Introduction

In virtually all scholarly traditions that analyze emotion, researchers have historically been divided on a fundamental question: Should human emotions be understood as meaningfully "universal"? While most scholars today, speaking informally, would probably acknowledge that there are both universal and culturally particular elements to human emotional experience, the fact remains that modern research on emotion has, in practice, tended to cluster in *universalist* and *anti-universalist* camps – something that has greatly impacted the overall development of knowledge on the topic.

This Cambridge Element surveys and assesses how scholars have variously responded to this debate, by reflecting on the state of knowledge in psychology, neuroscience, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, history, linguistics, and literary/cultural studies. Section 1 presents the universalist case, while Section 2 presents the anti-universalist case; Section 3 considers attempts to reconcile the two sides, and offers some suggestions on how we might move beyond a reductive opposition.

Though I have a wide interest in both emotion and universality, I am by trade a literary scholar – which means, of course, that most of the fields I survey in this Element are not ones in which I am formally trained. I have attempted to provide as fair and accurate an overview as I possibly can – and I have consulted with scholars within the fields I discuss – but the inescapable fact is that I am an outsider to most of the disciplines I cover. So it is certain that, in places, my approach and claims will appear to some degree idiosyncratic to readers more thoroughly anchored in a given field, and I offer this project with full acknowledgment that (say) a neuroscientist or a philosopher might object to some of the specific ways that I characterize their field. My hope is that the overall assessment I present will excuse the local matters that a more specialized reader might quibble with. My approach is generally historical; I have attempted to represent the development of various fields, and for this reason still make mention of evidence and outlooks that have been subsequently abandoned or revised. I have also rarely attempted to critique or problematize the actual research being presented, but rather have focused on reporting the claims made by the authors; although my own outlook peeks out a bit in Section 3, I have generally attempted to be a neutral observer. For matters of space, it is impossible to offer an overview of approaches to emotion or emotion theory; for this, the most comprehensive resource is Scarantino (2024). Finally, it will be noted that my discussion of "what is universality" is deferred until the final section; this is by design, as scholarship has generally proceeded on both sides of the debate without defining this central term.

Despite its short length, it is my hope that this Element will represent the most complete cross-disciplinary treatment of emotional universality to date, and that readers will leave with a clear sense of the scholarly terrain, from which they may make their own assessments of the evidence and judgments on the issue.

1 The Universalist Case

In the history of human thought, the capacity for emotion has most regularly been understood to emerge from a universal nature that is (in broad strokes) shared by all members of our species. Although accounts have become increasingly sophisticated, the basic belief that emotions are meaningfully universal has enjoyed remarkable currency in the modern era, and continues to profoundly influence contemporary work on emotion in a number of fields.

Psychology

For 150 years, a basic belief in the universality of emotion has been a cornerstone of modern psychology; indeed, in a recent survey of current researchers in the field, 88 percent of affective scientists endorsed the statement "there is compelling evidence for universals in any aspect of emotion" (Ekman, 2016, p. 32). However, this statement belies the fierce theoretical disagreements about emotion that occur in psychology, and the devil is in the details. While most psychologists probably agree that the fundamental capacity for emotion is a human universal, there have been intense conflicts regarding more specific issues, most notably whether individual emotions themselves universally occur in human populations. Those on the pro-side of the debate generally maintain that we can point to a set of specific human emotions that are meaningfully universal – that is, they consistently produce observable manifestations – which are thought to have developed as adaptive responses to frequently reoccurring selection pressures in the evolutionary history of the species.

