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Interactionism and the Sociology of Emotions

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to draw attention to the close relationship that exists between interactionism and the sociology of emotions. Not only was the latter born (also) under the sign of interactionism, it has developed essentially through two perspectives, the positivist and the interactionist, that consider interaction a more or less fundamental dimension of the emotions as sociologically understood. It is the interactionist perspective that emphasizes its relevance, however, as demonstrated by two specific approaches which can be traced back to that perspective, the symbolic interactionist approach as such and the dramaturgical-cultural approach. Since it holds together the different 'ingredients' of the emotions, namely biology, culture and cognitive processes, the interactionist perspective is to be preferred for the purpose of adequately understanding them.

Keywords: sociology of emotions, positivism, interactionism.

1. Introduction

The objective of this brief contribution is not to reconstruct the interactionist perspective within the sociology of emotions, even in introductory terms, nor could it be¹. The more circumscribed aim of these pages is to draw attention to the fact that the sociology of emotions was born at the end of the 1970s², in part, or even perhaps primarily, under the sign of

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¹ For a recent, clear introduction, see Sandstrom, Lively, Martin and Fine (2014).

² For an idea of how far the sociology of emotions has come since then, making up for lost time, as it were (the emotions were not totally ignored by sociology but for a

interactionism: from the foundational articles themselves it clearly emerged that the sociology of emotions would be characterized by two basic perspectives, the positivist and indeed the interactionist perspectives. However, as we shall see further on, the positivist sociological perspective has always acknowledged the presence of interaction and more generally the influence of the social on the phenomenology of the emotions, though in more limited terms than the interactionist sociological perspective, which is why the latter is to be preferred. Indeed, in our view it is the general perspective able to the most complete and therefore the most convincing *sociological* definition/notion of emotion: a position adopted here not out of a general sympathy with interactionism, but rather in recognition of the fact that interaction is a crucial element of the emotions as sociologically understood, or better that the sociology of emotions is *naturally*, though not exclusively, interactionist.

In the text, I shall refer principally to authors such as Arlie Russell Hochschild and Theodore Kemper (in particular their earliest writings) who can now be considered the classics of the sociology of emotions, relatively young branch of sociology though it is. Their pioneering reflections are still an obligatory point of reference, especially for the basic coordinates of the two dominant sociological models of emotion, the interactionist and the positivist. These general models substantially constitute the subject of this article, which will not deal in any way with more specific applications and/or empirical developments of those models.

2. The sociology of emotions was born (also) interactionist

One of the founders of the sociology of emotions, Arlie Russell Hochschild, in one of her two pioneering articles, dated 1979³ and commendably translated into Italian fairly recently⁴, which outlines the coordinates of the field of thought she was contributing to bring into being,

long time definitively neglected), one need only take a quick look at Turner, Stets, 2006 and Stets, Turner, 2014.

³ The first is Hochschild, 1979; the other is Hochschild, 1975. These two articles, together with Kemper, 1978a and 1978b, Collins 1975, Shott 1979 and Gordon 1981 in particular, inaugurated an area of investigation which only a few short years later, in 1986, would be officially consecrated by the creation of a specific section of the American Sociological Association dedicated to the sociology of emotions.

⁴ Hochschild, 2013. As has been pointed out (Cerulo, 2013), this is the article which furnished the sociology of emotions with a substantial part of its toolbox.

had the merit, amongst others, of predicting that two perspectives would predominate: the interactionist and the positivist.

Hochschild made this prediction on the basis of what she considered to be the two principal models of emotion for (social) psychology, which she defined as organicist and interactionist. The organicist psychological model, the American scholar claimed, owes a great deal to the writings of Charles Darwin, William James and the early work of Sigmund Freud, and more generally to biology. In this model,

the concept 'emotion' refers mainly to strips of experience in which there is no conflict between one and another aspect of self; the individual 'floods out', is 'overcome'. The image that comes to mind is that of a sudden, automatic reflex syndrome - Darwin's instant snarl expression, Freud's tension discharge at a given breaking point of tension overload, James and Lange's notion of an instantaneous unmediated visceral reaction to a perceived stimulus, the perception of which is also unmediated by social influences (Hochschild, 1979: 553-554).

Furthermore, she argued that social factors are taken into account only in terms of how emotions are stimulated and expressed; everything related to the management and hence the control of the emotions is considered extraneous to the social domain: 'indeed, emotion is characterized by the fixity and universality of a knee-jerk reaction or a sneeze. In this view, one could as easily manage an emotion as one could manage a knee jerk or a sneeze' (Hochschild, 1979: 554).

