

Chapter

WHEN DO FEELINGS HELP US? THE INTERPERSONAL FUNCTIONS OF EMOTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Whether emotions help us or hurt us has been debated for centuries, starting with early philosophers and carrying through to present-day experimental psychology. The purpose of this chapter is to review some of the potentially functional aspects of discrete emotions specific to interpersonal interactions. We first define what is meant by ‘functional.’ We then review research findings that suggest several emotions are beneficial to interpersonal interactions, in that both expressing emotions to others and recognizing emotions in others can result in better outcomes. We detail several emotions that meet this criterion, taking care to note how negative emotions fit into a functional framework. Specifically, we review theoretical and empirical evidence of how anger, sadness, and jealousy are functional, despite feeling aversive; we apply these emotions to multiple contexts, such as negotiations, friendships, and close relationships. Finally, we address the elements that may predict dysfunction of emotion, appropriateness and duration, and discuss what a functional perspective is not.

Keywords: emotion, function, affective science, adaptive

It would be difficult to imagine a day without emotion. Even common events, such as waiting in line, hearing a compliment, or facing a deadline, evoke an emotional response. Emotion is defined as a relatively brief and intense state in reaction to a specific experience or event that lasts a few seconds to several minutes (e.g., Clore, Schwarz, & Conway, 1994; Eich, Kihlstrom, Bower, Forgas, & Niedenthal, 2000; Ekman, 1992; Lench, Flores, & Bench, 2011; Rottenberg & Gross, 2007; Russell, 1991). Almost the full range of human emotions is present in children by three years old (Lewis, 2000) and emotions are a consistent, daily part of life

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(Lazarus, 1991). Because emotion is such a common experience, and typically captures attention and directs behavior, it has important implications for daily life.

The philosophical debate over emotions as helpful or hurtful has raged for centuries (for reviews, see Solomon, 2004). Many ancient philosophers, such as Plato, believed emotion to be inferior and counter to reason. They advocated a master-slave relationship: subjugating emotion (the slave) in favor of reason (the master). In their view, emotions were dangerous and needed to be controlled by the rational mind. Indeed, the Stoics of Rome believed emotions amounted to nothing more than conceptual errors in judgment. Yet other philosophers held emotion to be a positive force. Aristotle, for example, explained in *Rhetoric* that emotions were essential to leading a good life. Medieval Christians equated some emotions to sins (e.g., lust, avarice) but others to virtues, such as love and hope (Solomon, 1993). Most notably, David Hume turned the master-slave hypothesis on its head, famously stating that reason ought to be the slave of the passions because emotion motivates people to pursue goals.

These conflicting viewpoints mirror the debate over emotions in modern-day social science. Some researchers take the stance that emotions must be suppressed in order to improve rational choice (e.g., Frank, 1988; Hirshleifer, 1987; Mandler, 1984). They view emotion as a detriment or obstacle to effective decision-making. The logic is that rationality and emotionality are two separate end points of the same scale, where one can be rational or emotional, but not both. In contrast, functional theories argue that emotions help people adapt to challenges in the environment. These scientists believe emotional processes cause changes in cognition, experience, physiology, and behavior that result in beneficial outcomes, even in animals (e.g., Ekman, 1992; Frijda, 1987; Mauss, Levenson, McCarter, Wilhelm & Gross, 2005; Panksepp, 1994; 2000). Although not rational in the traditional sense, this perspective views emotions as functional in that they improve outcomes.

The aim of this chapter is to review some of the functional aspects of emotion specific to interpersonal interactions. People are social animals, and many emotional responses occur in a social context, either as a result of the actions of others or prompting people to seek out social support in others (e.g., Shaver, Wu, & Schwartz, 1992; Parkinson, 1996). We first define what is meant by 'functional.' We then review research findings that suggest several emotions are functional in interpersonal interactions, in that expressing emotions to others and recognizing emotions in others can result in better outcomes. Finally, we address potential criticism of functionalism and discuss what a functional perspective is not.