This universalist position is most readily advocated by a family of *basic* or *discrete* emotion theories (Shiota, 2024). These theories are anchored in the work of Darwin (1872), who famously examined facial expressions corresponding to discrete emotional states: "I have endeavoured to show in considerable detail," he writes, "that all the chief expressions exhibited by man are the same throughout the world" (p. 361). In the mid twentieth century, Darwin's analysis was influentially revived by Tomkins (1962), who largely inaugurated the modern research tradition on discrete, universal emotions (see also Plutchik, 1962). Tomkins argued that there were nine universal emotions, reflected in *innate affect programs* – subcortical structures that, when activated, reliably trigger a pattern of motivational, behavioral, and physiological responses,

including displays of the stereotypical facial patterns investigated by Darwin. Indeed, the presumed universality of emotional facial expression was central to Tomkins's theory, so his students began to seek empirical evidence concerning the cross-cultural facial recognition of emotion (Ekman, 1971; Izard, 1971); these researchers (most notably Ekman) would go on to develop the so-called Basic Emotion Theory (BET), the central theoretical framework that posits the natural existence of a small number of certain categorically discrete, universal human emotions, such as *happiness*, *fear*, *anger*, *sadness*, *disgust*, and *surprise* (Cordaro, 2024; Ekman, 1992, 1999; Ekman & Cordaro, 2011; Levenson, 1999, 2011; Shiota, 2024).

As we will see further in Section 3, BET has evolved considerably over the past half-century, but advocates generally agree that basic emotions are biologically universal evolutionary adaptations that are "physiologically, neurologically, functionally, and behaviorally distinct from one another" (Cordaro, 2024, p. 5). Historically, much BET research has focused on the facial expression of emotion; decades of cross-cultural analysis has led theorists to conclude that each basic emotion triggers a stereotypical pattern of universal facial movements that can be recognized by people across the world at a much higher rate than chance alone (Elfenbein & Ambady, 2002; Ekman, 1993; Ekman et al., 1987; Izard, 1994; Witkower, Rule, & Tracy, 2023). Evidence suggests that other forms of affective social communication may also be universally recognized, such as bodily expression (Witkower et al., 2021) and nonverbal vocalizations (Juslin & Laukka, 2003; Laukka & Elfenbein, 2021; Sauter et al., 2010, 2015). Basic emotion theorists equally argue that discrete emotions characteristically inspire certain response patterns in the body's autonomic nervous system (ANS); particular basic emotions are thought to generate specific ANS responses that can be to some extent distinguished from one another (Ekman, Levenson, & Friesen, 1983; Kreibig, 2010; Levenson, 1992, 2003; Levenson, Ekman, & Friesen, 1990; Levenson et al., 1992; but see Levenson, 2014 for methodological issues). In general, most BET theorists have historically maintained that the central emotions of human life have some sort of discrete, observable universal *signatures* that are biologically grounded in the body.

As mentioned, basic and discrete theories of emotion maintain that particular emotions are universal biological adaptations, so evolutionary psychology (Buss, 2015; Cosmides & Tooby, 2013; Tooby, 2020) provides complementary evidence for the universality of emotion. (Though, to be clear, many nonuniversalist theories of emotion equally ground their models in evolutionary theory, so it is important not to simply conflate an evolutionary approach with a universalist, discrete emotion approach.) Put simply, researchers working in this mode view emotions

as universal adaptations of our species' mental architecture, which emerged in the long course of mammalian development as responses to increase fitness in light of certain ubiquitous situations (Cosmides & Tooby, 2000; Keltner, Haidt, & Shiota, 2006; Nesse, 1990; Nesse & Ellsworth, 2009; Plutchik, 2001, 2003; Tooby & Cosmides, 1990a, 2008, 2015; Tracy, 2014; see also J. H. Turner, 1996, 2021). Many evolutionary approaches to emotion (and psychology more broadly) locate discrete emotions within human nature – that is, "the evolved, reliably developing, species-typical computational and neural architecture of the human mind and brain" (Cosmides & Tooby, 2000, p. 91; see Tooby & Cosmides, 1990b) – and thus universality consequently follows, as further suggested by studies that analyze analogous emotion-like expression in our evolutionary ancestors (Kret et al., 2020; Parr et al., 2007; Vick et al., 2007). A number of discrete emotions have been analyzed in terms of their universal adaptive functions, such as fear (LeDoux, 2012); jealousy (Buss, 2018), anger (Sell, Tooby, & Cosmides, 2009), pride (Cheng, Tracy, & Henrich, 2010), and compassion (Goetz, Keltner, & Simon-Thomas, 2010).