Differently, in the interactionist psychological-social model of emotion outlined, according to Hochschild, in the writings of Goffman, Lazarus, Averill, Schachter, the later Freud and the neo-Freudians, amongst others, social influences permeate the emotions more intensely, and are not limited to moments of emotional activation and expression. In the interactionist model, she affirmed, 'in addition, social factors guide the microactions of labeling [...], interpreting [...] and managing emotion [...]. These microactions, in turn, reflect back on that which is labeled, interpreted, and managed. They are, finally, intrinsic to what we call "emotion" [...]. Emotion, in this second school of thought, is seen as more deeply social' (Hochschild, 1979: 555).

So, for Hochschild, a first sociological approach to the emotions appeared to derive from the organicist psychological(-social) model, a second approach from the psychological(-social) interactionist model⁵. Put very

⁵ In this regard, it is perfectly understandable that a discipline like sociology, a latecomer to the (systematic) study of the emotions, should owe something conceptually to studies of psychology. Some scholars think differently, such as

simply, and as should already be clear, for the first approach social influences are relevant only insofar as they elicit/provoke emotions and regulate their expression, whereas for the second, social factors come into play not only *before* and *after*, but also, interactively, *during* the emotional experience (see Hochschild, 1990: 119). We shall see this in more detail further on. For now, I shall limit myself to affirming that the insight of the American scholar was absolutely correct: one need only consider the many sociological theories of the emotions that exist today to verify that, for the most part, they can essentially be situated within either a positivist or an interactionist perspective⁶.

3. Interaction and emotion

To make a rather obvious statement: the sociologists of emotions study them because of their (also) social nature. At a certain point, emotions became not just an explicitly sociological theme but one explored to an extent rarely seen before, because well-informed sociologists were fully aware of the fact

McCharty (1989), for example, who argues that the tendency of sociologists of emotions to adopt definitions of emotion drawn from other disciplines, in particular psychology and physiology, undermined at the root the development of an autonomous and original sociological approach to the emotions. However, in line with the author's radically constructionist approach which excludes any non-sociological element or explanation of the emotions, this thesis conflicts with (at least) one other significant point (apart from the notion mentioned above, that sociologists, especially in the beginning, could not fail to take into account the results achieved by other scientific theories of the emotions, experimentally as well), which is that sociology and psychology, especially social psychology, are inevitably and indeed traditionally closely linked; one thinks, for example, of sociology classics like Charles H. Cooley and George H. Mead, who were also and primarily scholars of social psychology.

⁶ It is true, as Hochschild (1990) herself noted a few years later, that a radically constructionist model of emotion does exist in the social sciences, whose ingredients are purely social: emotions are configured exclusively as the product of a socio-cultural construction (exemplary in this regard is McCharty. 1989). However, the scant plausibility of a notion of emotion that deprives it of any biological basis has made this perspective rather a residual one/a minority opinion, at least in sociology: see, for example, Turner, Stets (2005), who convincingly argue that biology is one the constituent elements of emotions. Two clarifications in this regard: the first is that the interactionist sociological perspective is also constructionist, but not radically so because biological factors are considered an integral part of emotion. The second is that, as one might imagine, within both the positivist and the interactionist perspectives there are variously modulated positions on the biological-social interface.

(and addressed it with direct and often systematic studies) that ‘what we feel is as *socially* significant and relevant as what we do and what we think’ (Turnaturi, 1995: 15, my italics). What determines the contraposition of the positivist and the interactionist perspectives in the sociological study of emotions is the degree to which they take social components into consideration: *how* social are the emotions? How important is *interaction*? And by interaction I mean here not only that between individuals, but also interaction with oneself, which symbolic interactionists call ‘self-indication’, with internalized others and, finally, with the environment understood primarily as culture. Now, while interactionists do not deny the biological/physiological component of emotions, and rightly not, they consider them social phenomena more than positivists do: this has already been mentioned and will be seen more clearly in sub-section 3.2. But even the positivists, for the most part, acknowledge the importance of the social, albeit in more limited terms, as we shall touch on in the following sub-section, 3.1, by briefly examining a theory based on the power-status model elaborated in the pioneering years of the sociology of emotions by Theodore Kemper.

