

Collective Emotions

Christian von Scheve

Freie Universität Berlin

scheve@zedat.fu-berlin.de

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Abstract

Many emotions are not only socially constructed, but are constituted in relation to different kinds of social collectives. Theories of collective emotions address the collective constitution of emotions and their social consequences in different ways. Emotions can be collective because of group membership or the collective properties of mental states underlying them (e.g. collective intentions or shared concerns). They can also be collective because they are simultaneously experienced by many individuals via processes of emotional contagion as well as through culture and social norms. Collective emotions can promote social solidarity but likewise fuel conflict and exclusion.

Main Text

Collective emotions have only recently begun to play a notable role in social theorizing, although they feature prominently in many of the field's classics, for instance in Durkheim's (1912) concept of collective effervescence or in LeBon's (1895) theory of crowd behavior. Collective emotions are investigated primarily from two perspectives, first regarding their ontology and conditions for elicitation, and second regarding their consequences for groups, communities, and societies. Compared to existing scholarship on "individual" emotions, approaches to collective emotions differ mainly in view of their understandings of the collective properties of an emotion, i.e. regarding the question of what makes an emotion "collective". These understandings vary widely, as is evident in the conceptual and often terminological overlap of collective emotions with group-based emotions, intergroup emotions, or group affect. Likewise, there is hardly a categorical distinction between discrete emotions than can and cannot

have collective properties, and a broad range of emotions have been studied as collective phenomena, for instance pride, shame, guilt, joy or hatred. A common denominator of theories of collective emotions is that *social collectives* of different kinds, for example groups (by way of social category), organizations (by way of formal membership), crowds (by way of physical co-presence), communities (by way of social bonds), or nations (by way of citizenship) are involved in an emotional experience in one or another way.

A longstanding view is that emotions can be collective insofar as they are felt as a result of one's membership in or affiliation with a social collective. In this case, social identity, social categorization, and the relevance of group concerns are integral to the elicitation of collective emotions, although they can be experienced by a single individual at a given time. The guilt felt by individuals due to harm done to others by members of their own social group is an example at hand (e.g., Branscombe & Doosje, 2004). In empirical research, however, this view mostly refers to many individuals experiencing a common group or intergroup emotion (e.g., Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000).

A different but related understanding emphasizes the role of collective or joint intentions and shifts the focus from social identity to socially shared beliefs, attitudes, and concerns as a basis of collective emotions. Hence, emotions can be collective because of the *togetherness*, often in cooperative endeavors, of a number of actors, for example in intending or accomplishing something together, as a social unit. Likewise, *we-intentions* as a variant of collective intentions that do not necessarily require a plurality of actors have also been suggested as a basis of collective emotions (Salmela, 2012). Similarly, collective emotions can be defined as requiring a collective (normative) *commitment* to feel in a certain way and as a plural subject, or a collective *acceptance* of an emotional state ascribed to a group (e.g., Gilbert 2002).

These non-aggregate and mental-state centered views of collective emotions are supplemented by conceptions that emphasize the (aggregate) properties of social collectives, physical co-presence, and emotional synchrony or convergence across individuals. In this perspective, an emotion can be collective because it is experienced by several individuals within a given timeframe and usually towards the same eliciting event, which is crucial for understanding social movements and collective behavior. In ritual gatherings or crowds, for example, people share a mutual focus of attention and engage in similar behaviors that are likely to produce comparable emotional experiences. In addition to the non-aggregate and cognitive mechanisms discussed above, a host of lower-level cognitive, physiological and motor processes promotes emotional convergence in these situations, for instance through facial mimicry, emotional contagion, and behavioral synchrony or attunement (Hatfield, Carpenter, & Rapson, 2014).

Regarding the properties of social collectives, both their structure and culture can be conducive to collective emotions, although some of them do not necessarily promote the sharing of the emotion in the sense of mutual awareness or “we-ness”. For example, groups’ ecological properties, such as the regular occurrence of specific events or the patterns and networks of social interactions, foster the experience of similar emotions across individuals. Likewise, social stratification and social inequalities produce social categories and symbolic boundaries, for example between class, gender, race, or ethnicity that make members of a social category experience similar emotions collectively. Finally, culture, shared knowledge, and political as well as normative orientations contribute to the elicitation of collective emotions. Shared values are a benchmark for individuals to interpret events and situations in similar ways and thus to converge in their emotional reactions. Social norms, such as feeling rules and display norms,

promote emotional coherence in groups and societies and motivate sanctions in cases of emotional deviance. Also, emotional regimes and ideologies can actively shape the emotions experienced within a social collective, as represented in the concepts of collective emotional orientation and emotional climates (Bar-Tal, Halperin, & de Rivera, 2007).

In social theory and research, collective emotions are often invoked not only because of an interest in their ontology, but also because of their notable social consequences. On the one hand, collective emotions have been shown to promote cooperation, enhance solidarity, and to produce bonds between individuals and social collectives. For example, studies have documented the prosocial effects of collective guilt and shame (Brown & Čehajić, 2008) and of emotional synchrony in collective gatherings (Páez, Rimé, Basabe, Włodarczyk, & Zumeta, in press). On the other hand, collective emotions are known antagonists to social cohesion, demarcating boundaries between groups and communities and propelling prolonged conflict between parties. This has been shown, for example, regarding hatred in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Halperin, 2008).

Although recent years have seen much progress in research on collective emotions, many unresolved issues remain to be addressed. First, there still is a substantial gap between the multifaceted theoretical concepts and the available measures of collective emotions. Second, theoretical advances are still confined to disciplinary boundaries and future efforts need to develop more integrative and comprehensive models of collective emotions crossing these boundaries.

SEE ALSO:

Social Identity Theory

Social Cognition

Group Processes

Collective Identity

Collective Behaviour

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Further Readings

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