THE FUNCTIONAL FRAMEWORK

Although emotions could be functional without being the result of evolutionary processes, most functional theories of emotion appeal directly or indirectly to natural selection (e.g., Darwin, 1872; Mauss et al., 2005; Pinker, 1997). According to these theories, emotions represent organized responses across systems that help people to resolve particular types of situations (e.g., Lench et al., 2015). The greatest obstacles that people experience in the modern world often involve other people and occur within a social context (Pinker, 1999). As such, it is important to assess whether emotions can help people overcome obstacles and better resolve interpersonal situations.

Why might emotions help people in a social context? One way that the experience of emotions may influence social interactions is through *emotional expression*. Darwin theorized that emotions were an integral part of human welfare, bolstering communication among individuals within and between social groups. Emotional expression, he wrote, is useful in daily life to increase our well-being, in part because it reveals thoughts and intentions clearly to other social actors. Being sad, for example, may express a call for help to others without a word. However, for expression to be functional in interpersonal contexts, that emotion must be recognized by others. Expressing sadness will only increase help from others if they clearly perceive that sadness is being expressed (Darwin, 1872). Emotion, in essence, is something that can convey information to others and influence others' behavior.

Evidence suggests that emotions are expressed on human faces, that those expressions are similar across cultures, and that emotional expressions are recognized by others within and between cultures (e.g., Elfenbein & Ambady, 2002; Ekman & Friesen, 1971; Ekman, Friesen, & Ellsworth, 1972). Emotion expression begins very early in life, but its range of development is contingent on having others to interact with (e.g., Izard et al., 2011), suggesting that it serves a social function. Furthermore, evidence suggests even very young infants perceive emotions, with evidence of amygdala activation in response to human faces (Johnson, 2005; Leppänen & Nelson, 2009) and different arousal patterns between discrete emotions like anger and fear (Hoehl & Striano, 2008). As early as 9 months of age, infants use emotion expression cues from others as a source of information (Campos, 1983; Walden & Ogan, 1988). The ability to perceive expressions in others appears to be central to interpersonal functioning, as the ability to identify emotional expressions predicts better social skills and fewer behavioral problems (Izard et al., 2008; Izard et al., 2001).

Thus emotions appear to be expressed and recognized at an early age and across cultures, and this ability translates broadly into better outcomes across the lifespan. We next briefly review the evidence that several examples of negative emotions (e.g., anger, sadness, jealousy) might improve functioning in a social context.

INTERPERSONAL FUNCTIONS OF NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

Given cultural stereotypes, it can be difficult to see the value in what are typically considered negative emotions such as jealousy or anger. It is common to see a jealous person as weak or flawed; anger is often viewed as destructive to social relationships. However, there is evidence that even prototypically “negative” emotions can be useful in social situations.

Anger. Conventional wisdom dictates that anger should be suppressed and that it can ruin social relationships. However, individuals appear to use anger to influence others' attention and behavior in ways that ultimately benefit the person expressing anger. Steven Pinker (1997) describes anger as analogous to a doomsday machine, wherein it shows others that the person expressing anger is serious about a situation and prompts them to acquiesce to demands. In other words, “the hothead who can figuratively explode at any moment enjoys the same tactical advantage as the hijacker who can literally explode at any moment” (Pinker, 1997).

Psychological studies suggest that anger can offer a tactical advantage in interpersonal situations (e.g., Schelling, 1980; Sell, 2011; Daly & Wilson, 1988), particularly contentious

negotiations. The recalibrational theory of anger, for example, hypothesizes that anger evolved in the service of bargaining to resolve conflicts of interest (Sell, Tooby, & Cosmides, 2009). Experimental evidence corroborates this idea, as exhibiting anger appears to offer a tactical advantage in persuasion as others are more likely to capitulate to the demands of an angry negotiator (e.g., Fischer & Roseman, 2007; van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2004). Anger modifies how others perceive the expressor's social status; namely, angry people appear powerful and threatening (Tiedens, Ellsworth, & Mesquita, 2000).