3.1 Interaction and emotions from the positivist perspective

The most important premise of any sociological theory of the emotions, wrote Kemper, is that the overwhelming majority of human emotions depend on the outcomes of social relationships, whether real or predicted, imagined or remembered (see Kemper, 1978b). In particular, he adopted a model based on two social dimensions: power and status. Put so simply as to risk misrepresenting his thought, he believed that when individuals have power (the capacity to force someone to do one’s will) or favourable status (by status Kemper means the relational dimension in which people spontaneously accord advantages, honours, and deference to others), they will tend to experience positive emotions like satisfaction, self-confidence and trust; if they lose power or status, however, they will tend to experience negative emotions like anxiety and fear, and also, particularly in the case of lowered status, loss of trust, shame, embarrassment and anger. Moreover, in the first case, when they enjoy favourable status, individuals will tend to express positive feelings towards those who confer that status on them, with the result that stronger bonds of solidarity between them may emerge. Of course, both power and status relations can compromise, as well as increase, social solidarity: power relations when power is used excessively or, in any case, to subjugate others who then develop feelings of resentment; status relations when individuals fail to maintain a favourable status or, at any rate, one they deem adequate, in which case they will tend to feel shame and embarrassment if they attribute

that failure to themselves, thus gradually and silently eroding social solidarity, or anger and hostility if they attribute it to others, thereby risking an even more visible rupture of social bonds (see Kemper, 1978a, 1978b, 1984, 1990a).

Kemper's analysis is naturally much more detailed than it is possible to present here. As we just glimpsed, it also includes cognitive references: concepts such as expectations and attribution of responsibility are important in the structure of his thought. And most importantly, insofar as his is a positivist sociological analysis, it is also linked to the so-called theory of psychophysiological specificity, which dates back to William James and asserts that each individual emotion has a specific neurochemical basis: when a person experiences what is commonly called anger, for example, the body always releases a specific hormone, noradrenaline; when we feel fear or anxiety, it releases the hormone adrenaline. Kemper very explicitly affirms the need to integrate three disciplines, physiology, psychology and sociology, for an adequate (also) sociological understanding of the emotions (see Kemper 1978b).

For our purposes, we need only affirm that Kemper's theory represents the positivist perspective very well, and has done so ever since the sociology of emotions emerged as a field. This perspective asserts that it is possible to establish basic and universal connections between classes of social situations, such as the acquisition or loss of power and/or status, and the emotional consequences thereof. For the positivists, certain classes of events always stimulate the same emotions: for example, in some situations or circumstances one would always react with anger, in others with joy and so on. Moreover, as Kemper himself wrote (1990b: 11), 'the idea that social structures determine specific emotions is based on the notion that we are phylogenetic inheritors of a set of primary emotions – fear, anger, joy, and depression – [...] that serve evolutionary adaptive needs'.

As should by now be clear, the positivist perspective, exemplarily represented by Kemper, also contemplates the presence of interaction in the notion/sociological definition of emotion. However, there is no doubt that broadly speaking the positivists consider the emotions to be physiologically determined and more or less objective phenomena which thus can be measured, for the most part quantitatively (see Kemper, 1990b). And this the interactionists mostly contest, pointing principally to the fact that, to use Kemper's schema, it is not true that certain classes of situations or events always produce, universally and deterministically, the same emotional reactions, because the same situations and the same events can be interpreted very differently, and consequently evoke different emotions, because of the different modes of definition employed by individual subjects and because of

the different cultural contexts to which they belong. In short, for interactionists, the category of emotional predictability is itself implausible.

The limits of the positivist perspective, its marked determinism and hence scant consideration for individual reflexivity, on the one hand, and on the other its limited consideration of cultural factors, which after all do not operate as emotional determinants (power and status, for example) only at a structural level but also on the plane of the emotional reaction, suggest greater plausibility for the interactionist perspective, which it is now time to consider, albeit within the limits imposed by the aims of these brief observations.

3.2 Interaction and emotions in the interactionist perspective

I would define emotion as an awareness of four elements that we usually experience at the same time: (a) appraisals of a situation, (b) changes in bodily sensations, (c) the free or inhibited display of expressive gestures, and (d) a cultural label applied to specific constellations of the first three elements. We learn how to appraise, to display and to label emotion, even as we learn how to link the results of each to that of the other. This is the definition of emotion (Hochschild 1990: 118-119).

