Formalization & Synergy in Emotions Theory


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Formalization and synergy in emotions theory: Review.

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Though it has taken some 30 years, the sociology of emotions has finally come of age. Long ignored or misunderstood within the social and natural sciences, there now exists a vast, growing and interdisciplinary literature on emotions in which a sociological perspective is increasingly seen as an essential piece of the puzzle. Jonathan Turner's most recent book, which represents the culmination of over 40 years of his thinking and writing on interpersonal behaviour, social theory and emotions, is a welcome addition to that literature. Arguing from a positivistic epistemological position, Turner draws on his more general theoretical work on social interaction and structure, and on earlier attempts to formulate a distinctive general theory of emotions from sociological and biological/evolutionary perspectives. This book represents a consolidation of these earlier efforts rather than a significant departure, and remains a work in progress rather than a completely finalised theory. Massive in both ambition and scope despite its small size, it is a comprehensive exposition of Turner's complex and multi-layered position on emotions and is sure, despite its flaws, to become a key work within the fields of the sociology of emotions and (sociological) social psychology.

Turner is a self-described and unabashed armchair theorist who advocates a division of labour between theory construction and empirical research, and this work is decidedly grand theoretical in focus. The core of Turner's project is to construct a formal theoretical model of human emotions, operating at different levels of social reality, which draws on already existing theories from a wide variety of disciplines and theoretical standpoints. Foremost amongst these are the symbolic interactionist and psychoanalytic traditions. In doing so, and based on his previous conceptual scheme, Turner derives seventeen highly abstract propositions, which form the basis of his theory. Emotions, he writes, form the basis of social bonds, create and sustain commitments to social structures and cultures, and may also contribute to the destruction of all three dimensions of human existence: 'Just about every dimension of society is thus held together or ripped apart by emotional arousal' (p. 1). This is the dialectic process – how social structure and culture affect emotional arousal, and vice versa – that Turner seeks to explain. Thus, the book's central question is: 'what sociological conditions arouse what emotions to what effects on human behaviour, interaction and social organisation?' (p. 1).

The first chapter discusses human emotions in general which are said to have biological, cognitive and cultural aspects. From a brief review of the literature, Turner posits four primary emotions (satisfaction-happiness, aversion-fear, assertion-anger and disappointment-sadness) which are thought to be hard-wired in human anatomy and, following Robert Plutchik’s model, hypothesises the ‘mixing’ of these emotions to produce ‘first order’ and ‘second order’ elaborations, which give rise to the vast emotional palette of humanity. Hence, for example, the first order elaborations of ‘pride’, ‘wonder’ and ‘reverence’ are produced via the ‘mixing’ of a greater amount of satisfaction-happiness with a lesser amount of aversion-fear. However, more important for the theory are the second-order elaborations that result from the ‘mixing’ of all three negative primary emotions to produce shame, guilt and alienation.
For Turner, the key reason that humans are the most emotional animals on earth lies in our evolution via natural selection, a position sure to scandalise many ‘die-hard’ constructionists within the field. He devotes Chapter 2 to the question of human emotionality and explains it from biological, evolutionary and (in an appendix) neurological points of view, which is both compelling and timely (if highly speculative in places). His basic point, which incorporates the ‘cladistic analysis’ of biologist Alexandra Maryanski and the neurological work of Joseph LeDoux (among others), suggests, briefly, that modern apes and the common ancestor of apes and humans evidenced weak social ties, fluid group structures and high levels of individualism. While this was fitness-enhancing in an arboreal habitat, around 16 million years ago the African forests began to recede, forcing many species of primates onto the savannah, where such traits became a liability. Thus, the need to adapt to a new habitat meant that natural selection ‘rewired’ the primate brain to enhance emotionality as a means to increase ties and forge higher levels of solidarity and cooperation among apes to aid survival. Indeed, Turner writes, emotions were ‘the only strategy for survival of a low-sociality ape on the African savannah’ (p. 28; original emphasis). He goes on to argue that the evidence for this can be found in the neurology of the sub-cortex and neo-cortex of the brain and that the first language (for visually dominant primates) was ‘the language of emotions’, onto which the facility of speech later ‘piggy-backed’ (p.36). There is also increasing evidence from cognitive, social and affective neuroscience that interactions between cognitive and emotional capacities in the brain make rationality and memory possible on a human scale, along with the ability to see self as object, all of which lends weight to the argument here. Turner is entirely correct, I feel, to bring biology and the new insights from neuroscience back into sociological debate, and to chide those who have a ‘primal fear’ of reductionism within sociology. Such an approach can only aid a sociological understanding of emotions. Social and biological approaches can and should be viewed as complementary within a multi-level and interdisciplinary analysis, not antagonistically. Emotions are, in my view, the key interface between the social and cognitive neurosciences, psychology, sociology and social theory. Turner’s work has greatly aided this integration.

