

Introduction

Ironically, we probably know more about the rings of Saturn than the emotions we experience every day.

(Lindsay-Hartz, 1984: 689)

With a burst of new interest, scholars in the social sciences and the humanities are talking about emotion, and the public is joining in. There are several reasons. Sheer intellectual curiosity compels us to try to understand whatever is mysterious, and emotions are mysterious to most people. They are complicated physical, mental, social, moral, and cultural phenomena that provide new frontiers for human understanding. Feelings may be especially mysterious to many middle-class European Americans (academics in particular) because suppression has become something of a way of life (Stearns, 1994). Emotions have been ignored, denigrated, and cut off from the rest of social experience in much of the Western philosophical tradition (Solomon, 1993). They are viewed as beastly, infantile, crazy things that must be controlled for society to operate smoothly and rationally, or so everyday talk and practices suggest. Academic investigation, however, is all about challenging accepted truths and opening up new possibilities. As Woodward (1996: 774) puts it: "Scholars in the humanities and social sciences have been working assiduously to rescue the emotions from cultural contempt."

The world is also forcing us to come to terms with emotion. Carmichael (1991: 185–186) writes that "This century, more than any other in human history, has brought us a terrifying awareness of the dark and evil capacities of human nature. . . . It has been the realization that rationality and reason have failed that shocked us." Today's papers have news about massacres in Mexico and Algeria; not long ago they

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were in Bosnia, Rwanda, and El Salvador. Emotional problems surround us – road rage, epidemic levels of depression, homicidal jealousy, suicidal love, and genocidal hatred and fear. Rationality does not seem to be an effective antidote, so perhaps the solution lies in understanding emotion on its own terms.

Emotions need to be recognized and respected in everyday talk and interaction because emotion is meaningful and meaning is emotional, whether we like it or not. By emotional meaning, I do not mean the kind of abstract, derived meaning that we find in dictionaries, but the meaning by which people live their lives. It is the kind of meaning we refer to when we say “He’ll never know how much he meant to me” or “Do you know what it means to lose your job?” or more trivially “You know what it will mean if you don’t clean your room.” It is meaning with emotional force and with practical implications. It is also moral meaning, the meaning of how we *do* live our lives and the meaning of how we *should* live our lives. Finally, it is meaning founded in interaction, the meaning that we share in varying degrees, some of us as members of the same culture and all of us as human beings on the same planet.

Each chapter of this book deals with a different issue related to emotional meaning, and to some extent the arguments and evidence of each chapter set up those that follow. For example, the emotion process that is described and analyzed in Chapter 1 is used throughout to organize other topics. At the basis of each chapter is also a false dichotomy that oversimplifies our view of emotional meaning and neglects its full richness and complexity. One of the gems of wisdom that comes from traditional cultures is that great insight and profound connection can be found in dualities such as male–female, life–death, good–evil, yin–yang, and energy–matter. More recently, we have learned that particles and waves are united as integral and inseparable parts of the whole. It was Niels Bohr who said that “profound truths [are] recognized by the fact that the opposite is also a profound truth” (cited in Wurmser, 1995: 5). The trick is not to try to resolve dualities but to explore and appreciate the complexities that they reveal.

The problem with dichotomies is that when we get beyond our initial intuitive conceptions of emotion, it becomes harder to take sides. First, one position is recognized as extreme, then the other is, and our conceptions of emotion bounce back and forth with this argument, that piece of evidence, or yet another scholarly trend. Schol-

ars lose patience, the dichotomies themselves begin to blur, and it becomes clear that emotional communication does not admit to such simple characterizations. Rather than assuming inconsistency between extreme positions, it becomes more fruitful to struggle to find a way of thinking about emotion that broadens our thinking and admits both. We have learned a great deal from considering the dual nature of emotion as both corporeal (bodily) and cognitive (Damasio, 1994; Leavitt, 1996), as both rational and irrational (de Sousa, 1987; Solomon, 1993), and as both individual and social (Averill, 1986; Parkinson, 1995).

Chapter 1 addresses the issue of how important emotion is in everyday interaction. We have long assumed that if we could just be rational rather than emotional, social life would be calm and we would make better decisions. Now we are starting to recognize that emotion may be good for social life and decisions, perhaps even essential. Two dichotomies underlie this chapter: the dichotomy between emotion as rare or pervasive and the dichotomy between irrational emotion and dispassionate reason. If we think of emotion as rare and inherently irrational, we will try to minimize emotion in conversations, except perhaps in the unusual case of loving, intimate talk. Alternatively, if we think of emotion as rare in its most dramatic manifestations, but also pervasive throughout social interaction, we will try to tune in to the emotional aspects of *all* conversation and understand how it guides us in making decisions, relating to others, and living our lives. Moreover, if we think of emotion and rationality as mutually dependent, rather than as opposites, we will try to understand how the two work together.