This definition of emotion, given by Hochschild a few years after the foundational article of 1979 cited above in which she had already immediately 'felt' inclined towards the interactionist perspective, is emblematic of that perspective. It seems quite clear that social factors come into play not only *before* and *after*, but also, interactively, *during* the emotional experience. In particular, interactionists claim that the social component of emotions, which is necessarily linked to interaction, cannot be reduced to a mere activating factor, albeit a very important one, as the positivist perspective does. Emotions, for the interactionists, are also linked to the definition of situations, that is, to processes of self-indication and reflexivity, on the one hand, and the socio-cultural contexts of the individuals who feel them, on the other. In the interactionist model, even though emotions are also constituted by physiological activations and modifications, they are formed at the precise moment in which the subject interprets both those modifications and the surrounding situation, of which s/he is conscious and aware; and, indeed, the very social stimuli that determine the emotions, on which the positivist orientation focuses, are at least partly constructed by the subject who is experiencing the emotions; and, in any case, the reaction to these stimuli is always filtered by a process of definition/evaluation tied to contexts that are not only situational but also and more specifically cultural.

The interactionist model highlights a paradox: emotion is something that happens to us, but it is also what we do to make it happen. In the continuous

flow of our experience, we pay attention, or not, to particular moments. Sometimes we name them, or name some of their features, or else we allow those moments to pass without naming them. We evoke certain emotions or we suppress them. We feel that our mode of feeling is out of place, or that it is appropriate. So we are aware of the conformity, or non-conformity, of our mode of feeling to emotional norms, regarding which culture plays a fundamental role. In short, the emotional process is particularly intricate. But we certainly contribute to the creation of the emotions (Hochschild 1990).

For the interactionists, however, as well as for the positivists, 'biological factors enter in – there are nerves, hormones, and neurotransmitters – without these we would feel no emotion, just as without eyes we would not see. But [for the interactionists] social forces have given shape to the biological, with a name, a history, a meaning, and a consequence of a certain sort' (Hochschild 1990: 120). As another interactionist sociologist of emotions, Peggy Thoits, has argued, environmental events stimulate a generalized physiological activation, interpreted as a particular emotion on the basis of the salient elements of the situation; in this sense, emotions are fruit of the combination of a generalized physiological activation and socio-cultural factors such as cultural contexts and the definition of situations (see Thoits, 1995).

In short, the interactionist perspective is the one that provides the most complete sociological definition of emotion, considering in a well-integrated way its three elements – culture, cognition and biology – none of which alone can explain the experience and the expression of emotions.

People occupy positions in social structures and play roles guided by cultural scripts. They are able to do so because of their cognitive capacities to perceive and appraise the situation (its structure and culture), themselves (as objects), others, and their own physiological responses. Emotions are ultimately aroused by the activation of the body system. This arousal generally comes from cognitive appraisals of self in relation to others, social structure, and culture. Once activated, emotions will be constrained by cognitive processes and culture. (Turner, Stets: 10).

Leaving biology to one side, even though the interactionist perspective takes it into account, we can see that it is possible from that perspective to analytically distinguish the contribution made to the relation between culture and emotions and the relation between cognition and emotions, respectively, by two *specific* approaches related to the *general* interactionist perspective: the

dramaturgical-cultural approach and the symbolist interactionist approach as such⁷.

For scholars who take the dramaturgical-cultural approach, social interaction is directed by a script written by culture; actors are not, for the most part, considered mechanical performers of culture but interpreters aware of the rules, beliefs, values and all the other symbolic elements that contribute to form it; in short, though not constraining, culture plays a non-secondary role in conditioning experience and emotional performance, as well as, naturally and more generally, social action. It is culture that generates the rules, the beliefs and the ideologies of feeling which suggest the script for the actors' performances on the cultural stages⁸. As has been suggested regarding Goffman's social actor, 'individuals are strategically motivated to manipulate gestures so that their presentations of "face" and "lines" are seen by others to conform to the cultural script, and in so doing, they reinforce the implicit morality of the cultural script' (Turner, Stets, 2005: 30). The sociological study of the relation between culture and emotions has many important implications: I am thinking here, to give just a few examples, of the themes of emotional socialization⁹, emotional rules¹⁰, emotional deviance¹¹ and emotional work¹². Indeed, the emotional culture of a society is not innate, we

⁷ Even though they can be traced back to the same interactionist perspective, these two approaches can be clearly distinguished because they are based on classical sociological traditions which do not entirely overlap, like the dramaturgical sociology of Erving Goffman, on the one hand, and the classical Symbolic Interactionism of Mead, Cooley and Blumer, on the other. In both cases, these classics, though not sociologists of emotions, left an important legacy of reflections on which subsequent interactionists have based and elaborated precise sociological theories of the emotions: see Iagulli (2012, 2014).

