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978-0-521-00449-7 - Speaking from the Heart: Gender and the Social Meaning of Emotion

Stephanie A. Shields

Excerpt

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CHAPTER 1

That “vivid, unforgettable condition”

The US presidential campaign and election of 2000 will be remembered for years to come. An intensely close race was followed by an unprecedented cliffhanger election that drew to an uneasy conclusion thirty-nine long days after the votes were cast. In this election the ideological lines between the two parties and their candidates (Democrat Al Gore and Republican George W. Bush) were clearly drawn, and for party diehards there was no doubt whom to choose. Indeed, the two candidates were diametrically opposed on every key policy issue. But during the final months of the campaign, polls indicated that the election hinged on a massive swing vote of undecided voters and voters with only a weak preference for one candidate over the other. A rift as big as the Grand Canyon separated the candidates' politics, but public debate continued to drift toward concern about who was the nicer guy. By late in the campaign, discourse was all but disconnected from the issues that anchored each side, and dominated by preoccupation with style and personality. The press and both camps viewed the race as one that depended on which man could better persuade the public that he was a genuine, feeling human, apparently the criterion for fitness to be president. The question of emotional authenticity became critical to winning the election, and it seemed that in the end the voters favored the candidate they thought projected the more authentic and heartfelt persona.

Throughout the campaign and the tense post-election period, the potential for emotion to make or break one of the candidates was a persistent background theme. Vice-President Al Gore, long renowned for emotional stiffness, caused a stir by passionately kissing his wife Tipper before his acceptance speech at the Democratic convention. His impatient sighs during the first televised debate with Bush were blamed by many for a serious fall in the polls. Meanwhile, Texas Governor George W. Bush worked throughout the campaign, on the one hand, to overcome the tendency to smirk and, on the other, to use his relaxed style as the foundation for campaign momentum. The political rhetoric of each camp, too, conveyed an understanding that emotional qualities have to be communicated in just the right way. Bush's self-styled

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“compassionate conservatism” conveyed an intellectual position made human by emotion. Gore’s achievement of persuasively speaking from the heart in his concession speech was widely praised for striking precisely the right balance between dissatisfaction with the injustice of the outcome, and principled support for the victor. *Emotion* was at issue, whether expressed through the candidates’ tone of voice, language of feeling, facial expression, or an apparently ineffable emotional “style.”¹

What do we mean by *emotion*? We use “emotional” to refer to what a person is doing in a particular situation – “Stop being so emotional!” – and we also use it to describe an enduring feature of personality – “She’s the emotional type.” What is it that says *emotion* to us? Something about the situation? Something about the person? At least some of the time the meaning of emotional even depends on who is doing the labeling. We learn early in life that most of the time the label “emotional” is one to be shunned. But at the same time we learn there is a positive side to the image of emotionality, too: A person who “speaks from the heart” is far more credible than someone who merely speaks. When, then, is emotion a valuable quality and when is it a defect?

A clue can be found in the ways in which emotion is gendered. Returning to the 2000 campaign, we can find many instances in which the common sense rules we believe to be true about emotion seemed to be turned on their head. For example, late in the campaign both candidates eagerly accepted invitations to appear on Oprah Winfrey’s popular afternoon TV talk show. Appearing a week apart, they each took care to emphasize their concern and emotional authenticity.² When Oprah quizzed Gore about his public image as wooden, Gore turned the question into an opportunity to affirm his depth: “They’re going to say something, so compared to the alternatives, that’s OK . . . I’m a little bit more of a private person than a lot of people in the profession.” Bush showed his own emotional *bona fides* by tearing up as he talked about his wife Laura’s difficult pregnancy with their now teen-aged twins. Why did Gore go out of his way to portray himself as emotional? Why did Bush allow himself tears – the quintessential sign of feminine emotionality?

The election controversy, however, pales next to the profound and permanent effects of the terror attacks of September 11, 2001. The attacks created an atmosphere in which public expression of intense emotion was an important part of coming to terms with the horror of the events. For men and women alike, raw emotions of anger, grief, determination, and even hope dominated the difficult and confusing aftermath. In the months that have followed, publicly-shared emotion gives us a place in which to work toward collective understanding of how deeply our world has changed. In this changed world, the power of emotion to be constructive or destructive is brought home again and again.

