

The Cultural Psychology of Natural Kinds and the Deconstruction of the Emotions: A Comment

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Abstract

Stimulated by these three brilliant target essays this commentary raises a few questions about the universality of the “emotions,” the cultural psychology of “natural kinds,” and the analytic deconstruction of the idea of an emotion.

Keywords

basic emotions, Brahman widows, cultural psychology, natural kinds

Cross-cultural research on so-called basic color terms and on so-called basic emotions grew up at about the same time in the social sciences (in the late 1960s and 1970s). The pioneer volume on basic color terms was Brent Berlin’s and Paul Kay’s *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution*, which began with the following rather significant disclaimer (Footnote 2):

Throughout this discussion when we speak of color categories in a given lexicon, we refer to the meaning of native lexemes in terms of three psychophysical dimensions: hue, saturation and brightness. It has been demonstrated by Conklin (1955) that color lexemes may well include, along with information concerning these psychophysical dimensions, other sorts of information, such as succulence versus desiccation. Similarly, in Tzeltal, secondary color lexemes indicate not only the features of surface texture but refer as well to features of shape and consistency. Moreover it has been argued, to our minds convincingly, that to appreciate the full cultural significance of color words, it is necessary to appreciate the full range of meanings, both referential and connotative, and not restrict oneself arbitrarily to hue, saturation and brightness. We thus make no claim—in fact we specifically deny—that our treatment of the various color terminologies treated here is an ethnographically revealing one. (Berlin & Kay, 1969, p. 160)

In that footnote and in the context of that caveat, Berlin and Kay go on to say that while the data they present in their book is admittedly not a revealing account of the native meanings of color categories, nevertheless they believe that from a scientific point of view “the high degree of pattern found in the data is sufficient justification for the process dictating its selection” (Berlin & Kay, 1969, p. 160).

My guess is that Paul Ekman would say, and somewhere probably has said (or at the very least ought to say), pretty much the same thing. After reading these three brilliant and stimulating target essays I found myself thinking that a good deal of cross-talk among emotion researchers might be avoided by honoring and making clear the distinction between research that aims to explicate the meaning of folk/indigenous/native categories (and lexemes) for understanding “feelings,” “affects,” or “emotions” versus research that is less concerned to be ethnographically illuminating and has other objectives in mind (which are sometimes dubbed with the honorific title “scientific”).

Andrea Scarantino (2012) is so sophisticated at separating anything that can be separated from anything else that his essay is especially relevant in this regard. He is such an adept at deconflating things that by the end I confess I found the accumulated force of all his distinctions almost dizzying. I greatly enjoyed the ride but was left wondering: Whatever happened to “ontological independence” as a condition of identity for a “natural kind”? The natural kind defining criterion of ontological independence was mentioned early in the essay. Also mentioned and then really put to work was the criterion of epistemic or inductive usefulness; with that criterion exclusively in mind, the “naturalness” of a category arises from the many things a fully informed human being might know about something and might be able to predict and explain by virtue of knowing it is a member of some particular homogeneous class of things. But unless I missed something (which is certainly a possibility), the criterion of ontological independence got dropped in the subsequent discussion of emotions as natural kinds. The disappearance of the ontological independence standard happened early when Scarantino used the class of “things taller than 1 meter” as an illustration of a “nonnatural kind,” presumably calling it a “nonnatural kind” because the things in that class may be homogeneous but only with respect to the feature of being taller than 1 meter, leaving us with very few (if any) valid inductive inferences to draw about the other features of members of that class.

Nevertheless it is worth noting that the feature of being “a thing that is taller than 1 meter” is ontologically independent of human involvement with, beliefs about, or knowledge of that

feature, unlike for example, the class of kinship positions (mother's brother, father's sister's husband, etc.) categorized as "uncles" in American English, where the status of being an "uncle" is ontologically dependent (on human consciousness). Being ontologically dependent, an "uncle" in American English is a real thing that does not exist independent of the point of view of a particular interpretive community. The move made by Scarantino (2012)—dropping the ontological independence criterion—leads me to wonder whether the things studied by cultural anthropologists—things that only exist by virtue of human involvement with them from a particular communal point of view—might justifiably be called "natural kinds" just so long as they possess epistemic usefulness; the class of "Brahman widows in rural India," for example.