Chapter 2 addresses the question of how and why emotion is communicated. How do you let someone know that you're angry? You just, well, get angry. You yell, you stomp your feet, you use bad words, you pout. There's no explaining it; that's just how it happens. And when someone gets angry with you? You either get it or you don't. If you don't get it, there is no way to understand why you didn't. In any case, it was probably the other person's fault; after all, he or she is not being reasonable. Besides, if you ignore it, it may just blow over. That is one way of looking at communicating emotion. Another way is to view emotional exchanges not only as understandable, but also as requiring substantial skill to handle well. Emotions do not just "come out that way"; they are communicated in ways that are more or less accurate, more or less subtle, and accomplish goals to

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varying degrees. Moreover, we can work to develop our skills in communicating emotion effectively in order to manage a wide variety of social situations.

The dichotomy that underlies this chapter is between emotional communication as easy or as difficult. There are dangers at both poles. If you believe that communicating emotion is easy, you may believe you will be in touch with other people's feelings automatically and you may become complacent. If, on the other hand, you believe that communicating emotion is difficult, you may give up the hope of really communicating your own feelings or understanding the feelings of others. In fact, many skills are both easy and difficult. The rudiments are easy; anyone can use them without special training, and most of the time they work well enough. But you do not have to throw up your hands in despair if communicating emotion does not come easily. You can build the knowledge and skills that make it possible to connect with others' emotions in a variety of ways.

Chapter 3 addresses the question of whether emotional communication is spontaneous or strategic. We talk about emotions being expressed – “pressed out” like espresso coffee. Fear of public speaking, for instance, might creep into your tone of voice, leak out in your gestures, or show up in your choice of words. Even if you can control whether and how they come out, you cannot control the feelings themselves, and you would not want to if you could. They are your genuine feelings. But then again, maybe they aren't. Emotion is a complicated process with many components that are alterable in a variety of ways. What's more, you can use your emotions strategically to pursue many different kinds of social goals. You do it every day whether you realize it or not, and many of our social institutions encourage you. You rein in your anger at your child's spilled milk or you put on a happy face for the customer.

Within Chapter 2 lies the dichotomy between the spontaneous and the strategic. We assume that emotions are either genuine, real, and expressed spontaneously or that they are phony, artificial, and manipulated strategically. Spontaneity is, of course, honest and good; strategy is deceptive and bad. But, again, we see that the dichotomy does not hold up. Regulation is built into the very substance of the most genuine feelings. In addition to deciding consciously to feel this way and act that way, we also automatically and unconsciously orient our feelings to our goals and adapt to other people. Spontaneity and

strategy blend seamlessly into one another such that they become virtually impossible to disentangle.

Chapter 4 addresses the issue of how emotional meaning is constructed through communication. The usual metaphor here is one of illness or disease. When will he ever “get over” her? It’s been three years since the accident, and she seems all right physically but still hasn’t “recovered” emotionally. If she would just “let it out” she would feel better (like vomiting up spoiled food). But this is not the best way to think of emotion. Communicating emotion is not a matter of purging, but of constructing meaning from lived experience. Powerful feelings are not so much a sign of trouble as a way of keeping up the pressure to understand an emotionally charged experience and reconcile it with other beliefs about the world and ways of living.

The dichotomy underlying this issue is that feelings are in themselves either therapeutic or debilitating. It comes in many different versions. One is that feel-good emotions (happiness, love) are therapeutic, but feel-bad emotions (guilt, anger) are debilitating. Another is that intense emotions are crazy, but moderate emotions are normal. Yet another is that certain emotions are unpleasant but necessary (grief comes to mind), and others are just plain bad for you (guilt is a good candidate). In any case, you need to figure out which emotions you should cultivate and which you should discourage to promote your own well-being. In place of the therapeutic versus debilitating dichotomy, however, you can think of strong emotions as a sign that you need to find new meanings and make adjustments. Emotions are neither good nor bad in themselves, but they give you important information about how you are orienting toward the world. Grief promotes readjustment to loss, and love promotes changes in the way you relate to others, but grief is not necessarily bad and love is not always good.