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In life-changing and in mundane ways emotion is a fundamental human quality. Only in exceptional times does emotion escape a gendered cast.

Everyone knows the prevailing emotion stereotype: She is emotional, he is not. Preschoolers identify sadness and fear with females, and adults of both sexes rate females as the "more emotional" sex. In early work my students and I asked undergraduates to describe "the most emotional person you know," and over 80 per cent of them named a woman first. The stereotype is so powerful that it serves as an overarching organizing principle for other related beliefs. In everyday conversation "stereotype" has a pejorative connotation, but stereotyping is a kind of cognitive short-cut through which a set of features are held to be common to a group. Stereotypes offer a way to think about a group without thinking through the nuance required when one considers the individual members of the group. The problem with stereotyping comes from how inflexibly it is applied, not necessarily from the stereotype's content.³

We might be tempted to think of questions of gender as a modern problem, but the linkages between gender and emotion show up long before contemporary American society. No less a philosopher than Plato centuries ago draws a connection between emotion and gender. The *Phaedo* gives a moving account of a collection of friends gathered together to watch Socrates, their intellectual leader, conform to the state's decree and commit suicide by drinking hemlock. Anticipating the heavenly happiness that awaits all just persons (by definition male) in the afterlife, Socrates dispassionately accepts his own imminent death. When the state's messenger arrives with the poison, Socrates takes it from him "quite cheerfully . . . without a tremor, without any change of colour or expression." The narrator continues:

Up till this time most of us had been fairly successful in keeping back our tears; but when we saw that he was drinking, that he had actually drunk it, we could do so no longer; in spite of myself the tears came pouring out, so that I covered my face and wept broken-heartedly – not for him, but for my own calamity in losing such a friend. Crito had given up even before me, and had gone out when he could not restrain his tears. But Apollodorus, who had never stopped crying even before, now broke out into such a storm of passionate weeping that he made everyone in the room break down, except Socrates himself, who said: "Really, my friends, what a way to behave! Why, that was my main reason for sending away the women, to prevent this sort of disturbance; because I am told that one should make one's end in a tranquil frame of mind. Calm yourselves and try to be brave." This made us feel ashamed, and we controlled our tears.⁴

In this brief account we recognize the sense of emotional uncontrollability, the contagion of tears, the rapid transition that can occur between

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emotions – all qualities familiar to our everyday experience of emotion. Just as clearly, this account also brings into focus the complex intersection of gender and emotion. Socrates' reaction crystallizes the fundamental issues of the gender-emotion relationship: Did Socrates admonish his companions because they were behaving *emotionally*, because they were behaving *like women*, or because they were behaving *emotionally like women*?

What is an emotion?

Before beginning to address questions about gender and emotion, another question takes priority: What is emotion? We are all experts on emotion – we used them to influence others before we could talk, we have been thinking about what they are and what they mean ever since we could reason, and we have all at one time or another wished fervently that we could better understand and manage them. For many years I have taught a university course on the psychology of human emotion and each term I begin by asking class members “What is emotion?” and “How do you know when you've got one?”⁵ These deceptively simple questions help to reveal much of the taken for granted assumptions and difficult to articulate practical knowledge shared in contemporary American society. At first students confidently define emotion as a kind of “feeling.” When pressed to define feeling, they describe emotion as “mental feelings” and “bodily feelings,” as feelings different from feelings of hunger and thirst, as feelings different from senses like touch or hearing, and as feelings different from more enduring attributes of personality or mood. When further pressed, they identify “emotion” as something that is incited by some thing (an idea, an event, an action), observe that emotion reflects a situation that is perceived as having personal significance to the individual, and note that objective reading of the situation by others may not match the subjective reading we, as emotional selves, may give it. They invariably observe that, even with a lot of work, emotion, once it gets going, seems very hard to control. No matter how fully elaborated their definition, each group of students tends to gravitate toward *experience* as the first and central defining feature of emotion. Their focus on emotion-as-feeling reflects the way in which emotion is most often talked about in everyday conversation, that is, in terms of its “felt” quality, the aspect of emotion that is self-consciously experienced. Indeed, psychologist Elizabeth Duffy sixty years ago maintained that the scientific study of emotion was handicapped by the exclusive identification of emotion in everyday life with its “felt” quality, the sense that emotion is a “vivid, unforgettable condition which is different from the ordinary condition” in which one finds oneself.⁶

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How do academic experts answer the question?

