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Why functionalist accounts of emotion tend to be tenuous in social and cultural contexts. A commentary.

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 some constructive criticism of Keltner's and colleagues proposal for advancing Social Functionalist Theory of emotion. I first briefly summarize some of the key premises of Social Functionalist Theory and then provide more detailed comments on the four key principles of the theory concerning emotional experience, cognition, expression, and the cultural archiving of emotion. I develop the argument that the link between emotions and the six relational needs (security, commitment, status, trust, fairness, and belongingness) emphasized by Keltner and colleagues are likely to differ across cultural and historical contexts. Moreover, I suggest that practices and representations of emotion are neither consistent nor uniform. Instead, they are frequently tied to strategic attempts at manufacturing relational emotions for political purposes. Third, I argue that whether emotions are functional for the social and cultural world is a matter of perspective.

Keywords: Social Functionalist Theory, social relations, culture, sociology

Why functionalist accounts of emotion tend to be tenuous in social and cultural contexts. A commentary.

Keltner and colleagues in their contribution provide an intriguing proposal for advancing "Social Functionalist Theory of Emotion" (SFT), a label they designate to a range of emotion theories that have consistently emphasized, over the past decades, the importance of the social and cultural world for emotions and vice versa (e.g., Frijda & Mesquita, 1996; Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Parkinson, 1996). I am using this label with a bit of hesitation, because, until now, I had not considered the range of theories the authors refer to as being part of a unified theoretical framework and, more importantly, because one of my issues with the theoretical proposal is indeed with the notion of "functionalism" the authors employ.

Keltner's and colleagues' contribution provides an exceptionally rich and detailed account of the "bidirectional interactions between individual emotions, relationships, and culture" (p. X). From my vantage point as a sociologist of emotion, this is a particularly interesting proposal because it is truly interdisciplinary in scope, bringing together understandings of emotions from disciplines as diverse as psychology, anthropology, sociology, and evolutionary theory to uncover how the social and cultural world shapes human emotion and how emotion is essential to understand a wide range of social processes and cultural practices.

The proposed extension to SPF achieves this understanding by focusing on six fundamental "relational needs", inspired by Fiske's (1991) Relational Models Theory and Baumeister's and Leary's (1995) claim for the "need to belong": security, commitment, status, trust, fairness, and belongingness. Each of these needs is supposed to be linked to distinct ways of relating, to specific challenges, and to specific emotions. Drawing on these six needs, SFT addresses the question of what sorts of relationships emotions enable, the answer to which is considered essential to understand how emotions arise in social contexts

and which social functions they serve. This is illustrated by a number of claims about emotional experience, expression, cognition, and the cultural representation of emotion, laid out in detail in the four major principles of the extended version of SFT. In the following, I will discuss these four principles, raising a number of issues that attracted my attention and provide some, hopefully, constructive criticism.

The first principle of SFT attests that emotional experience signals ongoing relational needs. Whereas previous research has emphasized intrapsychic or physiological processes, SFT proposes that emotional experience is also oriented towards others on ongoing relationships. This is a claim one can hardly disagree with, although I would argue that it is not as novel as the authors seem to indicate. There is a wealth of research that has argued, both in theory and in detailed empirical studies, that emotions are social to the core and that social relations are the building blocks of a vast array of human emotions. McCarthy (1989), for example, has pointed out that "emotions and feelings originate and develop in social relations; they exist relative to human social acts" (p. 57). Kemper (1978) has developed a sophisticated model of how structural relations, defined by status and power, determine the emotions individuals experience. Hochschild (1983) has shown how occupational relations are the backbone of work-related emotion regulation. And de Rivera and Grinkis (1986) have proposed to consider emotions as social relationships such that they can be "related to each other in terms of the structures of at least four interpersonal 'choices'" (p. 353).

These pioneering works and a range of more recent research have suggested a number of ways in which the social (and cultural) world can be conceptualized in a way that is meaningful to inform our understanding of the social nature of emotion, for instance regarding inequality and stratification (Turner, 2010), milieus and lifestyles (Ambrasat, von Scheve, Schauenburg, Conrad, & Schröder, 2016), status orders (Lawler & Thye, 1999), social relationships (Burkitt, 2014), and social networks (van der Löwe & Parkinson, 2014). Against this background, the intriguing contribution of SFT is to suggest a set of individual-

level concerns or "appraisal criteria" against which the social world – and an individual's or group's position in this world – are interpreted and evaluated. Existing theories that focus on the social world as a cause or object of emotion have hardly ever cared to specify these concerns or "needs".

