

SOCIOLOGY OF EMOTIONS

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Summary

Within the last few decades an amplified interest in emotions can be noticed. This new interest occurs both in the neurosciences as well as in philosophy, anthropology and also Anglo-American sociology. Treatises on human feelings can be found in the sociological classics, but then came an extensive exclusion of this topic (until the 1970s and 1980s). Discussing the question of why emotions were neglected for such a long time in sociology, one can concentrate either on the 'Zeitgeist' or on the internal structure of the scientific system as reasons for the disregard and rediscovery of a topic. After a short overview of this debate and a first outline of the subject area the academic field of the 'sociology of emotions' is described further. Especially in the Anglo-American sociology a lot of empirical and theoretical works on different emotions can be found now. Two main directions can be distinguished within the sociology of emotions: One approach is aimed at analyzing the shaping of emotions by the social. The other approach is aimed at analyzing the structuring influence of emotions on social phenomena. The article closes with some examples for a synthesis of both approaches and a short introduction into methodological questions concerning empirical research in the field of sociology of emotions

1. Introduction

For the past few decades we may state an increased scientific interest in emotions, in contexts such as neurobiology, philosophy, history as far as to anthropology. For about

30 years also sociology – most of all in the Anglo-Saxon countries – has increasingly been dealing with the topic of emotions.

However, this is not a completely new topic. Already the classical authors of the discipline were interested in human emotions, although not under the label ‘sociology of emotions’. But the analyses of the classical authors were not immediately continued. In the course of the 20th century there happens a gradual exclusion of emotions from the sociological debate, which continued until the 1970s. Only since then we may speak of sociology rediscovering the topic.

2. A Short History of the Topic

Here it is only possible to give a rough overview of early works on the topic of emotions in sociology. In this context we must distinguish two topical fields: the judgement on so-called civilization processes as supported by the respective classical authors (i.e. the possibility of changing significance of emotionality and rationality for human action in the course of the modernization process) on the one hand, and on the other hand their analyses of actual human behaviour. Most classical authors dealt with emotions in the context of this second field, even if in respect of the first field they were convinced of an increasing process of rationalization in the course of the modern age.

Just to give some short examples: Despite his thesis of the ‘Disenchantment of the World’, i.e. of the religious, the mystical and thus emotions being pushed out of man’s everyday life, Max Weber dealt with emotions. Weber discusses emotions in the context of his ideal types of social action, for example. Weber describes *affectional* action as being motivated by current affects or emotions, according to which it must be located at the border to conscious, meaningful behaviour. By his concept of the ideal types of social action, Weber shows that he believes it to be necessary to take also those motivations to act into consideration which are not only instrumental rationality; however in his writings he states the importance of instrumental rationality and its significance for the modern age. Also for his typology of forms of authority Weber takes emotional components into consideration, for example charismatic authority which is legitimated by emotional ties to the leader and by belief in the latter’s extraordinary qualities. From Weber’s point of view, however, rational-legal authority is typical for the modern age, which is legitimated by a rational legal system and is supported by bureaucracy as a rational executive. And, to give just one last example from Weber's works: Jack Barbalet and Helena Flam pointed out to the significance of fear of religious condemnation – as the essential motivation for the rationalization of life, guided by Protestant ethics – in Weber’s writings.

Also Georg Simmel states that in the modern age emotional behaviour is increasingly pushed to the back. According to him, there is no other way of organizing the living together in modern cities, for example. For the individual it is impossible to react by emotions to all the stimulations and encounters in the city; an insensitive attitude, he says, is that way of life which is most likely to guarantee a steady course of all actions in an urban environment. Nevertheless, Simmel dealt extensively with topics for which not only the emotional reactions of people play an important role, but also he systematically took emotion-triggered interactions between actors and their further

consequences for interaction into consideration. This is very well expressed in his studies on conflict as a way of sociation, for example. He does not only show how unavoidable the various forms of quarrel are for community life, but he also deals extensively with those emotions accompanying or causing quarrel.

The significance of Emile Durkheim's works on solidarity is discussed below in connection with Randall Collin's work.

If one considers that – despite the emphasis on a gradual rationalization of many fields of life – emotions were definitely mentioned by sociological writings from the beginning of the 20th century, the almost complete 'disappearance' of emotions from the sociological mainstream is a fact which needs explanation.

