*****PENULTIMATE DRAFT*****

Emotions as Relational Orientations: Accounting for Culture and Social Structure

Christian von Scheve

Freie Universität Berlin

Author info

Christian von Scheve, Institute of Sociology, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany. Email: c.vs@fu-berlin.de

Abstract

The present contribution provides a constructive criticism of Brian Parkinson's *Heart to Heart: A Relation-Alignment Approach to Emotion's Social Effects*. I outline a number of points in Parkinson's approach that I find particularly useful from a sociological perspective on emotions and provide suggestions for further extending his account. In doing so, I concentrate on issues regarding the social ontology of emotion, the proposition of emotional adjacency pairs in verbal and facial communication, on the importance of social appraisals in intergroup contexts, and the relevance of social institutions for understanding how some emotions come to dominate certain social relations.

Brian Parkinson in his contribution outlines a theoretical sketch for understanding emotions as genuinely social processes of relational alignment. In his view, these processes are social firstly in that they render emotions themselves as at least constructed by the social world. They are social, secondly, because they bear consequences for the social world, in particular for how individuals relate to one another in interactions and encounters. If one is inclined to speak in terms of scientific disciplines, this is as much a highly valuable contribution to a social psychological understanding of emotions as it is to a sociological one. With this commentary, I seek to provide some ideas for further developing the "relational alignment" approach and to raise a number of questions that might contribute to further sharpening this approach, but to also to connecting it with emotions research in related fields and disciplines.

To begin with, I was wondering how far we should go in understanding emotions as "forms of social-relational activity" (p. 5). I am not quite sure what Brian Parkinson is up to here, but statements like this suggest he favors a strong understanding of the relational alignment principle, namely that social relations are ontologically *constitutive* of emotions. In other paragraphs, however, it seems more like social relations, as well as language and nonverbal behavior, would "help to *construct* the emotional process" (p. 5, emphasis added). The view that emotions are fundamentally influenced by the social world and at the same time exert a crucial influence on interactions, relations, groups, and society at large, is not a new one, although Parkinson's analysis provides a highly original and focused take on this matter. The idea that the social world is in fact *constitutive* of emotions is of course much more provocative and philosophers have begun to explore the merits and tenability of this view (e.g., Krueger & Szanto, 2016) that might also be useful to advance social science research on emotion. If the social world were, in this sense, constitutive of emotions, any analysis of emotions would remain incomplete as long as it does not account for the structural properties of the social and how they systematically affect social relations. This includes the structures

of social networks (who can be related to whom in terms of reachability or closeness in a network?), social stratification (how do, for instance, status and power affect the likelihood that certain relations are established and how do they impinge on the quality of these relations?), cultural classifications (how are certain relations valued, socially regulated, and recognized) and their entanglement with emotion. Lamont and others (2017) have outlined this for the case of cognition and I don't see why this should not equally count for emotion.

A second commentary concerns emotion's interpersonal effects and the role of appraisal for these effects. Parkinson argues that emotion statements, that is verbal articulations of emotional experience, prompt others to respond with complementary or matching emotions. This is because Parkinson, drawing on conversational analysis, sees emotion statements as performative acts that are part of "adjacency pairs" in which call and response are matched by means of convention. Extending this reasoning to the realm of emotions, he suggests that the "preferred response to any appraisal communicated by an emotional statement should endorse that appraisal" (p. 9). I suspect that the situation is more intricate. Although Parkinson is careful to emphasize that adjacency pairs are organized flexibly, need to be differentiated regarding object- or self-directed emotions, and derive their compelling powers from purely normative concerns, the space of adjacency pairs is potentially endless. This is not to say that I find the idea of emotional adjacency pairs useless – I rather see it as a fruitful program for much needed empirical research. These pairs are likely to differ notably by context: we will see distinct pairs and normative expectations in close personal relationships as compared to, say, encounters in politics, interactions in occupational contexts, or in religions practices. Moreover, they are likely to differ historically: what forms an adjacency pair – in a given context – in late Medieval England will most likely be different from what the corresponding pair is in, for example, contemporary Indonesia. Which points out cross-cultural differences as a further line of distinction and research.

