

EMOTION AND MEANING

The study of human emotionality has been a part of the subject matter of social anthropology since the beginning. It is perfectly obvious that men, in some sense which I think would be understood by all, are not affectively neutral towards the world and their fellows; this fact has been seized upon by field-workers and theorists in very many different ways. It seems that, more often than not emotion is seen as a specific motivation for action; and theories in which emotion is seen as a specific motivation for behaviour have a tendency to be of an impressionistic or ad hoc character. This is not necessarily a point against motivation theories; there are probably reasonable grounds for saying that every person has some kind of intuitive grasp of the affective life of every other person regardless of culture. But, while one might be ready to admit the generality of phenomena which could be categorized as fear, hate, joy, love, etc., it would be impossible to establish a priori what would be the specific occasions for such outbursts.

Emotionality can be seen as part of the symbolic system of a culture, and inappropriate emotionality, as our own psychiatry shows, can be classified as mad. Before a reasonable use may be made of emotion as an analytic concept it is clearly necessary for one to have a grasp of the idiom in which the phenomenon described as emotion occurs. As Durkheim recognized in The Elementary Forms, the public expression of emotion may have a highly conventionalized aspect; emotionality may or may not be "true" emotionality however passionate seeming its manifestation.

But for all its use in anthropological discourse, it strikes me that, on the whole, remarkably little of interest has been said about the social nature of emotions. Yet emotionality is a critical experience of life and it has been possible for some to say that it is virtually life itself, or so essential to life that it would be impossible to imagine its absence; curious that so little should be known of it when deductive considerations indicate that its nature must be profoundly social. Here I will indicate some possible approaches to its study; for this purpose I will briefly examine William James' opinions on the subject.

James' theory was physiologically based; he believed that every different emotion had a different physical manifestation: "Were we to go through the whole list of emotions which have been named by men, and study their organic manifestations, we should but ring the changes on the elements... Rigidity of this muscle, relaxation of that, constriction of the arteries here, dilation there ... etc., etc." (James' Principles of Psychology: 447). He finds this tedious and proceeds on to a general formulation. "Our natural way of thinking about... emotions is that the mental perception of some fact excites the mental affection called the emotion, and that this latter state of mind gives rise to the bodily expression. My theory, on the contrary, is that the bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion" (449). Emotion in short, is a reflex in much the same way as is the jerking of an arm unexpectedly put on an open flame.

There are many possible objections to this theory; I will forward one of potential interest to social anthropology. We might ask what justification James has for stating that the feeling of an emotion is subsequent to the perception of the object which aroused it. It seems far more plausible that, when an emotion is found to be in association with a perception, they occur simultaneously, and that the emotion is an integral part of the symbolic content of the thing perceived; this implies that emotion is a part of something which might be described as the lexicon of a language.

If the view that emotion can best be treated as a part of languages is viable, then emotionality and specific emotional responses are learned in the same way that verbal language is learned and in the same contexts. Language is picked up through experience, and at first very largely through simple

ostention - 'that is a knife'/'that hurts'; and this is followed by increasing ability to deal with abstraction and to use the generative rules of language with facility. Emotion is a part of primitive experience in much the same way that language is, but with the difference that emotion is internally generated; however this can make no essential difference; the emotional response to an external event is as much a part of the meaning of this event as are the external sensory data which gave word of it; in fact it might be said that the effective response is really the only thing in terms of which the event can be evaluated.

But emotion will only be evoked under some circumstances, and many objects of experience will to a large degree be affectively neutral. Language per se may or may not be associated with affect-arousing situations and I think that it is a valid assumption that language and emotion are theoretically separable though not necessarily always separate. What this seems to mean is that words and linguistic rules have no necessary sway over the experiencing of events of great subjective importance. It further seems to imply that experiences may occur for which there is no ready categorical slot within the person experiencing them. This idea is of relevance to psychopathology and to the cross-cultural study of emotion; the former can be illustrated through the following quotation from Karl Jasper's General Psychopathology (113):

The elementary break-through of experiences, which are not understandable in their genesis, is manifested in unattached feelings. If they are to become meaningful to the subject, these feelings must first search for an object or try to create one. For instance, unattached anxiety is very common in depressive states, so is a contentless euphoria in manic states ... so are the feelings roused at the start of a pregnancy and in the early states of a psychosis. Driven by an almost inescapable need to give some content to such feelings, patients will often supply some content of their own (delusions).

This refers to persons of more or less our own culture. It is possible that, where other cultures can interpret their emotional experiences in terms of spirits, multiple souls, witchcraft, etc., we are only offered the option of going mad.

It should be noted at this point that I have avoided any definition of emotion. Psychologists have increasingly come to believe that emotion cannot be defined in terms of those stirrings which are commonsensically held to be emotions; with each addition to a catalogue of this nature any technical usefulness for the word 'emotion' steadily decreases. It would seem far more useful to define emotion in a developmental and behaviouristic manner. This in fact is the way in which it would have to be defined, if I am to consider emotion a part of language in the broad sense; it is absurd to talk of an infant feeling pride, or any sophisticated affective perception at all, and equally suspect to suppose that such feelings as pride come into being as such at some definable developmental stage. We must begin with primeval affective responses, and observe them as they differentiate, perhaps from a simple predisposition to activity, through the avoidance and approach responses associated with pleasure and pain, etc. This is surely not to imply that the problem is likely to be a simple one; however I am given hope by the psychologists who find that complex affective states may be built out of simpler elements.

If emotions and language are inculcated in the same way, and to some extent in conjunction, then it seems evident that there should be significant differences between the emotional aspects of the symbolic systems of different cultures. But there nonetheless always remains the fact that these systems are inculcated anew in each individual, and that gross differences may exist between individuals of the same culture as a result of different handling.

And given that an individual learns a symbolic system directly, as built out of his own experience, it is at the same time true that a symbol system is enforced on him, and this system includes manifestations of emotionality,

publically enjoined as such or implicitly in the behaviour patterns of others. Ego sees others acting emotionally (as we would describe it) in certain contexts, and learns how to do so himself if not called short; this fact introduces a real complication into any empirical study of emotion. Just how does the individual come to behave as he does? And what, after all, does this mean to him?

Michael Kenny

Bibliography

Durkheim, E., Elementary Forms of the Religious Life

James, W., Principles of Psychology.

Jasper, K., General Psychopathology.