Interpersonal Emotion Dynamics in Close Relationships

Emotions play a powerful role in close relationships. Significant progress has been made in understanding the temporal features of emotions associated with the development and maintenance of close relationships across the life span. This advancement has revealed further questions: Which theories help conceptualize interpersonal emotion dynamics? What are the ways in which researchers can assess and model these dynamics? How do interpersonal emotion dynamics manifest in different close relationships? Do these emotion dynamics contribute to the maintenance or dissolution of relationships?

Interpersonal Emotion Dynamics in Close Relationships addresses these and other questions by bringing together state-of-the-art perspectives from scholars widely recognized for their contributions to the study of emotions in relationships. Each chapter defines interpersonal emotion dynamics, reviews methodological or empirical work, and offers important directions for future research. This volume will be a valuable resource for students, researchers, and practitioners interested in understanding the role of emotions in close relationships.

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Foreword

Bernard Rimé

When we consider our everyday experience, it seems obvious to us that our emotions and those of our loved ones are continually in dynamic interaction. With our children, our parents, our spouses and others to whom we are close, the emotional interaction is ongoing. These emotional exchanges in close relationships in fact constitute, moment after moment, the framework and the plot of the existence we share with others. It is therefore intellectually puzzling to observe that it took more than a century of developments for psychological science to echo this common observation.

At the dawn of the scientific study of emotion in the late 1800s, the impetus was clearly in line with intra-individualist concepts. The pioneers of the field, Darwin (1872), James (1884), and Cannon (1916), viewed emotions as automatic processes with an evolutionary history of service to the individual's adaptation. Later, many followed Watson's (1929) anti-vitalist positions and considered emotion as a disturbed condition of the organism during which it temporarily loses its potential for adaptive action (e.g., Claparède, 1928; Pribram, 1967; Young, 1943).

Constructive concepts of emotion came to the floor in the 1960s and 1970s with the advent of cognitive (Arnold, 1960; Frijda, 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Scherer, 1984) and neo-Darwinian views (Ekman et al., 1972; Izard, 1971; Tomkins, 1962). Still, the focus of these theories remained essentially intra-individualist. Cognitive theories insisted upon cognitive appraisal, subjective experience and action tendencies. Though neo-Darwinian views stressed the importance of facial expression of emotion, it did not result from an interest in emotional social interaction. Facial expression was examined as embodying the signature of primary emotions. A social psychology perspective on emotions was still to come. In the spirit of these times, I remember our total surprise when in the 1980s in a collaborative study initiated by Klaus Scherer to investigate the components of emotional experience in ten European countries (Scherer et al., 1986), we faced clear evidence of the interpersonal nature of most emotions. Indeed, the antecedents of fear, anger, joy and sadness reported by our numerous respondents resided in interpersonal relationships in more than three-quarters of cases. We had not anticipated this.

In the meantime, studies of child development opened up major breaches in individualistic views of emotions. With the theory of attachment, Bowlby (1969) demonstrated that the children's emotional regulation was inseparable from an interpersonal dynamic with their caregivers. Meltzoff and Moore (1977) provoked a shock by evidencing infants' precocious capacities for imitation, and thus demonstrating infants' in-born disposition to social interaction. Many other developmental researchers (e.g., Bruner, 1977; Campos & Stenberg, 1981; Tronick et al., 1977) further documented the interactive nature of children-caregivers relationships and the essential role played by emotional exchanges in these relationships.

In the 1990s, adult research in turn began to focus on the place of social interaction in emotional life. For example, it was found that the emotional episodes were systematically shared with the entourage (Rimé et al., 1991). Social functions of emotion were highlighted (Keltner & Haidt, 1999). An examination of the cultural variations of emotions was undertaken (Mesquita & Frijda, 1992). In this context, calls for the study of the social aspects of emotions have multiplied (e.g., Fischer & Manstead, 2008, Parkinson, 1996, Van Kleef, 2009). The interest in this field then quickly spread to the point of opening even to the study of collective emotions (for review, von Scheve & Salmela, 2014) – a question that had been totally forgotten in the twentieth century.

The book that follows will reveal to its readers a well-circumscribed field of research that arose in the context of this evolution. This current volume examines precisely this fact that we all experience in everyday life but that emotion research has so far ignored: that our emotions are shaped by our close personal relationships, and reciprocally, that we constantly affect the emotions of our close ones. This book demonstrates that the investigation of interpersonal emotion dynamics in personal relationships has evolved with great steps toward its maturity. The contributions, gathered by Ashley Randall and Dominik Schoebi, allow us to discover the work of the major actors of this current. They provide extensive documentation on the rapid progress of this new field. The high level of scientific demands is their common feature. Readers will find an overview of the conceptual frameworks useful in this area of investigation. They will discover findings from studies examining bodily components of the interactive emotional dynamic, both at the biochemical and at the physiological level. They will also find abundant scientific observations on the staging of this dynamic in family relations, in interpersonal relationships, and in intimate relationships.

In the background, readers will guess the importance of the information provided by this research for a scientific lighting of clinical interventions. Obviously, problematic interpersonal relationships are at the core

of many demands of the public for psychotherapeutic support. In reading this book, it becomes clear that research on the dynamics of emotional interactions can provide keys to these problematic relationships in many, if not all, cases.

Let me add that this book also gives a testimony of the scientific maturity reached today by the research on human emotion. Over the last fifty years, this research has undergone tremendous conceptual and methodological enrichments. It can now address issues that we did not dare – or that we did not imagine – addressing until recently. This evolution contradicts the many who doubted that human emotion could lend itself to scientific investigation.

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