Emotions are biologically and socially constituted: A response to Greenwood

SCHERER, Klaus R.

Abstract

It is most refreshing to see a philosopher take a sober look at some of the psychological theories postulating the social constitution of emotion. Greenwood provides a sharp logical analysis of the theoretical premises and conclusions to be found in such theories and exposes some fundamental errors and/or confusions. Most of these are related to the mistaken presumption that the act of verbal labeling is actually constitutive for the occurrence of emotion as a phenomenon (refer to p. 11 of Greenwood's article). Greenwood is not opposed to the idea that the emotions are socially constituted. However, he bases his view on the notion that an emotion consists of the representation of intensional contents directed upon intentional objects in the social world. More precisely, he advances three bases for the social constitution of emotion: (1) The socio-culturally specific evaluation and representation of reality; (2) the close relationship of emotion phenomena to socially constrained "identity projects"; and (3) social discourse as the "ontological vehicle" for emotion. While I agree with many of Greenwood's points, I would [...]


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EMOTIONS ARE BIOLOGICALLY AND SOCIALLY CONSTITUTED: A RESPONSE TO GREENWOOD*

KLAUS R. SCHERER
Psychology Department, University of Geneva, 1211 Geneva, Switzerland

It is most refreshing to see a philosopher take a sober look at some of the psychological theories postulating the social constitution of emotion. Greenwood provides a sharp logical analysis of the theoretical premises and conclusions to be found in such theories and exposes some fundamental errors and/or confusions. Most of these are related to the mistaken presumption that the act of verbal labeling is actually constitutive for the occurrence of emotion as a phenomenon (refer to p. 11 of Greenwood's article).

Greenwood is not opposed to the idea that the emotions are socially constituted. However, he bases his view on the notion that an emotion consists of the representation of intensional contents directed upon intentional objects in the social world. More precisely, he advances three bases for the social constitution of emotion: (1) The socio-culturally specific evaluation and representation of reality; (2) the close relationship of emotion phenomena to socially constrained "identity projects", and (3) social discourse as the "ontological vehicle" for emotion.

While I agree with many of Greenwood's points, I would like to raise a number of objections to his analysis.

SOCIAL EVALUATION AND REPRESENTATION

Greenwood seems to argue for evaluative representation as the basis for all emotion differentiation. I could not agree more. Several cognitive appraisal theories (Frijda, 1986, 1987; Roseman, 1984; Scherer, 1984, 1986; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985, 1987; Weiner, 1985; see Scherer, 1988, for a comparative review) develop detailed predictions on which kinds of evaluation results produce particular emotions. Greenwood does not seem to be familiar with this extensive literature which is directly relevant to his claims. Yet, this work might complement the theoretical claims he advances. I do not agree, though, that all evaluation is socially learned and anchored in social interaction (which serves as the basis for the argument that emotion is socially constituted because of the social nature of evaluation). Greenwood's analysis is a bit one-sided in that it focusses almost exclusively on social emotions (most of which are specifically human, e.g., shame, guilt, jealousy). While he admits the possibility of the existence of at least some emotions in animals, apparently he does not subscribe to the notion of phylogenetic continuity of the emotions, since he excludes non-

learned aspects of evaluation (suddenness, intrinsic pleasantness, and other rudimentary appraisal processes found in infants and animals; see Leventhal & Scherer, 1987, for an extensive discussion of this point).

SOCIAL CONSTITUTION VIA IDENTITY PROJECTS

It is true that emotions are generally elicited by events that are centrally relevant to the self and it is obviously true that much of the self is socially constructed (and changes over time). Yet Greenwood's analysis in this section is limited to self-reflexive emotions, particularly the more advanced types of these. Again, there is a problem of starting the analysis at the top, and generalizing downward. In order to understand the nature and functions of the emotion mechanism in general, it might be better to start at the bottom, that is, with the basic, phylogenetically continuous emotions, such as fear, disgust, or anger, and work up to the more complex emotions, specific to humans, many of which are clearly strongly determined by socio-cultural factors.

SOCIAL DISCOURSE AS THE "ONLY ONTOLOGICAL VEHICLE" FOR "AT LEAST SOME" OF THE EMOTIONS

Greenwood remains rather vague on this point, and there is little coherent argument or any examples that might help to understand the claim. However, whatever "ontological vehicle" might mean, I do not agree that emotions cannot exist without social discourse, particularly if a verbal code is seen as underlying the interchange.

I very much hope that on this last point Greenwood does not retreat from what is the strong point of his analysis and critique of other social constructivist emotion theories—the insistence on the independence of labeling from the experience of an emotional state. He correctly points out that social knowledge may be necessary in order to be able to experience a particular emotional state, for example, shame, but that there is no need for labeling since the latter is not constitutive for emotion. So why should social discourse be constitutive? Why should we not be able to experience shame in utter solitude? This is not to deny that emotions are often dealt with in social discourse since people seem to like to share their emotional experiences with others (see Rimé, Mesquita, Philippot, & Boca, 1991). But I do not believe that many emotion experiences are constituted in "working them out" with others, particularly in verbal form.

DISCUSSION

Greenwood asks many intriguing questions relevant to the issue of the social constitution of emotion, for example, the possibility of mistaken labeling. These questions are most useful to organize the theoretical and conceptual work that still needs to be done to arrive at a consensually shared definition of emotion. However, his own analysis remains partial, and I believe partly contradictory, because (1) it lacks a comprehensive view of the emotion process, and (2) it confuses issues of self-knowledge and of labeling.

The emotion process

Greenwood neglects important psychological and physiological components of
the emotion process. It is just not the case that the representation of the intensional content of intentional objects and the actions related to these are sufficient to characterize the emotion process. Physiological symptoms, expressive behavior, and feeling state are all part and parcel of the emotion process and, since they are partially independent and organized differently on both the psychological and physiological levels, they cannot simply be subsumed under action tendencies.

Self-knowledge and labeling

It would seem to me that all self-knowledge includes some proprioceptive feedback. Greenwood is worried about “internal things in the mind” that people keep disagreeing about when they try to use introspection. Yet, obviously the term “feeling” refers to some kind of monitoring of many kinds of internal changes (cognitive, motor, and physiological). While Greenwood acknowledges this feedback for pain and tickles he does seem to rule it out for the emotions, something that would seem counter-intuitive not only to psychologists. The fact that philosophers and psychologists do not agree about typical introspective content for specific emotion labels is due to the fact that emotional experiences, even for very similar situations, are very different from one individual to another and that, indeed, emotion labels are not always used very consistently. Thus, while Greenwood’s paper raises a number of interesting issues and points to ways of settling the controversy about the role of social factors in emotion, his own theoretical position is not entirely convincing. Most importantly, he does not take the total phenomenon of an emotion episode into account. The view that emotion can be described by intensional contents of intentional objects and related actions does not sufficiently reflect the biological and phylogenetic bases of emotion. The present analysis also neglects the important aspect of the dynamics of emotion, which is a process over time. Greenwood’s view of the phenomenon remains static, a philosophical construction in terms of representation and intentions for action. Most importantly, Greenwood does not really succeed in the attempt to clarify the intricate relationships between experience, self-knowledge, and verbalization that are at the core of the controversy. He does succeed, however, in putting his finger on some of the most blatant misconceptions and in raising some central issues that are often conveniently forgotten by psychologists working on emotion.

REFERENCES