In 1998, Simon J. Williams and Gillian Bendelow described this problem as follows: "Despite their obvious importance to a range of issues within the social sciences, emotions, like the body to which they are so closely tied, have tended to enjoy a rather 'ethereal' existence within sociology, lurking in the shadows or banished to the margins of sociological thought and practice. Certainly, it is possible to point towards implicit if not explicit emotional themes in classical sociological writing. (...) None the less, in conjunction with the recent upsurge of interest in the body and society (...), it is really only within the last decade or so that a distinct 'corpus' of work, mostly American in origin, has begun to emerge in the sociology of emotions."

Two reasons can be found for the exclusion of emotions from the sociological debate or for their rediscovery by literature:

Often the 'Zeitgeist' is given as an explanation for a boom of scientific topics. According to this argument, it was most of all general change in society which resulted in emotions being neglected by sociology and being rediscovered later. This approach is implicitly based on the sociology of knowledge thesis of the existential determination (*Seinsgebundenheit*) of all thought, going back to Karl Mannheim, which is believed to be particularly true for sociological thought. There is a close interdependency between the object range of sociology and its research, due to which we may assume that lifeworld changes influence the foci of work and the predominant approaches of sociology.

Another explanation tries to find the reasons for the neglect and respectively the rediscovery of emotions by sociology in the institutional structure of the scientific system. What must be stated is that, of course, both chains of arguments are relevant. The institutional argument is most of all useful for explaining the different chronologic 'booms' of the topic of emotions in the context of the various national sociological traditions.

2.1. 'Zeitgeist'

In the compilation *Research Agendas in the Sociology of Emotions*, published in 1990, Theodore D. Kemper pointed out to the general predominance of a rational concept of man in the sciences since the 1930s. This predominance, he states, prevented any

intensive discussion of emotions in sociology. An age when extended organizations characterize the lives of the people and demand a future-oriented way of life from them (of the kind that the individual must take the variety of other actors into consideration for planning his/her actions) will result in a rational concept of man also in sociology, aiming implicitly at making the behaviour of other people calculable. From this point of view, the success of social-scientific approaches which try to explain human action by simple laws (such as behaviourism) become understandable. In a world of modern, rationally calculating actors emotions, these phenomena which are often called irrational and are hardly measurable, may seem to be increasingly neglectable. That is why Barbalet describes the period between 1930 and 1970 as a 'cognitive phase', when sociology dealt predominantly with the *cognitive* achievements of actors in the context of planning and carrying out their actions. However, even in this period, the topic of emotions was never completely eliminated from science. Even in the 'cognitive' period there were authors who placed a high value on emotions but were not able to enforce a general discussion of the topic (often quoted examples are: George Homans, C. Wright Mills, Neil Smelser, Alvin Gouldner, Erving Goffman). That is why Barbalet speaks out in favour of reconsidering the history of sociology, in the context of which those authors who were moving on the sidelines should be acknowledged. Only the questioning of the rational concept of man by different social movements in the 1960s made the sciences deal with the emotional aspect of man again, as stated by a variety of authors: the Women's Movement, the Black Movement, but also the Peace Movement discussed questions of identity which revalued man's emotional conditions and doubted the all-encompassing rationality of man. Kemper gives the year 1975 as a turning point of the rediscovery of the emotional by sociology, a year when a number of important publications on the topic were published. Such works need some lead time, which makes Kemper conclude that probably since the early 1970s there had been renewed sociological interest in emotions. This chronologic location of the rediscovery of emotions is in accordance with observations by other authors.

2.2 Institutional Structures of the Scientific System

Apart from the spirit of the times, also the structures of the scientific system must be employed to explain the changing fields of interest of sociologists. Attempts to be established as an academic discipline played an important role for the gradual exclusion of emotions from sociological considerations. Just as in other social sciences, also sociology is confronted with the problem that – in contrast to that of most natural-scientific disciplines – its cognitive selectivity is not very distinctive. Right from the beginning, sociology's objects of cognition and methods were partly the same as those of other disciplines. Particularly in academic contexts with long lines of tradition, in a phase when sociology was established as an independent subject at universities, this may be supposed to have led to particularly rigid attempts to close off from other disciplines. During this phase topical fields which obviously were also those of other sciences – such as emotions belonging to psychology – were avoided by the mainstream of sociology. Thus, the renewed international sociological interest in emotions may be explained by the model of branching according to Michael J. Mulkay. When an academic discipline spreads, it becomes necessary to find new fields of analysis and tasks which promise reputation for the growing number of scientists. Now also fringe areas which before were either considered unimportant or were consciously avoided,

due to attempts at becoming established, may be analyzed in more detail. From this point of view, emotions may become a topic of sociology again. In respect of sociology in the German-speaking countries, for example the 'belated' - in comparison to the USA – taking up of the topic of emotions in the 1980s may be (co)explained by such institutional reasons as well as by the different institutionalization history of the subject in the two countries.