Beyond evolutionary psychology, some researchers in the field of cross-cultural psychology aim to detect not only variants in mental functioning across different populations but also points of regularity and consistency (Keith, 2019; Sinha, 2002). This work has contributed to the development of basic emotion theories by conducting research pointing to the broad universality of emotion in different cultural contexts, most notably in the realm of facial expression and recognition (Hwang & Matsumoto, 2015, 2020; Manokara et al., 2021; Matsumoto, 1990, 1992; Matsumoto & Ekman, 1989; Matsumoto & Willingham, 2006).

Other psychological approaches to emotion complement BET's findings on universality; indeed, some influential scholars like Izard (1977, 1991, 2007, 2009, 2011) do not consider themselves BET theorists per se, but still advocate for discrete, universal emotions. Finally, it must be noted that basic and discrete emotion theories are not the only psychological models of emotion that consider the existence of particular universal emotions. We may also look, for instance, at the category of appraisal theories. Appraisal theory generally maintains that emotions emerge from a computational cognitive process in which humans subjectively evaluate the meaning of stimuli they encounter via a series of categorical criteria (Ellsworth, 2024); along with basic/discrete theories, it is one of the four primary theoretical models of emotion in the contemporary affective sciences. (We will encounter the final two, *psychological construction* and *social construction*, in the next section.) While appraisal theory, broadly speaking, is thus an intellectual competitor of BET, certain models nonetheless posit a similarly universal approach to particular emotions: Moors calls these

"flavor 1" (2014, p. 304) or "biological" (2022, p. 175) appraisal theories. These models, she writes, split emotional episodes "into a limited number of subsets, corresponding to the specific emotions figuring in natural language (e.g. anger, fear, sadness)," and are thus "compatible with affect program theories" (2014, pp. 303, 304). Appraisal theories that might be thought to fall under this umbrella include Arnold (1960), Lazarus (1991), Oatley & Johnson-Laird (2011), and Roseman (1984, 2011, 2013).

Neuroscience

Affective neuroscience seeks to elucidate how emotions function at the neural level (Aromy & Vuilleumier, 2013). For many researchers, a fundamental premise is that the human emotional brain evolved from earlier animal brain systems – with "partly separate neural circuits for different emotion related responses [including] autonomic output, freezing, fixed action patterns, and unconditioned approach or withdrawal" (Rolls, 2017, p. 252) – and thus much work on human emotionality is anchored in a universalist perspective, which maintains that "emotions are ubiquitous across species and evolved by natural selection" (Adolphs & Anderson, 2018, p. 308; see also Adolphs, 2017).

In the 1990s, a number of pioneering neuroscientists began to study the basic neural components of emotion systems, finding structures in the brain that give rise to affective feelings in humans (Johnston & Olson, 2015). "At least for some emotions," Ledoux argued, "the evidence for an innate, biological organization is quite strong" (1996, p. 121); he famously reconstructed the neural pathways of fear responses in the rodent brain, which pointed to human functioning (see also Ledoux, 2000). In his study of patients with brain injury, Damasio argued that the limbic system (particularly the amygdala) was vital to the operation of "primary" emotions, which he describes as "innate [and] preorganized" (1994, p. 133; see also Damasio 1995, 1999, 2003); for him, emotions form a category of *action programmes*, or "sets of innate, programmed physiological actions aimed at addressing the detected [neural] changes and thereby maintaining or restoring homeostatic balance" (Damasio & Carvalho, 2013, p. 144). Though disagreeing with Damasio's emphasis on the role of bodily feedback on emotional experience, Rolls (1999) similarly examined the "neural bases of emotion," taking a primarily evolutionary perspective; he argued specifically that "developments in primates in the structure and connection of neural systems involved in emotion such as the amygdala and orbitofrontal cortex [are] particularly important for understanding emotion in

humans" (p. 75). Somewhat differently, Panksepp (1998, 2005, 2011, 2012; Montag & Panksepp, 2016; Panksepp & Bivven, 2012; see also Montag & David, 2020) identified the basic emotional circuits of mammalian brains, arguing that we can detect neural mechanisms for affective systems related to SEEKING, RAGE, FEAR, LUST, CARE, PANIC, and PLAY; these "underlying circuits for primary-process emotions were evolutionarily programmed/prewired" (Panksepp & Watt, 2011, p. 390). This work, like that of Lane, Reiman, Ahern, Schwartz, and Davidson (1997), assumes that neural correlates for basic emotional functioning can be discovered.