Knowing that someone is a Brahman widow in rural India makes it possible to predict all sorts of things about members of the class: that they will never remarry, that they will be residing in the same household with one or more of their sons, that they will have a strict diet of "cool" foods and never eat fish or meat or garlic or onions, that they will only wear white saris made of cotton, that they spend much of the day praying to be reunited with the soul of their husband, that they will never wear jewelry or apply cosmetics, that they will not be invited to auspicious occasions such as weddings, and on and on. And there is a rich set of theoretical ideas that makes sense of and motivates all those actions and restrictions. By that criterion for "naturalness"—epistemic usefulness regardless of whether the objects in the class are ontologically independent or not—it seems entirely imaginable that widowhood might be a nonnatural kind in some cultures (where few valid inductive inferences could be drawn from the fact of being a widow), yet might well be a natural kind (in the epistemic usefulness sense) in other cultures. What would bar us from saying the same thing about particular mental categories, including the emotion categories lexicalized or otherwise experienced and expressed in the cultural psychology of this or that people? Conceptualizing natural kinds in this way, one might suggest that one aim of the cultural psychology of the "emotions" is to discover which mental states are natural kinds for members of particular cultural groups but not for members of other cultural groups.

So one wonders: Would Andrea Scarantino accept that a mental state might be natural (in the epistemic or inductive sense), but only for members of particular cultural traditions and primarily by virtue of the way members of that group organized their interpersonal relationships and packaged their wants, feelings, values, and pictures of the world?

Allow me to comment briefly on the Kevin Mulligan–Klaus Scherer dialogue (2012) (which contains a very informative and clarifying discussion of valuation and intentionality) and the invitation from Thomas Dixon (which I am happy to accept) to reinstate the "old-fashioned terminology of passions and affections" (Dixon, 2003, cited in Dixon, 2012). My own working definition of the idea of an "emotion" goes something like this (see Shweder, 1994, 2003, 2004; see also Shweder, Haidt, Horton, & Joseph, 2010): an "emotion" (e.g., sadness, shame, guilt) is a complex. As a potential feature of human mental functioning it is not something

separable from the conditions that justify it, from the somatic and affective experiences that are ways of being touched by it, from the actions it demands and motivates. The emotion is the whole story. It is a kind of somatic feeling (for example, fatigue, chest pain) and affective feeling (for example, panic, emptiness, or expansiveness). It is caused by the perception of some antecedent condition (e.g., death of a friend) and by the recognition of the personal implications of the event for the self (e.g., loss, gain, threat, goal blockage, degradation or elevation of status). This motivates a plan for action (e.g., attack, withdraw, hide, confess, celebrate) to preserve or enhance one's sense of identity and purpose in life. The idea of an "emotion" is about the entire episode. It is about the unitary experience of the whole package deal or the simultaneous experience of all the components of meaning.

What conditions of identity distinguish sadness versus shame versus guilt? Sadness, it might be suggested, is the particular way a normal person will feel and act when the things he or she wants or likes are believed to be permanently unattainable or lost. Shame, it might be suggested, is the particular way a normal person will feel and act when he or she fears being judged defective by those (including one's self) whose regard matters for the maintenance of one's social status and personal identity. Guilt, it might be suggested, is the particular way a normal person will feel and act when he or she violates the moral order and deviates in thinking, feeling, or doing from what he or she knows to be good, right, and dutiful.

Not surprisingly I find the working definition in the Mulligan and Scherer (2012) essay quite congenial, although after reading their essay I am not sure I could come up with a very good nonostensive homogeneous class-like definition of their all-encompassing notion of the "affective." I myself don't find it problematic to talk about states of the body (a headache or an itch, for example) experienced by a subject as somatic *feelings* or states of the soul (elation or emptiness, for example) as affective *feelings* (call it states of the "self" if you have problem with the word or concept of the "soul").