As Williams writes, in today's literature on *sociology of emotions* we find "a variety of competing perspectives and multiple research agendas". Apart from this variety of topics and methods, however, we also observe processes of increasing consensus-building. Turning towards emotions once again has resulted in the foundation of appropriate organizations whose purpose is the further research of this field. The International Society for Research on Emotion (ISRE), founded in 1984, the appropriate section of the American Sociological Association (ASA), founded in 1986, and the Study Group of Emotion of the British Sociological Association (BSA), which followed in 1989, should be given as examples. Just recently, an appropriate research network of the European Sociological Association (ESA) has been founded. It is also conspicuous that there seems to be agreement in respect of those early works from the field of the *sociology of emotions* which are considered quotable and must be quoted. Books or articles by Arlie Hochschild, Randall Collins and Norman K. Denzin as well as a few other authors are frequently named as starting points for a *sociology of emotions* by the more recent overviews. Furthermore, the label '*sociology of emotions*' has pushed through for sociological works on the topic of emotions (while currently still works of very different theoretical and empirical directions are subsumed under this label). The fact that meanwhile there exist introductions and readers on *sociology of emotions* may be given as evidence for a process of being institutionalized as a special branch, just as the existing entries on *sociology of emotions* in the various encyclopedias, such as *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*.

3. Subject Area

We may distinguish the following dimensions of the emotional:

1. Firstly, the bodily dimension which refers to all physiologic processes connected to emotions (from neuronal as far as to endocrinological processes).
2. Secondly, the dimension of expression which refers to the bodily appearance of an emotion as being visible for other people, which can be partly influenced by the person concerned.
3. Thirdly, the dimension of experience which includes the conscious experience (and partly also its verbalization) of an emotion by the person feeling it.
4. Fourthly, the dimension of evaluation which establishes a relation to the environment by classifying outside stimulations, i.e. in the most simple sense as being pleasant/unpleasant. The evaluation dimension may refer to the individual him/herself by the subjective experiencing of an emotion being further emotionally evaluated. In this context we might refer e.g. to the shame-shame spirals sketched by Scheff, where the subjective experiencing of shame again triggers off shame. The supporters of the evaluation theory of emotions in psychology (such as Magda Arnold or Richard S Lazarus) assume that the

evaluation function is the main feature of emotions (not at last also due to the assumed adaptive functions of emotions).

5. And finally, fifthly, there is the action dimension which refers to the motivation or tendency towards a certain future way of behaviour.

These five dimensions are connected to each other in different ways, while the opinions in literature disagree on the question of which determining relations exist between them or if there are any at all. Naturally – due to man's bodily nature – the bodily dimension is connected to all other dimensions, however no one-sided effect on the other dimensions can be stated. Of course, the expression of an emotion (such as with facial expressions) is based on physiologic preconditions (such as the facial muscles and their control by neuronal and endocrinological processes). However, the facial-feedback thesis shows that also the intended presentation of a certain expression (when certain facial muscles are moved without any appropriate emotion existing at that moment) may trigger off physiologic mechanisms and sometimes also the experiencing of the thus-associated emotions. Also the dimension of experience, i.e. the subjective experiencing of an emotion, may start or influence physical mechanisms, as it is suggested by studies on psychoneuroimmunology. The dimensions of expression and experience, on the other hand, need not be congruent, as given evidence to by studies on the manipulation of expressing emotions according to cultural or social emotion norms. The dimensions of evaluation and experience, on the other hand, are closely connected to each other, if we follow Magda Arnold's assumptions; however it is also possible to evaluate the environment emotionally without this resulting in a subjective experience of the respective individual (just think of the appropriate experiments by Robert Zajoncs). The action dimension, i.e. the tendency towards a certain behaviour triggered off by an emotion, may also come along with consciously experiencing this emotion or it may be triggered off by it, but, as shown e. g. by Joseph Lenox's studies on automatic fear reactions to conditioned stimulations, they may also happen unconsciously. Similar to the bodily dimension, also the action dimension (which is of particular interest for sociology) is closely connected to the other dimensions, in the context of which tendencies of emotional behaviour may also consist of not making obvious action steps which, however, may also result in crucial consequences for the actor or his/her social environment.

For all mentioned dimensions of emotional processes, man's social existence must be taken into consideration. Physiology, expression and experience of an emotion are essentially influenced by our social experiences and learning processes. We react to our social environment by emotionally evaluating it, and within this environment we act on the basis of our emotional conditions, in the context of which learned social and cultural rules play an important role for the way in which we evaluate and act. For example, what annoys us is closely connected to the ideas of justice we have learned, and whose violation makes us feel annoyed. If then it is allowed to express this annoyance openly or if we are forced to suppress it depends also on the time and society we are living in. Thus, a *sociology of emotions* may deal with all the above mentioned five dimensions.