Emotion is studied from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives, in areas as diverse as psychology, sociology, history, neuroscience, anthropology, linguistics, philosophy, and psychiatry. It is difficult to generalize across such divergent perspectives. Still, it is fair to say that contemporary work tends to focus on the processes that generate emotions, the signs and symptoms of emotion, the intrapersonal and social regulation of emotion, and the consequences of emotion for the individual and for interpersonal relationships.⁷

One of the most striking features of current emotions research is the large degree of overlap between everyday understanding of emotion and the definitions offered by experts in its study. Formal theories tend to diverge most from the everyday conceptualization of emotion in going beyond simply equating all emotion with experience. Classic definitions offered by researchers typically include some notion that emotion is a response to some precipitating event, and often that emotion involves some sort of readiness to act or respond. They frequently, but not always, include some reference to the bodily feelings associated with emotion, such as awareness of heart beat or trembling. Similarly, many note the special cognitive qualities that comprise the experience, such as absorption in what the emotion is about, that is, the object of the emotion. Emotion is also viewed as having an hedonic quality, that is, a quality that elicits approach or withdrawal, pleasure or pain, a sense of well-being or vulnerability. Fifty years ago, in the heyday of behaviorism, emotion was generally construed as a disruptive level of physiological or cognitive arousal that interferes with organized, goal-directed behavior. Today emotions researchers, regardless of their field of study, generally agree that emotion is essentially a short-term adaptive response which, because it is not the result of deliberation and reflection, may not have the most advantageous long-term consequences. In other words, emotion seems to operate more as a tactical response to an immediate situation, rather than as a strategic move toward a long-term goal. Nearly all researchers acknowledge that there is a set of behaviors that are recognizable as a class called "emotion" common to all mammalian species. Beyond these areas of common agreement, however, researchers differ in their positions regarding the operation of emotion, emotion's function, and the extent to which expression and "felt" experience are inevitable components of the occurrence of emotion.

The variety of approaches to emotion is reflected in the difficulty that we have in devising a simple definition of emotion that covers the complexity of the phenomenon. In their textbook on human emotions Keith Oatley and Jenny Jenkins (1996, p. 96) offer a definition that encompasses major themes in contemporary study of emotion. They

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note that even though emotion is a familiar and everyday concept, it is no simple matter to distill a definition that is sufficiently precise or that would be universally accepted. Oatley and Jenkins offer a three-part definition of emotion:

1. An emotion is usually caused by a person consciously or unconsciously evaluating an event as relevant to a concern (a goal) that is important; the emotion is felt as positive when a concern is advanced and negative when a concern is impeded.
2. The core of an emotion is readiness to act and the prompting of plans, an emotion gives priority for one or a few kinds of action to which it gives a sense of urgency – so it can interrupt, or compete with alternative mental processes or actions. Different types of readiness create different outline relationships with others.
3. An emotion is usually experienced as a distinctive type of mental state, sometimes accompanied or followed by bodily changes, expressions, actions.

I would take this careful and comprehensive definition and sum it up this way: *Emotion is “taking it personally.”* Whether the emotion is love for my newborn baby, irritation at myself for procrastinating, fear for my friend who has breast cancer, or pride in my country, each of these situations entails perception of someone or something as having urgent significance for my own well-being or interests. I will have more to say about this in later chapters, here I just want to emphasize the theme that something about the *self* is at stake in emotion.

The difficulty in arriving at a single, simple definition of emotion is reflected in the proliferation of competing theories. In fact, in the third edition of his comprehensive textbook on emotion in the late 1980s, Ken Strongman identified no fewer than twenty-six major psychological and philosophical theories of emotion! The field has continued to grow dramatically since then, and so has the number of competing theoretical accounts.