In human subjects, this first wave of affective neuroscience relied on things like lesion, electrical stimulation, and imaging studies to analyze the neural underpinnings of emotions; researchers generally attempted to associate particular areas of the brain with particular discrete emotions. Two early meta-analyses found at least partial support of basic emotion theory; Phan, Wager, Taylor, and Liberzon (2002) associated particular individual emotions with specific locations within the brain, while Murphy, Nimmo-Smith, and Lawrence (2003) identified "considerable support . . . for the affect program accounts of emotion," noting that while emotions may not be "represented by entirely distinct neural circuits, it seems reasonable to conclude that the underlying neural systems are separate in part" (p. 227). The meta-analysis of Vytal and Hamann (2010) offered stronger evidence: not only "each of the basic emotion states examined (anger, fear, sadness, anger, and disgust) was consistently associated across studies with characteristic patterns of region brain activity" but also "each basic emotion was reliably distinguished or differentiated from the other emotions on the basis of its characteristic pattern of brain activation" (p. 2879).

This emphasis on patterns is crucial, because when subsequent experiments failed to show a one-to-one correspondence between brain regions and discrete emotions – for example, when the amygdala turned out not to be the simple "fear center" of the brain – researchers in the last decade or so began to use more sophisticated methods of imaging (such as multivariate pattern classification) to record the broad patterns of cross-region neural activity that seem to correspond to individual emotions (Kragel & LaBar, 2013, 2014). Such studies seemed to find "mappings between neural activation patterns and categorically distinct emotional experiences" (Kragel & LaBar, 2015, p. 1447) and suggest that "information encoded in both neural ensembles and whole-brain activation patterns can be utilized to predict affective dimensions and discrete emotions with high levels of specificity" (Kragel & LaBar, 2016, p. 453). For example, Saarimäki et al. (2016) used multivariate analysis to show that "all 6 basic emotions have distinguishable but spatially distributed neural signatures in the

human brain," signatures that "generalize across different emotion-eliciting conditions and also across individuals" (p. 2564). Such experimental results suggest that "different emotions are represented in the brain in a distinguishable manner, yet in partly overlapping regions" (Saarimäki et al., 2018, p. 477). Accordingly, current thinking suggests that the "discreteness" of basic emotions is "best understood as widespread, system-level patterned activity, rather than selective regional or systemic engagement during specific emotions" (Nummenmaa & Saarimäki, 2019, p. 7), and the most recent work looks for whole-brain *functional* (as opposed to *physical*) connectivity patterns in the experience of basic emotions (Saarimäki et al., 2022).

Sociology

"Traditionally," it was said not long ago, "emotion is a topic more central to psychology than to sociology" – but foundational sociologists like Marx, Weber, and Durkheim gave considerable attention to the operation of affective forces, and since the 1970s the sociology of emotion has truly emerged as a dedicated subfield of research (Smith-Lovin & Winkielman, 2010, p. 327; for overviews see; Ariza, 2021; Bericat, 2016; Lively, 2024; Stets, 2010; Stets, 2012; Stets & Turner, 2006, 2008, 2014; Turner & Stets, 2005). In many ways, debates about emotion in sociology ran parallel with those we have already explored in psychology (Smith-Lovin & Winkielman, 2010). Almost immediately, sociologists began to question whether emotions should be understood as biologically based, quasi-universal phenomena – the *positivist*, *naturalizing*, or *organismic* view – or whether they were more meaningfully shaped by social and cultural forces – the *constructionist* view, which we will see more of in Section 2 (Hochschild, 1983a; Kemper, 1981). In an early contribution to the field, Kemper (1981) neatly delineated some initial terms of this opposition; in terms of universality, the positivists most vitally emphasized "the importance of the biological and physiological substrate in the determination of specific emotions" (p. 336). Consistent with other fields, in the most basic sense these contrasting viewpoints continue to account for "the two main trends of sociology of emotions up to the present day" (Longo, 2020, p. 42).

