rewired, and there can be little doubt that biology exerts some independent effects on human emotional arousal and, more interestingly, interacts with cultural and social forces in ways that sociologists can no longer ignore.

Thus, although the argument of social constructionists is not wholly wrong, it is too one-sided and fails to recognize that the neurological wiring for the production of emotions cannot be completely usurped by cultural and social structure forces. Conversely, neuroscientists often cannot explain the reason for various modular wirings in the brain for emotional responses because they do not understand the sociocultural selection pressures that operated during the emergence of humans from their hominid ancestors. As the ancestors of humans increasingly used culture to organize social life, natural selection was working to enhance the emotional capacities of humans in ways that would generate commitments to culture and social structures. In teasing out just how emotions operate in cultural processes and in social structures, sociologists can contribute to evolutionary biology and neuroscience by drawing attention to how culture and social structures were pushing for the rewiring of both neocortical and subcortical systems in the brain that are responsible for the large array of emotions that humans generate and use to build social relations.

Recent efforts in sociology to understand the biology of emotions (e.g., Kemper, 1990b; Ten Houten, 1999; Turner, 1999a, 2000) recognize the reciprocal relationship between biology and sociocultural processes. Still, most sociologists have been reluctant to recognize the importance of biological processes in theorizing about emotions. Instead, they have emphasized the effects of situational cues, social structures, and cultural norms in determining the very nature of emotional arousal (Wentworth & Ryan, 1994). As sociologists, this emphasis is perhaps appropriate, but in pursuing this research agenda, sociologists tend to underemphasize, if not ignore, the biology of emotional responses. Biology becomes, in essence, a “black box” that sociologists refuse to enter. As a result, sociological theories and research will always be incomplete, especially approaches that continue to assert that all emotions are socially constructed. Sociocultural construction



of emotions is certainly involved, but culture and social structure do not completely trump the neurology of emotions. Emotions are the result of a complex interplay among cultural, social structural, cognitive, and neurological forces. The goal should be to figure out how they are interconnected.

### **Cognition**

If biological processes are important in understanding emotions, so, too, are cognitive processes. The cognitive approach to emotions has been the dominant perspective for psychologists in recent years (Cornelius, 1996). This approach emphasizes the role of judgments in influencing people's emotions. The central idea is that emotions are not formed until there is an appraisal of objects or events in a situation. Following this appraisal, emotion is aroused (Arnold, 1960). The evaluation of objects/events is guided by the degree to which they are potentially beneficial or harmful to actors as they pursue goals. If judged as potentially beneficial, positive emotion will result, whereas if evaluated as potentially harmful, perhaps because they interrupt goal accomplishment (Mandler, 1975), negative emotion will follow, and coping devices will emerge to manage or get rid of the negative emotion (Lazarus, 1991).

For Magda Arnold (1960), once emotional arousal has occurred, it is followed by a unique, underlying physiological response. Thus, physiology follows the interpretive process and is the end point rather than the starting point (the biological view) of emotions. Whether biological responses initiate or follow from emotional experiences, we can at least recognize that perception and thought are often implicated in the process. When people attend to and interpret situational cues, their interpretations and accompanying emotions often activate underlying biological processes. Conversely, when biological processes are activated, these biological cues can be subject to thought and reflection, which in turn can alter the flow of emotional experience (and perhaps the underlying biological processes generating this experience).

### **Sociology**

From a sociological perspective, the foregoing discussion reveals that emotions involve certain elements: (1) the biological activation of key body systems; (2) socially constructed cultural definitions and constraints on what emotions should be experienced and expressed in a situation; (3) the application of linguistic labels provided by culture to internal sensations; (4) the overt expression of emotions through facial, voice, and paralinguistic moves; and (5) perceptions and appraisals of situational objects or events. Not all of these elements need be present for emotions to exist, however. For example, in contrast to the view of emotions as cultural constructs,

people have unconscious emotional memories and, as a result, activate biological systems and emit cues while being unaware of their emotional response. At other times, individuals can repress emotional arousal, with the result that they do not experience the emotion or signal it to others.

Even if all the elements of emotions just listed are in operation, they may be evident to varying degrees. For instance, people may not be able to label their feelings precisely as they experience physiological changes in their body, or they may be unsure as to what events activated their feelings, even as they perceive that they are being emotional and, hence, must abide by cultural rules about what emotions they should reveal to others.

The sociological perspective can potentially offer a way to integrate the diverse elements involved in the arousal and flow of emotions. People occupy positions in social structures and play roles guided by cultural scripts. They are able to do so because of their cognitive capacities to perceive and appraise the situation (its structure and culture), themselves (as objects), others, and their own physiological responses. Emotions are ultimately aroused by the activation of body systems. This arousal generally comes from cognitive appraisals of self in relation to others, social structure, and culture. Once activated, emotions will be constrained by cognitive processes and culture.

No one element – biology, cultural construction, or cognition – is *solely* responsible for how emotions are experienced or expressed. Rather, these elements all interact in complex ways that no one discipline can fully explain. A sociologically oriented approach to biology and cognition can potentially provide a means to explain the relationship among body system, cognitive processes, and cultural constructions.

Unfortunately, the sociological theories to be reviewed emphasize some of these elements to the relative neglect of others. No theory in sociology has adequately conceptualized all of these elements, to say nothing of their causal connections to each other. Nonetheless, considerable progress has been made within sociology alone in theorizing emotional dynamics, and coupled with theories from other disciplines, a more general theory of emotions is perhaps not far off, as seemed to be the case just a few decades ago.

#### HOW MANY EMOTIONS ARE THERE?

##### **Emotions as a Motivating Force**

Humans experience and employ a wide variety of emotions that mobilize and push them to respond to each other and to situations in particular ways. Anger, for example, drives individuals to be aggressive toward others in a situation, whereas happiness leads people to establish bonds with others. Thus, emotions are a motivating force because they not only order people's