The assumption that, for example, an individual's position in the social structure (e.g., in terms of status) is instrumental for emotional experience also typically entails the idea that the criteria against which this position is evaluated are socially shared to a reasonable extent (i.e., most people will appreciate higher rather than lower status positions). Based on its evolutionary premises, SFT seems to assume that these criteria are human universals, widely shared across cultures and societies. Given the long debates about cultural specificity vs. universality in emotions research, this might be a particularly controversial claim. I am suggesting that if SFT relaxes this assumption, for example only asserting that these criteria are likely to be widely shared within a specific society or a given cultural context, it does not give-up much of its explanatory power. Quite the contrary: Holding that relational needs – even if they were human universals – are culturally fleshed out and elaborated, will further strengthen SFT's views on the importance of relational action and interaction structures (see below).

Keltner and colleagues admit that the specificity of the link between relational needs and modal emotions is not straightforward and that specific modal emotions might apply to different ways of relating and to different relational needs. This opens-up the door for a further dimension of how emotion, culture and the social world are interrelated. Looking at friendship, for example, I would suggest that the specific kinds of emotions that are experienced in situations that are "congruent" or "incongruent" with the relational need for "trust" (Table 1 in Keltner et al., this issue) are also subject to cultural variation. Whether a breach of trust is met with experiences of anger or guilt, or, rather, with resentment, rage, embarrassment or shame will almost certainly depend on the situational context and on the

cultural centrality and elaboration of both, the relational need and the specific emotions. I therefore wholeheartedly agree with the authors employing the concept of "modal emotions" (Scherer, 1994), thereby emphasizing that the emotions arising from appraisals of situations that are congruent or incongruent with the need for trust probably share a significant number of appraisal criteria, but that the specific emotions are probably best investigated by detailed inquiries of specific cultures and societies.

Another issue that remains somewhat unarticulated in this approach to SFT pertains to the idea that emotions, serving relational needs, "strengthen the individual's relationality, or interconnectedness with others" (p. XX). This is certainly a matter of perspective and I would disagree if this were taken to be a general claim of SFT. Emotions, as much as they promote relationships, connectedness, and communal bonds, are equally well drivers of conflict, disintegration and social exclusion. Research on collective emotions in intractable conflict are an example at hand (e.g., Halperin & Reifen-Tagar, 2017), as well as the literature on affective polarization (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). I would therefore also agree with an understanding of the term "functionalist" as pertaining to an individual's orientation within the social world. Here, emotions serve the function to signal one's position in a complex web of social relations and interdependencies. Whether emotions are "functional" for societies is, however, a different matter and can only be answered for select parts of the social world. For example, emotions may serve the function to create strong emotional bonds between members of a criminal gang, but these very same emotions might be considered "dysfunctional" from a larger, societal point of view.

I very much agree with the authors' second principle that emotion-specific cognition guides relational action. Drawing on solid evidence showing that emotional experience shapes thought and cognition to facilitate goal-directed action, SFT that this signaling function of emotion also serves social-relational purposes. If we accept the premise that relational needs are not unambiguously tied towards specific discrete emotions, but rather to modal emotion

families, and that the specific emotions that arise from relational needs are contingent upon cultural beliefs and practices related to emotions, then culture also has a say in the relational actions that arise from fulfilled or unfulfilled needs. It is an interesting question for future research how the cultural practices of a society that render certain emotions more or less likely in response to relational needs are associated with the structures and institutions of a given society. For example, do welfare states encourage resentment or contempt rather than anger in violation of the need for fairness? And is this linked to specific cognitive and behavioral tendencies of these emotions that bolster institutions relying on indirect reciprocity? Or do collectivistic societies promote gratitude and happiness over, say, awe and triumph when the need for belongingness is fulfilled, because these emotions go hand-in-hand with cognitions and behaviors that may be more in-line with interdependent self-construals compared to other emotions? And how does this differ from individualistic societies?

Similar questions can be raised for the mimetic and complementary responses in social interactions, as proposed in the author's third principle. Here, the basic premise of SFT is that emotions structure dyadic, group-level, and large-scale, collective interactions, as evidenced in previous sociological and social anthropological research. Relational needs in conjunction with ways of relating and specific emotions are thus supposed to inform social interactions such as soothing, flirtation, or banter. Keltner and colleagues speculate that "within these emotionally rich interactions [...] individuals develop culturally rich ideas about their selves in relation to others" (p. XX). This perspective can very well be reversed, suggesting that cultural ideas about the self in relation to others (for instance in egalitarian vs. very unequal societies) inform different kinds of rituals in these societies that recruit distinct emotions. Political rallies and violent protest gatherings often rely on the production of collective outrage or indignation that serve as an indicator of belonging to a specific, possibly disadvantaged group. Hence, I am not questioning the proposition that emotions are essential

for rituals and collective gatherings to work, but rather suggest that the types of modal emotions these rituals rely on are very likely to differ across culture and history.