I am more agnostic than Mulligan and Scherer concerning the inductive grounds for claiming universal applicability for their working definition of emotion as a means for making sense of the mental life and cultural psychology of peoples wherever you go. Informed in part by Anna Wierzbicka's (1999) corpus of research in which she nominates certain concepts as universally available across all cultural traditions, I am quite willing to conduct interpretive research on cultural differences in human mentalities relying on a theory of mind that presumes that all normal human beings wherever you go in the world want things, know things, feel things, and value things (as good or bad), and think about the things they want, know, feel, and value. But I am less sure about the question whether the concept of an emotion (as defined by Mulligan & Scherer [2012] or by myself [1994, 2003, 2004]) should be included as foundational or basic in a theory of mind, rather than treated as a contingent (and in a globalizing world arguably increasingly prevalent) product of the way wants, knowledge, feelings, and values get assembled or packaged in particular human groups. This is not because I want to reduce complexity to simplicity or because I think

emotions are words or because I require that a concept be lexicalized before I credit its importance in a cultural tradition. I am agnostic because I am unsure what the persuasive inductive or empirical basis for claims about universal applicability might be in this case.

Of course, the idea of an emotion means what it means (and thus is what it is) whether you contemplate the idea in New Guinea or in Geneva. In that sense it is universal; but that is not an empirical or inductive claim. There is also a kind of analytic or a priori universality to the core or minimally essential definition of particular emotions. Imagine an anthropologist who returns from years of field research in rural India and reports that in his or her village “shame has a very different core meaning than it has in our culture” and that “what shame means in India is the subjective experience of elation and satisfaction caused by actually attaining the things one has long wanted to achieve in life.” I think we would justifiably say that the anthropologist either did not speak our language or was confused about the meaning of the English word “shame,” and/or that his or her field report was unintelligible or incoherent.

Indeed, I wonder how Mulligan and Scherer would interpret the following type of observation, which has appeared in credible anthropological reports by leading field hands. This is the way people in some cultures have been observed to respond to apparent “loss” (such as the death of a child). They do not respond with visible or direct signs of “sadness”—no tears, no subjective reports of deflation, no predicted facial expressions, no mournful retreat from life, and no use of a word for a negative emotion. Rather they respond with “fatigue, sickness, or other kinds of bodily distress” (such as backaches and headaches). They feel sick not sad. In the light of such anthropological observations (for the sake of argument let us assume that they are reliable), what should we say about the mental life of such a people? What should we say about the cultural relevance of the particular package of wants, beliefs, feelings, and values which we call “sadness”? Is the anthropological report evidence against its relevance? Surely not, because we can readily make use of our concept of sadness to generate all sorts of interpretations of what was observed—it wasn’t really a loss, they are denying their sadness or defending against it via an latent process called “somatization,” they lack the linguistic resources to express their sadness, they are not “normal” human beings, etcetera. But this is not inductive science; it is the speculative use of a received theoretical category (“sadness” as defined by our own ethnopsychological folk theory) to interpret and hence go beyond what has actually been observed. So the usual Popperian question arises: What evidence could possibly count as disconfirming the hypothesis that “sadness” is a universally applicable concept for understanding the mental life of all people under conditions where they believe that the things they want or like have been permanently lost? If disconfirmation is not an option then perhaps we are not really dealing here with a hypothesis about empirical universals, but rather with assumptions we are culturally prepared

to make about which aspects of the mental life of persons are essential and which are contingent.

I loved the Thomas Dixon (2012) essay and not just because I am a neoantiquarian. Lively disputes deserve to be eternal ones. It is good to know that current calls to view the “emotions” as packages or complexes have a distinguished historical pedigree and may well have been advanced in more sophisticated forms in the past than are available today. This is not entirely surprising given the philosophical issues tied up with any analysis of the emotions and given the unfortunate separation of psychology and philosophy in the early 20th century. The call for the deconstruction or interpretive resolution of the emotions into wants, feeling, beliefs, and values might be viewed as just one more variation on the “passions and affections” theme.

And it was certainly eye-opening to learn that originally (at least circa the 16th century) the word “emotion” denoted a physical disturbance and bodily movement. I found myself admiring the Stoics for being among the first to acknowledge a principle that is central to good ethnographic work in cultural anthropology, namely that one should be slow to judge little-known others and be on guard against one’s own intuitive or spontaneous reactions of aversion or affective arousal when first encountering their practices. Be cautious before your emotional responses lead you to declare the other a savage or a barbarian. My only request to Thomas Dixon would be to tell us more about the Augustine–Aquinas response to the Stoics and how the Stoics might have replied to the accusation (was the accusation based on a descriptive claim or a normative one?) that “apatheia” was not human.

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