Chapter 5 addresses the simultaneously personal and social nature of emotional meaning. One side says that your emotions belong to you; they are your business and nobody else’s. You may show them to others, but they are yours to show or to hide. Invading others’ emotional space is invading their privacy. The other side says that a good deal of our emotional life is shared. We react to each other emotionally (“I’m ashamed of you”), we share common emotional experiences (the football game last weekend), we socialize children emotionally (“Look happy about your gift!”), and we negotiate emo-

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tions together (“Please don’t be mad at me. I’m sorry”). In a similar way, emotion is ghettoized in the private, personal sphere. It may not be proper at work, but you can let loose at home. In fact, emotion is a more proper topic for academics to study in the context of personal relationships than it is in the context of work relationships or public affairs. (In support of this claim see Andersen and Guerrero’s 1998b *Handbook of Communication and Emotion*, but for an exception see Fine-man’s 1993 *Emotion in Organizations*).

The false dichotomy that underlies Chapter 5 is that emotions are *either* private and located in the individual *or* public and located in the social world. Generally speaking, Americans do not even hesitate on this one. Of course, emotions are inside you. It doesn’t even make sense to think of emotions as out there between people; at least it didn’t until several writers came along to make a case for the social. My favorite is Parkinson’s (1996) article with the direct and unambiguous title “Emotions are Social” (also McCarthy, 1989). But why do we have to choose? Can’t emotion exist inside us *and* in the social world that we share? Can’t they be both private and public, both secret and shared, or at least some of each? When you feel awe that a man walks on the moon, is it a personal or a social experience? When you feel embarrassed when you trip onstage, is it personal or social? Well, really, it is both.

Chapter 6 addresses the issue of how emotional messages communicate moral meaning. A common view is that love (or jealousy, sadness, or disgust) is what it is. You can’t condemn people for how they feel any more than you can condemn them for their headaches or the size of their ears. Besides, how would we go about evaluating emotions? The answer is – we do it all the time. We say “You shouldn’t be jealous of your girlfriend’s study partner” or “You should feel guilty about cheating on your taxes” or “How can you do that – it’s disgusting!” Indeed, we are very generous in evaluating other people’s emotions whenever we believe that our own interests or the common good is at stake. How and how much we should judge each other’s emotions is a moral issue in itself, but emotions do not and cannot hide from moral judgments.

The dichotomy that underlies Chapter 6 is between the “is” and the “should be.” You can operate in either the realm of the real or the realm of the ideal, but moving back and forth is a hard road traveled mainly by saints and philosophers. And emotions are clearly real, not ideal. Real as they may be, however, they are founded in ideals. What

is anger without something gone wrong, often some form of perceived injustice? What is shame without expectations for proper behavior? What is sadness without some recognition that what was lost was and should be valued? What kind of society would we have without compassion for other people, regret for wrongdoing, horror at atrocities, or disgust at the unclean?

Chapter 7 addresses the issue of how well we can understand emotions across cultures and across historical periods. When we go to an exotic place and see the local people, we often assume that we know how they are feeling. If they are smiling, they are happy; if a loved one dies, they cry; if they go along with things without protest, they are agreeing to what we want. Are we right? Well, not entirely. Nor should we assume that their emotions are completely incomprehensible to us. Even though all humans share the same emotional capabilities, and probably some of the same expressions and tendencies to act, emotional meaning is more variable and subtle than most people realize. We may be able to comprehend the outlines of their feelings, but the details and subtleties require deep knowledge of the culture as well.

The dichotomy that underlies Chapter 7 is between the universal and the relative, a permutation of nature versus nurture. Either all humans have the same emotions or they have completely different ones. We seem to want either to assimilate new information into what we understand already or to view it as completely alien (Eiser, 1990: 53–76). But if we have learned anything from the protracted nature versus nurture controversy in other domains, it is that most forms of human behavior are a combination. The more interesting question is *how* nature and nurture combine to produce our emotional lives and *how well* we are able to communicate emotion across cultures.

The issues and dichotomies represented in these chapters are not just academic ones. People who know nothing about the scholarly literature still use their own implicit theories of emotion to guide their action and talk, although largely at an unconscious level. When the chair of a committee asks members to “be reasonable” instead of getting angry, she is opposing emotion in favor of reason. When one person defends an insulting remark with “I was just saying what I felt,” he is assuming that expressions of emotion are amoral and are not subject to criticism. When we look at the smiles of international students and conclude that they like our classes, we are assuming that emotional communication is universal. The stances toward emotion

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that are held by nonscholars no doubt have more impact on how the world works than do scholarly debates. Nevertheless, everyday and scholarly biases often coincide, either because everyday conceptions of emotion guide how scholars think or because scholarship influences popular thinking. I have chosen to pursue both scholarly and practical issues in this book in the hope of addressing both audiences and exploring gaps that may be found between popular and scholarly notions about emotional communication.

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

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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,