How to explain emotion

The most influential contemporary theories fall into one of two broad categories: fundamental emotions theories and cognitive-appraisal theories. Fundamental emotions theories assert the existence of a small set of innate basic emotions which may interact with cognitive processes, but which comprise a separate biological system. They tend to look for culturally-universal expressive features of emotion and use those features as the means to investigate what they consider basic emotion processes. Cognitive-appraisal theories think of emotion as a process of evaluation and so emphasize the role of cognitive processing in the

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generation of emotion. They do not make a sharp distinction between emotion and cognition. Information processing models represent a new generation of cognition-based theories and often borrow from the concepts and approaches of artificial intelligence to map out the dimensions or steps in processing that lead to one affective state or another. Social constructionist models share with cognitive-appraisal theory a focus on the meanings assigned to situations. Social constructionism emphasizes emotions, emotional experience, and display of feeling as cultural artifacts, rejecting the notion of biologically "basic" emotions. The constructionist (also referred to as *constructivist*) point of view has played a significant role in the anthropology and sociology of emotion. American academic psychology, with some important exceptions, has been far less welcoming to this approach.⁸ In fact, psychologists' critiques of constructionism often reflect a fundamental misunderstanding of the position, confusing constructionism's emphasis on the process of meaning-making for an indiscriminate rejection of "biological" factors.⁹ In this field dominated by theory, there are, of course, other perspectives, but they tend to be held by a minority of researchers. One, which is distantly related to cognitive-appraisal theories, derives from the philosophical standpoint of phenomenology. Phenomenological theories stress the embeddedness of the emotion in the relationship between the individual experiencer and the context in which emotion occurs. This approach has begun to have wider influence through the work of philosophers and European social psychologists.¹⁰ Psychoanalytic theory and therapeutically-based psychologies have so far had more limited impact on current trends.¹¹

Neurobiological research, meanwhile, is on the verge of transforming many of the long-held and cherished assumptions about emotion's "built-in" or "hard wired" features. Work on animal models has shown how biological features ranging from neural structures to hormonal state mutually affect and are affected by emotion-linked learning and experience. Research on humans, benefiting from technological advances in brain imaging and the burgeoning field of cognitive neuroscience, has revealed much about the interrelationship among brain structures involved in emotion and emotion-linked processes.¹²

Why I study emotion

As long as I can remember I have been curious about how people make sense of their own experience and try to understand others' experience. Early in my undergraduate days I realized that I was far less interested in the exotic cases described in my abnormal psychology textbook than in what preoccupies ordinary people in everyday life. Garden variety

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emotion – emotion as people talk about it, think about it, and try to manage it – amazed and continues to amaze me. As a psychology graduate student I wanted to understand how young children think about their own emotions and how they learn to make inferences about what other people are feeling. As my involvement in feminist psychology grew, I realized that many intangibles contribute to these judgments. When children, or grown-ups for that matter, believe a person to be “happy” or “emotional” or neither, they make this complex social assessment on the basis of how the person looks, what the person is doing, and the situation that the person is in. Their own subjective values, expectations, and stereotypes inevitably color what they see and how they think about it in both subtle and obvious ways. These features to me seem as central in importance to an account of human emotion as are the physiological, neural, and cognitive capacities that are built-in dimensions of our emotion equipment. As with any researcher, my own background colors my ideas about what are the best questions for researchers to ask and the best strategies to answer those questions. My training in social and developmental psychology and my years-long work in feminist psychology and women’s studies have shaped this book and expanded its scope beyond conventional research psychology. For example, I have found it helpful to look to history, literature, and popular culture as I explore the intriguing connections between gender and emotion. On the other hand, my psychological framework emphasizes “the individual” and I struggle to press beyond the Western, individualized definition of personhood that constrains American psychology’s thinking.

Where do I place myself on the continuum of emotion theory? My own position is that humans and other mammals share a built-in capacity for what in human societies is identified as emotion. The meanings assigned to “emotion” vary across cultures and historical periods. At different times and in different places people have thought about what emotion encompasses, who has a right to which emotions, the rules of how to show and feel emotion, understanding about the causes of emotion, how emotion is related to other concepts such as consciousness, mind, intentionality, and so on, in many different ways. I do believe that capacity for and the range of expressions that go with emotion have their roots in our evolutionary heritage. But I also believe that *everything* about emotion changes when the cognitive capacity for symbolic representation, especially language, is introduced. We have the capacity as humans to think about our own feelings and to be conscious of our own consciousness, and so we can conceptualize emotions and use them to create and maintain culture. This is what sets human emotion apart from that of other mammals. Having the capacity for mental representation and language enables us to use language to describe and label emotion,

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to represent emotion symbolically, to attach moral and aesthetic values to emotion, and to link emotion to other social categories such as gender. The built-in part of emotion does not require language or the capacity for self-conscious reflection for it to work. "Meta-emotion," that is, thinking about one's own and others' emotions, introduces a new and complex set of questions about emotion functioning that is unique to human experience.