Finally, I also agree with the fourth principle that culture archives emotion through representation, symbol, and ritual. SFT proposes that emotions are in fact constitutive of culture and are essential in constructing, experiencing, and negotiating cultural beliefs and practices. As Keltner and associates argue, a broad range of cultural practices, such as music, literature, dance, religion, theater and the like, revolve around emotions, i.e., they represent, articulate, express, manifest, and communicate emotions. In addition to this enactive and performative dimension of emotion, culture also maintains stocks of knowledge about emotions and what they are, how they arise, what they mean (for individuals and societies), and how to deal with them, both individually and collectively. Because culture is, by definition, a socially shared and collective effort, it is essential for shared emotional experiences that constitute the nucleus of many forms of human sociality.

Whereas Keltner and others focus the view that cultural practices and belief systems share a "core emotional similarity" (p. XX), I would like to emphasize the potential for analyzing cultural differences, conflict, and contestation through this framework, all of which are all essential to understand how emotion, culture and society mutually constitute one another. My first argument pertains to the cultural representations of emotions that make-up the "archives" of emotional experience, thought, and expression. Although there might well be a core emotional similarity across cultural belief systems, I maintain that cultural representations do not simply express or "store" emotion-related knowledge, but that the very act of encoding or decoding those representations also always entails the alteration and modification of that what is being represented.

In other words, cultural practices fundamentally change our very understanding of emotions and what they imply for social relations and broader societal affairs. Keltner and colleagues briefly seem to indicate this when they write that individuals "become

sophisticated practitioners of culture-specific emotions" (p. XX), but the implications of the SFT framework, in my view, seem to be far more comprehensive. The meanings, understandings and social implications of specific emotions have been shown to differ notably across cultures. Shame, for example, is much more prominent in social life in Indonesia as compared to Western cultures. It is also more specifically tied to social relations of subordinance in Indonesia, whereas it is linked to breaches of moral rules in the Western world (Fessler, 2004). They have also been shown to differ notably across time. Even though shame seems to be ubiquitous throughout history (in-line with the "core similarity assumption"), there is profound variation in the cultural practices related to shame and thus in how shame structures social relations and social interactions (Stearns, 2017).

A second source of variation that is crucial for how emotion, culture, and society are co-constituted are ways in which emotion-related practices and knowledge are organized, distributed, and regulated in society. Practices of articulating and expressing emotions as well as representations of emotions do not circulate freely in any given society, but are subject to political considerations, economic interests, and technological developments. They are deliberately and strategically steered and channeled, and often backed by social institutions. Whether a nation state society articulates, for instance through rituals and practices of commemoration, guilt and remorse over past wrongdoings or rather highlights pride and veneration regarding key historical figures is a matter of lively debate and contestation (e.g., Knudsen & Andersen, 2019). Likewise, political actors frequently engage in the staging of rituals and protests to articulate specific emotions and to couple these emotions with political grievances, for instance regarding social relations between in- and outgroup (e.g., Shoshan, 2016), establishing a dominant "emotional regime" (Reddy, 2001) or an "emotional climate" (de Rivera, 1992). Finally, the economic organization of a society not only determines the kinds of social relations that are prevalent in the context of work and occupation, but likewise

affects the emotions that are associated with these relations, for example insecurity and alienation (Hochschild, 1983).

Importantly, and in-line with the assumptions of SFT, this deliberate and strategic curation of cultural archives of emotion has profound implications for the principles of SFT discussed above. The practices and representations of emotion that become dominant in a society not only affect citizens' emotions, but likewise the relational actions and interactions these emotions inform and enable. The practices and representations that govern emotions are probably less interested in emotions as such, but rather in the relational and cognitive consequences of emotion. For example, autocratic regimes aiming at the establishment of an emotional climate of fear will primarily be interested in disrupting social relations amongst citizens to prevent the formation of opposition and protest. Here, emotions are simply a means to a social-political end.

Taken together, Keltner and colleagues in their contribution propose a much appreciated and needed advancement of SFT that most thoroughly accounts for the manifold interactions between emotions, relationships, and culture. Importantly, their approach is mostly compatible with theories and concepts of emotions in other disciplines concerned with culture and sociality, and my contribution has outlined some of the ways in which more macro-social perspectives on the relevance of conflict and cultural difference can further inform the proposed theory.

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