People appear to be aware of this tactical advantage of experiencing, and expressing, anger in contentious situations. In one study, for example, participants had the opportunity to select music they wanted to listen to before a confrontational or non-confrontational game. Participants preferred anger-inducing music when they expected to play a confrontational game, suggesting that they were aware of the potential advantages of being angry in such a situation (Tamir, Mitchell, & Gross, 2008). Further, people with a greater understanding of emotional processes generally (i.e., more emotionally intelligent people) are particularly likely to prefer anger-eliciting experiences before a confrontation (Ford & Tamir, 2012). Together, this evidence suggests that recognizing the tactical advantage offered by anger, and expressing anger appropriately during contentious interpersonal interactions, offers a benefit to the individual.

Sadness. Expressing sadness may also positively impact interpersonal relationships. The experience of sadness is associated with attention to details and analytic thinking as people attempt to find solutions to the problems that caused sadness (e.g., Bodenhausen, Sheppard, & Kramer, 1994; Schwarz, 1990). This tendency is also apparent in interpersonal situations, with sad individuals engaging in deeper analysis of social information (e.g. Bless et al., 1990; Weary, 1990). This deeper analysis of the social context might facilitate attempts to improve self-image—and thereby, belonging—in a variety of social contexts (e.g., Hirt & McCrea, 2000; Zeman & Garber, 1996). The experience of sadness appears to motivate people to reach out to others (Gray, Ishii, & Ambady, 2011), and having a deeper understanding of the social context could result in these attempts being more successful.

The expression of sadness also appears to result in better outcomes in some social contexts. Sad individuals express less antagonism than angry individuals in negotiations. They tend to behave pro-socially, garnering support rather than taking command. Expressing sadness often results in conceding to others (van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2006), but it becomes adaptive in moral negotiations (Dehghani, Carnevale, & Gratch, 2014). Sad persons concern themselves more with social norms, such as fairness, and use more polite and attentive interpersonal strategies to convey information (Forgas, 1995; 2002; Tan & Forgas, 2010). In some contexts, the attention to detail that is associated with sadness appears to persuade others to change their attitudes and empathize with them (Forgas, 2007). Even brief displays of the expression of sadness, such as crying, appear to be functional, in that they are a call for help to which emotionally close others respond (Vingerhoets & Becht, 1997). In short, expressing sadness at appropriate times appears to be functional in interpersonal contexts.

Jealousy. Convention wisdom tells people to suppress jealousy entirely and to avoid others with this trait. However, despite the bad reputation, jealousy is a widespread emotion that presents across cultures (Buss & Haselton, 2005; Reiss, 1986; Thiessen & Umezawa, 1998). Theorists suggest that jealousy represents a cheater-detection response, and motivates people to deny competitors unfair access to resources (see Cosmides et al., 2005). Some researchers claim that jealousy can also serve as an early warning sign in relationships, signaling an

instability needing attention and the potential loss of a loved one (Tangney & Salovey, 1999). This may motivate the individual to express jealousy, either to save the relationship or seek to end it while minimizing the impact on self-esteem.

Psychological studies have revealed that the expression of jealousy depends on the needs of the individual in terms of whether they desire to maintain their self-esteem or maintain the relationship. Jealous individuals who were primarily motivated to maintain their self-esteem were more likely to discuss potential infidelities with their partners, but also expressed more manipulative behaviors, such as actions intended to make the partner feel guilty. In contrast, jealous individuals who were primarily motivated to maintain their relationships were more likely to engage in behaviors to enhance their attractiveness to their partner and to engage in surveillance of their partner (Guerrero & Afifi, 1998). Overall, expressing these emotions appears to motivate individuals protect their self-esteem or protect a valued relationship.