However, for those who do not wish to admit biology into the realm of social theory, the book is written so that this chapter can be skipped entirely. The rest of the book represents much more familiar terrain for the sociologist. Chapter 3 outlines Turner’s conceptual model of social structure and culture, which forms the backdrop for the theory that follows. This simplified model rests on a number of assumptions. The first is that social reality unfolds at three levels: the micro level of the encounter, the meso level of corporate units (organisations, communities, groups) and categoric units (age, sex, class, ethnicity), and the macro level of institutional domains (economy, polity, kinship, law, science, education), stratification systems (based on unequal distribution of resources), societies and systems of societies. A second assumption posits social forces that generate social structures and their cultures. The macro-level forces are population, production, distribution, regulation and reproduction while the micro-level forces include emotions, transactional needs, normatizing, roles, status positions, demographic forces and ecological forces. The meso level is the arena in which these forces meet and are an outcome of their joint operation. Thirdly, these structures are embedded within each other: encounters (in addition to being embedded in biology) are embedded in corporate and categoric units, which are embedded in institutional domains and stratification systems, and these in turn are embedded in societies and systems of societies. Fourthly, meso-level units are ultimately built from the bottom up by encounters, and institutional domains by corporate units and stratification systems from categoric units, much like embedding. Finally, all social structures evidence culture, which flows in a top down manner from macro to micro and acts to constrain (via ideologies, norms, symbolic media) the levels below. It is through this process of normatizing that the cultural systems impose constraints on encounters. However, in a bottom up manner, (emotional arousal in) encounters can, in turn, either reinforce or attempt to change the cultures of the meso-level units.
This basic conceptual scheme forms the backdrop for Turner's analysis. The remainder of the book is devoted to formulating a theory of emotional arousal in different contexts at different levels of social reality, and to exploring the effects social structure and culture have on this process and vice versa. In doing so, Turner builds his theory by selectively incorporating aspects from a wide variety of sources.

It is impossible to do justice to the complexities here, but a very brief outline will be attempted. Human emotional arousal at the level of the encounter depends on two key processes for Turner: expectation states and mutual sanctioning. In addition, humans possess certain universal needs that drive interactions. These ‘transactional needs', in descending order of importance, are: the need to verify self, needs for profitable exchange payoffs, group inclusion and trust, and the need for facticity. These needs generate expectation states for the encounter. When expectation states for self, other, and situation in an encounter are met, individuals experience positive emotions and give off positive sanctions to others. When others receive positive sanctions, this can generate an escalating cycle of positive emotional arousal, which Turner, incorporating the work of Randall Collins, calls an ‘interaction ritual'. This process includes, *inter alia*, the entrainment of emotional responses, the emergence of a shared mood, and the rhythmic synchronisation of talk and body, all of which create a ‘collective effervescence’ and the creation of ‘emotional energy'. This energy acts to increase social solidarity and leads to the symbolization of the group, with ritual enactments aimed at these symbols and, ultimately, the creation of a particularised cultural capital (over iterated encounters). The likelihood of this process occurring is a positive function of the clarity of the expectations (bound up with roles, status positions, ecology and demography) which itself is a function of the degree to which the encounter is embedded within corporate and categoric units (and to which these structures are themselves embedded within institutional domains and stratification systems). Positive emotional arousal reveals a *proximal bias* in that self-attributions are usually made for the receipt of positive sanctions. However, the more an individual experiences positive emotional energy over iterated and embedded encounters, the more likely will be the development of commitments to the structures and culture of macrostructures and, ultimately to society as a whole, thereby helping to maintain the status quo and lending legitimacy to the social order.

However, a more interesting process occurs when expectations are not met. Here, individuals experience negative emotions and are more likely to give off negative sanctions to others within the encounter. When others perceive negative sanctions, they are more likely to activate what Turner terms, following Freud, ‘defensive strategies and defence mechanisms’, such as repression, to protect self from the arousal of intense negative emotions (see, for example, p. 94). Repression intensifies and transmutes the emotion, often into anger, and disrupts the interaction ritual, lowering solidarity. Attribution is a key element in this process. Negative emotional arousal reveals a *distal bias* with others or, more usually, the structure and culture of meso level units likely to be blamed. If self-attributions for failure to meet expectations or needs are made then it is likely that the individual will experience all three negative emotions simultaneously, resulting in the second-order elaborations of shame and, if moral codes are salient, guilt. Following Thomas Scheff, Turner argues that shame is a key emotion of social control and, if repressed, can lead to ‘shame/rage cycles' in which individuals feel shame and repress it, only for the repressed emotion to return later as intense anger spikes, which in turn causes more shame and further repression, ratcheting conflict upwards in an increasingly intensifying spiral. The more this occurs over an individual’s lifetime, the more likely is the employment of defence mechanisms and the external attributions of intensified emotions occurring. If others are targeted, anger is expressed (in a more intense form if shame is the repressed emotion). If corporate units are targeted, expressed/repressed anger will reduce commitments to the structure and culture of the unit, potentially leading to alienation (if anger is fuelled by shame) from the units and the macrostructures and cultures in which they are embedded. If categoric units are targeted, negative
prejudices towards members of these units will ensue. Of particular interest in this context is
Turner’s discussion of ‘emotional stratification’ and ‘emotional capital’ in relation to social
structures and social change and its effects on the lower end of the class spectrum (pp. 185–190).
The more an individual’s biography reveals consistent negative emotional arousal, the less likely
is the development of commitments to the structures and culture of the meso-level units or to
the society as a whole. Indeed, the more individuals have experienced diffuse anger (particularly
from shame, guilt and alienation) and when external attributions can be framed in terms of
justice and sustained by local networks and resources, the more likely is the possibility of social
transformation occurring via the mobilisation of this anger. For Turner, such processes help to
account for both extreme violence and terrorism. 3

