

The Social Construction of Emotions

Edited by Rom Harré.

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Reviewed by Cas Wouters [in: *Theory, Culture & Society* 6 (1990) 4: 704-707]

In the study of emotions, the disciplines of biology, psychology and sociology meet. However, most publications are confined to a much smaller spot in the spectrum of these disciplines, and many show the symptoms, even the scars of a fierce internal competition. The book reviewed here is a good example. Its title, *The Social Construction of Emotions*, could easily lead to be mistaken as a reader for a new field in sociology, the sociology of emotions. In this case, the term 'social construction' would bring to mind the approach of sociologists like Berger and Luckmann (1966). But these names are mentioned only once, in passing. The word sociology too, is seldom used, and not at all by the editor Rom Harré. He does speak of 'sociocultural phenomena', 'social contexts' and 'local moral orders', but he presents the book as a study of human psychology. It has a polemical and programmatic intention, because it aims at a "more complex psychological theory of the emotions than the intellectually anorexic accounts offered by recent academic psychology." (p.9) Indeed, Harré et al. are quite critical of the biological and physiological studies of emotions. To them, they are forms of biological reductionism and/or 'simplistic empiricism'. Every branch of psychology, Harré says in his introduction, underwent the 'deeper revolution' of a decline in confidence in physiological empiricism and in "the sterile paradigm of psychology dominant in the recent past". This resulted in a swing of the pendulum away from physiological studies of emotions, and into '*social constructionism*'. This new 'ism' is legitimized with documented arguments like:

In the case of emotions, the overlay of cultural and linguistic factors on biology is so great that the physiological aspect of some emotional states has had to be relegated to a secondary status, as one among the effects of the more basic sociocultural phenomena. (p.4)

References to the "considerable cultural variety in the emotion repertoires of different peoples and epochs" (p.7/8) abound, and Part III of the book, "The Diversity of Emotions," is a demonstration of this variety.

A physiological state as "the basis of some felt perturbation" is acknowledged, but that state is *not* the emotion, nor is it an abstracted entity, called 'anger' or 'anxiety'. Harré claims to direct the attention to "a concrete world of contexts and activities", i.e. angry people and upsetting scenes, and he does not allow to "reify and abstract from that concreteness at our peril." So far, so good (although already in part II, "Case Studies in Contemporary Emotions," abstracted entities like anger, envy and loneliness are the subject of separate chapters again).

Constructionists primarily direct attention to linguistics, to emotion words and to various emotion vocabularies. Local language, together with the local moral order are called the "two social matters that impinge heavily on the personal experience of emotion" (p.9). As their use of the word 'local' already suggests, the social constructionist viewpoint strongly stresses the cultural relativity of emotions: "even if there are some universal emotions, the bulk of mankind live within systems of thought and feeling that bear little but superficial resemblances to one another" (p.12). Therefore, in the domain of emotions, psychologists can do no more, Harré seems to say, than study a complex of things like the "native assessment of meanings", the "local moral order", the "social function of particular emotion displays", the "repertoire of language games", the "standard dramatic scenarios". The constructionists seem perfectly content with this complete relativism. The problem is hardly mentioned, and if so, only in passing:

To sum up, emotion talk differs from culture to culture. We are still a long way from knowing how to handle all the differences. It seems clear, though, that they can generate quite radical differences in emotional experience; that they can generate differences at the very heart of what it is to have an emotion. (p.261)

Like so many psychologists at the crossroad of the disciplines, they move into the direction of sociology, while they keep looking over their shoulder, direction biology, shouting: "When, and only when, *all this hard work has been done*, we are likely to engage profitably in the tracking of the physiological details of the various bodily perturbations..." (p.13) Here, Harré obviously addresses colleagues working in one of the major fields of psychology, that of physiological research. In this field psychology is closely connected and often submitted to biology and medicine, but it is a field where the battle for jobs and reputations has been very successful. It has now come under attack for its reductionism or 'naturalism.' In this sense, social constructionists are mainly anti, anti-reductionism and anti-naturalism.