Does this expression of jealousy improve outcomes in an interpersonal setting? Evidence suggests that expressing jealousy contributes to relational satisfaction (Andersen, Eloy, Guerrero, & Spitzberg, 1995). This relational benefit extended to the partner *recognizing* the jealous expression, particularly when men used possessiveness cues or females used constructive communication (Guerrero, 2014). This is ostensibly because the expression of jealousy betters the situation, preventing anticipated problems or repairing an important relationship. Interestingly, exchange-oriented and communal individuals recognize that jealousy can be adaptive to maintain close relationships; some make attempts to intentionally evoke jealousy from their partners to increase relational satisfaction (Cyanus & Booth-Butterfield, 2004). Like anger and sadness, jealousy appears to serve a function in interpersonal situations both through emotional expression and recognition.

Summary. Being angry, sad, or jealous is often considered undesirable in a strictly hedonistic sense. Yet, from a functional perspective, these emotions appear to increase interpersonal success by resolving social challenges. These are not the only negative emotions that serve an interpersonal function; other negative emotions may also promote changes in an individual's behavior or the behavior of others that helps to resolve interpersonal challenges. In the following section, we address common misconceptions and assumptions about functional perspectives of emotion.

DYSFUNCTIONAL EMOTION

One of the common counter-arguments to the idea that emotions might serve interpersonal functions is that emotions can also damage relationships. Specifically, negative emotions have the potential to destroy or strain social relationships. Yet research findings suggest that it is not the emotion per se that is destructive for relationships, but rather the *appropriateness* and *duration* of the emotion. If the expression of emotion is not appropriate or lasts too long, the individual risks pushing others away and straining social relationships. By contrast, expressing a situationally appropriate emotion for reasonable amount of time should benefit individuals in the ways described above.

Identifying when and how one should express emotions is a difficult task, and this ability is core to being an "emotionally intelligent" person, who is able to successfully utilize and understand emotions across situations (e.g., Salovey, Hsee, & Mayer, 1992; Salovey & Mayer,

1990). The appropriateness of emotional expression varies across culture and groups (Fischer et al., 2003; Parkinson, 2005). For example, Western cultures often expect others to express emotion at a funeral; however, Eastern norms differ and others are expected to conceal emotion (Butler, Lee, & Gross, 2007). Although norms differ across cultures regarding when and how to express emotion, the costs for inappropriate expression remain similar across cultures. People will distance themselves from or refuse to help those who violate norms (e.g., Evers et al., 2004; Parrott, 2001). For example, victims of crimes who fail to express enough emotion (considered inappropriate to being ‘victim-like’) are often perceived as less sympathetic and deserving of justice; this translates into less severity in sentencing for the perpetrator of the crime (Nadler & Rose, 2003; Tsoudis & Smith-Lovin, 1998).

Similarly, expressing emotions a duration that is extended or inappropriate can have interpersonal costs. Even a completely appropriate emotional expression can wear on others if it is present for too long a time. For example, expressing anger may facilitate social goal pursuit, eliciting an apology or behavioral change from others (Izard, 1993). But constant and repeated anger expression—poor anger management—leads to upsetting others and driving them away (e.g., Thomas, 1998a). It is important to regulate both appropriateness and duration of emotion because doing so predicts the quality of social interactions (e.g., Lopes et al., 2004; Lopes et al., 2005). Thus emotions must be expressed congruently to the situation and in moderation to be effective in interpersonal situations.

CONCLUSION

Even aversive emotions, such as anger, sadness, and jealousy, can be useful for the individual and promote social success. These emotions are particularly likely to be useful in interpersonal situations when they are expressed in ways that are appropriate to the situation and of limited duration. Of course, there are instances where acting on emotion alone can result in negative consequences and emotions should be regulated. Yet research suggests that emotions should not always be suppressed and that expressing emotion can promote better and stronger social relationships.

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