Those outside the discipline may be initially surprised to find the enthusiasm for the universalist outlook, but this in part reflects the larger legacy of much early sociology, which often "looked for what is generic and universal in human behaviors and patterns of socio organization" (J. H. Turner, 2021, p. 4). Given sociology's historical interest in making "systematic and universalistic" claims about "the nature of man and society," it thus makes sense that much work in the field has maintained "that there is a common human nature [and] that emotions,

sentiments, feelings, and passions do not vary over time" – it is "only their representation, the forms of their expression, and their philosophical or doctrinal rationalization" that are contextually dependent (Romania, 2022, pp. 106, 107–108). The universalist position of sociology is founded on the same general premises as basic/discrete theories in psychology – that a small set of "primary" emotions are an evolutionarily shaped, biological constant of human nature – and researchers in this mode argue that "a complete theory of emotion must ultimately deal with the fact that emotion is biologically rooted . . . regardless of the degree of social conversion, construction, or management" (Kemper, 1990, p. 21). Turner and Stets (2005), for example, begin their sociology of emotion by announcing that "although there are cultural differences in how emotions are expressed and interpreted, it is now clear that some emotions are universal [and] generated from evolved body systems"; "most scholars would agree," they suggest, that certain basic emotions are "primary or biologically based," and we can thus safely "conclude that happiness, fear, anger, and sadness are universal among humans, with a few other emotions as potential candidates for inclusion in the list of primary emotions" (pp. 11, 13). For such positivist scholars, there is accordingly "nothing antisociological in finding that physiology plays a differentiating and crucial role in the emotions," and this opinion is to a degree common: even sociologists who recommend skepticism toward the "lure" of the neurosciences acknowledge that, in general, constructivist work has "not managed to upset a naturalizing view of emotion" in sociological thought (Kemper, 1981, p. 342; Kleres, 2009, pp. 14, 13). Even beyond basic affective sentiments, we can find a universalizing orientation toward more socially elaborated emotion; consider, for example, Jacobsen's (2019) recent collection *Emotions, Everyday Life and Sociology*, a volume whose chapters on discrete emotions make statements like "courage is universally valued" (Marvasti, 2019, p. 71), "embarrassment as an emotional experience is universal" (Jacobsen & Kristiansen, 2019, p. 105), and "envy is a universal social problem" (Clanton, 2019, p. 150).

But aside from the issue of biological rootedness, sociologists often show universalizing sympathies in their accounts of how emotions function socially – indeed, the very search for "a general sociological theory of emotion" implies the possibility of universal principles of process and function (J. H. Turner, 1999, p. 134), and universalism thus underpins the work of those who believe "the task of the sociology of emotions [most rightly concerns] the interconnection between social structure . . . and certain physiologically specific emotions" (Longo, 2020, p. 42). J. H. Turner (2002), for example, in his theory of interpersonal behavior argues that "transactional needs drive the flow of interaction in certain universal directions, despite the widely varying contexts of