I do contend with Parkinson that the unique potential for emotion research probably lies in facial emotional communication. Whereas verbal reactions to emotion statements, as to any other sort of evaluative statement, will typically involve thought and deliberation, facial communication is a more continuous, often less reflexive and more subtle and streamlined means of relational alignment and co-regulation, providing a steady input of information referring to relational attunement or divergence. Importantly, as Parkinson also notes, these processes likewise become the object of strategic and goal-directed action, they can be worked-on, managed, and altered to advance desired end-states of relations. From a sociological perspective, this becomes all the more interesting when considering systematic, larger-scale attempts at emotional regulation and co-regulation, for example in politics (e.g., Webster 2020) or the economy and public sector (e.g., Penz & Sauer, 2019).

Third, I was probably most surprised by what Parkinson has to say about intragroup processes and social status. Although I fully agree with what he writes in these sections, I was puzzled by his emphasis on emotional contagion and other "low-level non-inferential processes" (p. 23), towards which he previously voiced strong skepticism (p. 14). When trying to understand how emotions align the relations of larger numbers of people, i.e., within and between groups, communities, corporations, or societies, I suspect that it is imperative to also account for "higher-level" processes that inform group-based and intergroup appraisals. In line with Parkinson's earlier focus on social appraisal, we would need to study how groups are portrayed in public and political discourse with regard to their characteristic or dominant emotional experiences. With many groups and group members we hardly ever interact directly, but we form opinions and attitudes based on news reports, social media, literature, and anecdotal evidence. It makes a difference whether we think some other group is angry or anxious, whether it is ashamed or sad, or whether it frequently experiences indignation or resentment (e.g., Salmela & von Scheve, 2018). Also, the ritual dynamics Parkinson refers to require previously existing stocks of knowledge, social norms, and practices on how

interaction rituals proceed, who has access to these rituals, and who remains excluded as a matter of some form of category membership, such as race or gender. And finally, when it comes to question of social position, we urgently need to understand not only group prototypicality, but also how social institutions shape human emotion. Institutions are paramount in that they dictate how social reality – including social relations – is to be perceived, both in substantive and normative regard. This includes ways of thinking and feeling, whereby institutionalized forms of feeling usually become the dominant and legitimate forms of feeling, individually and collectively. Religion as an institution proscribes which emotions to experience in view of the suffering of others, for instance sympathy and compassion. Public security institutions, such as police, demand a range of relational emotions from citizens when engaging with these institutions, for example submissiveness. And science as an institution typically requires abstaining from emotion-laden interactions, proscribing modes of engagement characterized by rational thought and deliberation.

Taken together, Parkinson's proposition to understand emotions as relational orientations is innovative and fruitful to further our understanding of both, emotions and the social world. It holds potential for a broad array of empirical research, from relational alignment in personal relationships to intergroup processes and even larger social contexts, such as institutions. Moreover, Parkinson's approach can easily be complemented with concepts sociologists and other social scientists might deem necessary to tackle relational emotions in larger contexts, such as social networks, status and power constellations, or cultural properties of groups and communities.

References

Krueger, J., & Szanto, T. (2016). Extended emotions. *Philosophy Compass*, 11, 863-878. doi: 10.1111/phc3.12390

Lamont, M., Adler, L., Park, B. et al. (2017). Bridging cultural sociology and cognitive psychology in three contemporary research programmes. *Nature Human Behavior* 1, 866-872. doi.org/10.1038/s41562-017-0242-y

Penz, O., & Sauer, B. (2019). *Governing affects: Neoliberalism, neo-bureaucracies, and service work*. London: Routledge.

Salmela, M., von Scheve, C. (2018). Emotional dynamics of right- and left-wing political populism. *Humanity & Society*, 42(4), 434-454.

Webster, S. W. (2020). *American rage: How Anger shapes our politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.