Emotion and its social meaning

In conventional psychological research, researchers direct their efforts toward identifying the components, causes, and consequences of emotion in the hope of revealing emotion's true nature. They take as a starting point concepts of "emotion," "emotionality," "facial expression of emotion" without questioning whether these "foundational constructs" should, in fact, be accorded a special status. For example, for some time American psychologists have debated whether the domain of emotion is better represented in terms of discrete emotion types or in terms of its underlying structural dimensions.¹³ Within this often lively and sometimes heated debate, however, questions of when, why, and how "emotion" is distinguished from "not emotion" seldom figure. Examining foundational constructs – the unexamined starting point, I believe, leads inevitably to placing emotion in a social context: How is the meaning of emotion negotiated? By whom? And under what circumstances?

Who says it's "emotion"?

What happens when we ask how foundational constructs are given shape and invested with substance by science, popular culture, and interpersonal relationships? The naturalizing of emotion has consequences for how gender and gender relations are construed in the course of daily life. Because concepts of emotion and emotionality are differentially applied to women and men, the gendered emotion scheme inevitably connects to systems of power. Feminist ethnographies reveal the intersection of emotion and gender as a critical locus for revealing how a culture incorporates emotion into its system of social organization. Catherine Lutz (1988), for example, shows that among the Ifaluk of the South Pacific emotion is understood in terms of social relationships, and particular emotions are expected to be connected to one's position to others in terms of age, social rank, and gender. Her analysis challenges the Western presumption that emotion is essentially private and internal and highlights the stereotypic equation drawn between emotion and femaleness which devalues both.¹⁴

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When we problematize foundational constructs, that is, ask questions about assumptions rather than just take them as axiomatic, the focus of the inquiry shifts dramatically. In the case of emotion and gender, the question changes from “Who is more emotional, women or men?” to questions that ask “What does it mean to say someone is ‘emotional’?” and “Who decides what is or is not ‘emotional’ behavior?” Agneta Fischer (1993, p. 303), for example, examined the empirical research on sex-related differences in emotion, and concluded that the stereotype of female emotionality “tells us more about Western sex stereotypes than about women’s actual emotions.” So I begin with the every-day, taken for granted. What “everyone knows” about emotion can obscure some of the most provocative and interesting questions we might ask. And it is revealing to look for anomalies that violate emotion rules. The behavior that doesn’t quite fit often reveals the most about unquestioned assumptions. For example, everyone knows that “real” American men are not emotional, but what about the football field, the basketball court, and anywhere else where competitive sports are played? Emotion is absolutely critical to succeeding in sports, and concern for handling emotion the right way is every bit as important when dealing with defeat. In Chapter 6 I explore the truism of “masculine inexpressivity” to illustrate this point.

Bedrock beliefs

People acquire a rich store of beliefs as they learn to be effectively functioning members of culture. Beliefs about emotion encompass beliefs about what makes good or bad emotion, beliefs about emotion and the body, and beliefs about emotion’s relationship to other behaviors such as sex and aggression, to name only a few. This network of beliefs is the basis for expectations we develop about when, where, and how emotion should occur and what the occurrence of emotion signifies. These *bedrock beliefs* are so embedded within the dominant culture that they seem unquestionably to embody the true nature of emotion.

Some of the bedrock beliefs about emotion are explicit and easily named and recognized. In Western cultures, the emotion stereotype that identifies emotion as feminine is an obvious example. Other beliefs, in contrast, are so deeply embedded in the dominant culture that they do not meet the threshold of recognition: one does not realize that one holds the beliefs, nor that one sometimes resists them. These implicit bedrock beliefs are only made apparent by scrutinizing patterns in how emotion is represented in language, social institutions, or social practice. Even when these beliefs are not shared by marginalized or minority cultures,