encounters" (p. 28); emotions play a central role in how these encounters unfold, and they are thus thought to have universal functions that align with their biological universality. Another example is Barbalet (1998), who argues that "emotion terms can be developed in and applied to the analysis of social structure": thus "rationality, class structure, social action, social conformity, basic rights, and social change [can be] considered through discussion of a particular emotion or set of emotions which both characteristically pertains to each of them and elucidates the processes to which each is subject" (p. 1). Perhaps most notably, Kemper (1978, 1987, 1990, 2006; Kemper & Collins, 1990) very much honors the physiological grounding of basic emotions, but argues that they are made salient in social encounters through linkage to the two central dimensions of personal interaction: *power* and *status.* Most importantly for our current purposes, a "fundamental assumption" of his theory is that "the power-status antecedents of specific emotions apply universally across the spectrum of social and demographic categories" – because "were the primary emotions to vary in their relational precursors, considerable social ambiguity would result," a fact that fundamentally problematizes how "emotion might, in an evolutionary sense applying to all humans, have emerged" (2006, pp. 109–110). Thamm (2004), building on this work, finds that "the *structure* of human groups and emotions are universal," and that "there is a direct link between specific universal social substructures and specific universal emotions" (pp. 189–190).

Anthropology

"Affect has never been a focus of anthropological research," Epstein (1992, p. 2) wrote some time ago, and Stodulka (2017, p. 12) more recently observed that "emotions are rarely a primary theoretical focus of ethnographies and predominantly remain implicit subject matter"; this is reflected, for example, by the fact that there is no section devoted to emotion in the 102 chapters of *21st Century Anthropology: A Reference Handbook* (Birx, 2010). In anthropology, emotions have, to some degree, been undertheorized in the broader sense, with the focus usually fixed on giving accounts of what they *do* in a given society (Beatty, 2014).

But this does not mean that anthropologists have remained quiet about the subject. Researchers increasingly acknowledge that emotions crucially shape the anthropologist's experiences in the field (Behar, 1996; Davies & Spencer, 2010; Lo Bosco, 2021; Spencer & Davies, 2010; Stodulka, Selim, & Mattes, 2018; Stodulka, Dinkelaker, & Thajib, 2019), and beyond this, there has more generally been foundational work on anthropological emotion in the last 50 years.

(It is important to recognize, though, that the heyday of modern anthropological research on emotion was in the last decades of the last century: noting in 2013 the "apparent thinness of current emotion research," Beatty observed that "an overview of highlights in the anthropology of emotion would show that the major contributions have mostly been made some time ago" [p. 415].) Anthropological accounts of emotion have shown both explicit and implicit interest in the issue of affective universality – perhaps unsurprisingly, given that human universality is a larger concern of anthropology, in the sense that the discipline has historically been at least partly concerned with "the study of human nature in light of human variation" (Shore, 2000, p. 81; see Roughley, 2000). In terms of emotion, the field has seen a division between universalist and constructivist positions that broadly reflects what we have seen elsewhere (Leavitt, 1996; Svašek, 2005).

Although much anthropology of emotion has taken a constructivist approach, there is a core universalist sympathy that runs through the history of the discipline. Following Boas (1910), modern anthropology was historically premised on the so-called psychic unity of mankind, the notion that there is "an essential similarity of mental endowment" in all peoples, and that "diverse [cross-cultural] phenomena are based on similar psychic processes" (pp. 372, 384; see Shore, 1996; Beatty, 2019). But, as we will consider in the next section, commitment to this position does not mean that the discipline became fundamentally invested in enumerating transcultural human universals: Boas's students primarily utilized our species' common psychic potentiality to establish a cultural relativism that investigated the unique features of different population groups, and this tendency has endured in some of the most important subsequent anthropological works on emotion, especially (we will see) works that developed cultural relativism into a genuine constructivist position.

Despite this, however, there have always been anthropologists who adopted a universalist approach to the basic question of emotion. H. Geertz (1959), for example, in her study of Javanese socialization processes, argues that "the range and quality of emotional experience is potentially the same for all human beings"; concepts like "anxiety and hostility, insofar as they are operationally defined in terms of scientific theory, refer to basically human – that is, universal – emotions" (p. 225). In his analysis of symbols, V. Turner (1967) similarly refers to "referents of a grossly physiological character, relating to general human experience of an emotional kind" (p. 54). Though Myers (1979) acknowledged that "socialization selects, elaborates, and emphasizes certain qualitative aspects of emotion," his treatment of Pintupi affective vocabulary explicitly affirmed H. Geertz's earlier position (353).