Apart from them, emotions show also chronological characteristics; these may be short-term emotions referring to a specific situation, but also longer lasting moods of an individual. For a *sociology of emotions* both phenomena are relevant. In many works, the words 'affect', 'emotion' or 'feeling' are used as synonyms, however in respect of

their different qualities they are sometimes treated differently. With previous approaches of a *sociology of emotions*, the bodily dimension has rather played a minor role. Whereas meanwhile psychology (which by its experiment-oriented approach has always been close to natural-scientific disciplines) and neuro-sciences, for example, share a number of connections and commonly pursued questions, still for sociology the field of bio-sciences seems to be *terra incognita*. In this field, the border between the 'two cultures' - despite stating interest in interdisciplinarity - proves to be extremely resistant. For the time being, only very few representatives of a *sociology of emotions* have at least referred to bio-scientific debates in their works (such as Theodore Kemper or Jack Barbalet). Still today there has been no systematic debate among sociology and bio-sciences on emotions and their social references, and for the oncoming years we may expect that this will be an intensively discussed topic for the discipline.

4. Different Approaches

Given the existing multitude of theoretical and empirical studies in the field of sociology of emotions (e.g. in the research fields of social movements, intimate relations, media and organizations), it is difficult to provide a *systematic overview* of this special field. Furthermore, often single studies mix 'sociological', 'social-psychological' and other perspectives. Thus, the following overview is meant to work out the respective 'sociological core' of the different types of a *sociology of emotions*. There are other ways of classifying *sociology of emotions*, such as that of Turner and Stets; however for a general overview the distinction of the following two main lines of *sociology of emotions* proves to be reasonable: studies discussing the *social development* of emotions, and works analyzing the *social effects* of emotions.

Authors following the first line analyze emotions in respect of their development. In this context, they are not understood as biologically given but as a phenomenon which is essentially (co)influenced by the social and/or cultural environment (in the context of which all above mentioned five dimensions of emotional processes may in principle be analyzed in respect of such social influences). The question about the 'nature' of emotions, i.e. about their fundamental characteristics and ways of appearance forms the background of these studies. This is a matter which is also the subject of other disciplines, which is why in this field we may find a number of interdisciplinary interfaces.

However, in the field of *sociology of emotions* we also find studies analyzing the effect of emotions on social situations. According to this approach, emotions are assumed to be mostly given (without making any preliminary decision on their biological and/or social preconditions). Here, the question of how emotions develop is put back, and instead the effect of emotions on the structuring of social circumstances is discussed. In principle, this approach also shows interfaces with other disciplines, however research-pragmatically these may be somewhat neglected, compared to the case of the first mentioned approach. Or, in other words: more recent bio-scientific insights on the development of emotions do not necessarily result in a revision of sociological explanations for the social effects of emotional behaviour. So to speak, the social consequences of emotions may be considered a task of sociology *in the stricter sense*.

In the following, both main lines of *sociology of emotions* are introduced by the example of some exemplary works. Although some authors make efforts to combine the here separately sketched approaches, in most cases we observe a focus on one or the other approach, which is due to the complexity of the phenomenon, which makes such a focusing unavoidable. At the end of this chapter some attempts at a promising synthesis are presented.

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Biographical Sketch

Katharina Scherke is associate professor at the department of sociology at the Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz, Austria. Her research interests are in History of Sociology, Sociological Theory, Sociology of the Arts and Culture, Sociology of Emotions and Sociology of Science. Between 1999 and 2004 she was taking part in an interdisciplinary long term project on "Modernity – Vienna and Central Europe around 1900". She has been a member of the European Sociological Association (ESA) since 2001 (Research Networks: Sociology of Emotions, Sociology of the Arts) and board-member of the Austrian Association of Sociology from 2005-2009. Since 2007 she is vice-dean of the Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences of the University of Graz.

Her recent publications deal with the history of the topic of emotions in sociology: *Emotionen als Forschungsgegenstand in der deutschsprachigen Soziologie* (Wiesbaden 2009). She is co-editor (with Helga Mitterbauer) of *Moderne. Kulturwissenschaftliches Jahrbuch*; in 2007 a special issue of this yearbook has been devoted to emotions. In 2008 she has been co-editor (with Eva Flicker) of a special issue on *sociology of emotions* in *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Soziologie* (2/2008).