For the moment, their iconoclastic mood may bring some satisfaction, but the problems of cultural relativism – whether presented as post-modernism or by any other name – may be expected to spoil that mood soon enough. This is to be expected, as it has increasingly done so in social anthropology and in sociology. Since this problem is immediately connected to feelings of inferiority and superiority, to the reputation of both social scientists and their objects of study, it is a very delicate one. It entails matters of power and hierarchy, by raising questions such as 'Who are you to know about me? Who am I to know about you? and Who's definition of the situation is going to prevail?' Questions like these have the effect of needling and questioning the respect and self-respect of all those who claim to be experts in answering them: social scientists and philosophers. Thus, the problem how to respect the insights of cultural relativism and at the same time claim expert knowledge and status has been pressing. It points with increasing force toward more subtle blends of theory and evidence, to higher levels of synthesis (cf. Goudsblom, 1977). For instance, the relevant question in the context of Harré's book, the question whether any theoretical integration of the various pictures of socially constructed emotion systems is possible at all, can only be answered by providing empirical evidence for a theory that aims at explaining the variations in collective and individual emotional developments, i.e. developments in we- and I-identities and in the We-I balance (cf. Elias, 1987a). It demands inquiries into the ways in which 'local' processes of emotional development and their result, the dominant emotional make-up or social habitus, can be understood, interpreted and explained by comparing their structural characteristics to those of other places and periods. This implicates empirical research into the similarities and differences in the present conditions and in the history of survival units, the groups in which individuals are born and develop emotionally. In this view, the problem of overcoming cultural relativism is highly dependent upon empirical research. In the constructionists' view, however, it seems that all social scientists can possibly do, is to collect snapshots of various instances and places in the world, while these 'stills' will "bear little but superficial resemblances to one another." The problem is enlarged, because in their polemic with naturalists and biological reductionists, social constructionists do not turn to sociologists for help, they refer to philosophy instead. They do so especially in the first part of the book, that on theory and method of social constructionism. Yet philosophers seem to be in a more difficult position than social scientists, because they have no tradition of collecting systematic bodies of empirical evidence for *their* definition of the situation. [In Richard Kilminster's words: "Without this external control from publicly verifiable empirical data, however, the authority and credibility of philosophers' statements must ultimately reside *entirely* in their

standing as philosophers, in the social weight of their status as a professional group" (Kilminster p.291).] Furthermore, if social scientists embark in the enterprise of philosophy themselves, this generally results in an highly abstract philosophism.

Their turning to philosophy may partly explain why certain sociological perspectives and questions are overlooked. Empirical questions like whether there are regularities or structures in the changes of individuals from childhood to old age and in those of groups of people, from hunting and gathering tribes to military-industrial societies, are not raised. The possibility of comparing the structures of changes in different places and periods, the sociological method of historical comparison, is not discussed. Harré et al. *do* raise the question of the social function of emotions, but their answer - sustaining local social values and moral rules: "emotional schemas are the internal representation of social norms or rules" (p.100) - is not followed by the next crucial question. They do not bother to inquire how moral values and feeling rules have *developed* in the way they have within wider networks of power. (Cf Elias 1987; Wouters 1989)

In their preoccupation with biology, the social constructionists seem content in stating that the building of a general theory of emotion is "extremely difficult, if not impossible" and that the implication "is that 'emotion' be dropped from the psychologists' lexicon" (p.96). Of course, the book does not end here, nor is the use of the concept of emotion finished: constructionism is not really that destructive.

On the contrary, their struggle to clarify the relative autonomy of the social sciences to the natural sciences, and to clarify the nature of this relative autonomy, is very helpful. This is precisely the reason why I criticize the book, and for the same reason I would like to conclude my criticism by clarifying a misunderstanding I think important.

The misunderstanding is in the contribution to the book by James R. Averill. In this instructive article Averill presents an analytical cross-classification of rules of emotion. In its taxonomy "rules of etiquette, civility and good taste" are labelled as "regulative" (p.110). Probably because of this, in a paragraph called "Civilizing the emotions," he argues that in Elias's view "socialization is primarily regulative" (p.113). First of all, Averill calls this view "quite common." Then he proceeds by polemizing against "Elias, Tomkins and many others," and his argument can be illustrated by the following quote: "However, if we admit that some of the rules of emotion are also constitutive, then the role of society becomes constructive as well as regulative. (Needles to say, in this context I am not using constructive in its evaluative sense.)" At this point, I think, Averill shows too strong an emotional attachment to his systematic and analytic cross-classification. Although he has started out (p.106) by saying that

"psychological reality [and, I like to add, every other reality] seldom fits comfortably into the neat pigeonholes that we devise for analytical purposes," at this point Averill becomes guilty of the self-same thing, especially when he continues and concludes his argument by remarking: "Indeed, much of the data reported by Elias could just as well be interpreted in this way. For example, the ferocity and bloodthirstiness extolled by the medieval knight are just as much social constructions as are the more benign emotions advocated by the most dedicated pacifist of today." Here something has gone seriously wrong, because in Norbert Elias' books on the civilising process a prominent object of study is the long-term change in the dominant emotional make-up from the time of the knights to the end of the eighteenth century. In other words, by investigating the structure of these changes, Elias supports [=provides] empirical evidence for precisely the argument that Averill tries to use against him. *The Civilizing Process*, particularly the synopsis part of volume 2, can easily be read as a theoretical integration of an empirical investigation into the connections between the sociogenesis and the psychogenesis of changing patterns of self-regulation, social habitus or affect economy.

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