There is much to commend Turner’s contribution. It represents a highly ambitious synthesis of a
large number of different traditions at a very abstract level, summarised as 17 formal
propositions which, he hopes, will serve as hypotheses for further (empirical) research. As such,
Turner is correct when he writes that this (in many ways Parsonian 4 ) approach to theorising is
‘not everyone’s cup of tea’. Indeed, as far as criticisms go, a number can be levelled at this work.
For one, much of the work tends towards speculation which is relatively unsubstantiated by
empirical findings or data. While Turner would probably see this as justified in a highly abstract
work of theory construction, nevertheless this tendency means that, at times, he overstates his
case. For instance, the ‘mixing’ of primary emotions argument (which occur in some ‘unknown,
neurological way’) and the idea that guilt and shame are ‘mixes’ of the three negative emotions
are largely speculative and under-substantiated. The claim that enhanced emotionality was the
only adaptation capable of ensuring our ancestor’s survival on the savannah is also an overstated
hypothesis relative to available evidence. A different, possibly more significant criticism is the
way in which Turner uncritically incorporates the work and perspectives of others. Aspects of an
exceptionally wide range of fields inform the theory construction but at no point are these
sources critically evaluated relative to each other. Rather, different concepts or findings are
simply lifted from thinkers like Erving Goffman, Emile Durkheim, Randall Collins, Ralf Turner,
Thomas Scheff, and Edward Lawler. Thus fields as diverse as symbolic interactionism,
expectation state theory, affect control theory, behaviourism and psychoanalysis are simply
‘plugged in’ to the conceptual scheme, without sufficient effort to render them theoretically
commensurable. This is not an oversight on Turner’s part. Indeed, it is his goal to synergise these
diverse models, to supplement the inadequacies of symbolic interactionist accounts of emotion
(which are seen as overly cognitive and ‘gestalt-based’) via the incorporation of psychoanalytic
theories of repression. But at no point are the concepts or schools themselves critically explored.
Within Turner’s broad church compatibility reigns supreme, thus methodological and conceptual
compatibilities tend to be overlooked.

Nevertheless, this ambitious book represents a serious achievement, and is sure to become a
major contribution to the increasingly expanding and important field of the sociology of
emotions. A life’s work could be devoted to the testing of the seventeen propositions alone, and
there is much both to inform and inspire within its pages. It successfully achieves its aims
scientifically and theoretically to explore the relationship between (specific) emotions, social
structure and culture, thus enabling its readers better to understand and further explore the
relationships that operate in the social universe. Both undergraduate and postgraduate students
with an interest in emotions would be well advised to consult it, as, indeed, would more
established sociologists who remain blind to the importance of emotions in the constitution of
human reality.
Notes

1. See, for example, Turner (1999) for an earlier formulation of his general theory of emotions.

2. Turner, in collaboration with the social psychologist Jan E. Stets, has been pivotal in both mapping the emerging field of the sociology of emotions and bringing it to a wider audience, especially in the US. In particular see Turner and Stets (2005, 2006) for introductory reviews.

3. Extending the theory presented in the book under review, Turner has recently explored this relationship amongst emotions, violence and terrorism in more detail, arguing that the structural and cultural conditions which create such diffuse negative emotions can also lead to collective violence if such emotions are channelled by local network groups and directed at specific targets. See Turner (2007).

4. Despite the similarities between the theoretical styles of Parsons and Turner, their relationship is actually quite complex. Indeed, Turner begins A Theory of Social Interaction (1988, p. 3), from which the conceptual model of the work under review is first outlined, with the words ‘Who now reads Parsons?’ in a direct reference to Parson’s own famous quote regarding Spencer. Here Turner aims to ‘parallel’ the work of Parsons by reviewing and synthesising the work of others but with the key difference being that Turner theorises the structure of inter-action rather than action and acts. In the sense that Parsons was willing to analyse the generic elements in the structure of a process Turner’s approach may be considered Parsonian, but by focusing on dynamic interaction he avoids the static inaction of Parsons’s model (Ibid., p. 11).

References


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