⁸ On emotional culture, see in particular the work of Steven Gordon (see, at least, 1981).

⁹ Emotional socialization is the process through which people grow up to become emotionally competent social actors, i.e. prepared to take on roles that are emotionally adequate to the situation; see Gordon (1989a, 1989b).

¹⁰ See Hochschild (1990); I will restrict myself to recalling her distinction between *feeling rules*, that is, the rules of real feeling, which prescribe how we should feel in certain social situations, and *display* (or *expressions*) *rules*, which lay down how certain feelings should be manifested (not necessarily felt).

¹¹ See, at least, Thoits, 1990, whose definition is as follows: 'emotional deviance refers to experiences or displays of affect that differ in quality or degree from what is expected in given situations' (Thoits, 1990: 181).

¹² 'By "emotion work" I refer to the act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling', wrote Hochschild (1979: 561). The author returned often to the subject in the course of her career. I will restrict myself here to recalling that

learn it through a process of socialization; nevertheless, socialisation is not always sufficient to evoke in us the 'right' emotions for certain situations, nor to make us respect the relevant emotional rules; if we do not adapt to these rules, we commit a type of emotional deviance. Moreover, for the most part, we have the necessary cognitive, expressive and bodily tools (on this point, see Hochschild 1979) to work on our emotions, to manage them, and thus be able to conform to emotional norms.

For scholars who can be situated within Symbolic Interactionism, the cognitive element is fundamental. As is well-known, this general theoretical-sociological approach configures social actors as constantly engaged in assuming the role of others, or more precisely the role of what G. H. Mead called the 'generalized other' (the rules, conventions and culture of the whole community to which they belong). For symbolic interactionists, this generalised other is one of the key elements of social interaction, since by assuming this role the actors demonstrate that they are capable of evaluating what others think of them; in other words, it is the capacity to be an object to oneself from an external viewpoint, a capacity completely in line with the active nature of the social actor of Symbolic Interactionism, which sees the *self* as the product of conscious self-presentation to others, rather than a more or less adaptive reaction to socio-structural constraints and cultural scripts. And so, from the pioneering contribution of Susan Shott¹³ through Thomas Scheff's many contributions on the emotions of pride and shame¹⁴, the symbolic interactionist sociologists of emotions have argued¹⁵ that emotional dynamics revolve around the processes through which subjects commit themselves to sustaining and affirming their identities or conceptions of self to others, from general ones to those more specifically related to situational contexts or social roles: the more they believe, through self-evaluation of what others think of them, that they have succeeded, the more positive emotions they will feel; the less successful they are at affirming their identities, the more they will experience negative emotions, which, however, will plausibly be followed by an attempt to (re-)affirm to others their most adequate self; an attempt that may have the further result of reinforcing existing socio-cultural structures.

A more in-depth look at these approaches (and more generally at other approaches to the sociology of emotions) is beyond the scope of these

Hochschild uses the term *emotional labor* to designate emotional work requested as a professional service, and therefore paid.

¹³ This is the article already mentioned: Shott (1979).

¹⁴ See, at least, Scheff (2000, 2003).

¹⁵ Amongst others: Stryker (2004) and Heise (2006).

pages¹⁶. To conclude, I will simply recall what Hochschild, once again, had already predicted in her pioneering contributions, namely that only the interactionist perspective would be capable of conceptualising the themes that were destined to become crucial for the sociology of emotions (see Hochschild 1979), including those of emotional work and emotional rules mentioned above. She was right in this case too. We can see this through one quick example, which can indeed be considered exemplary. Think of the emotional rule which prescribes that one should feel sad at a funeral and happy at a party. Now, the positivist model, moving within a fundamentally deterministic perspective, makes it difficult to thematise the concept of emotional work; by contrast, the interactionist model, which sees reflection and self-indication as an essential intermediate moment between the emotional stimulus and the emotional experience, has an important conceptual resource in the control of the emotions: and, needless to say, only if we are able to control our emotions, by working on them, can we adapt them to the situation we find ourselves in and thus feel, or at least display¹⁷, sadness at a funeral and joy at a party.

4. Conclusions

As we have seen, interaction is a crucial element of the emotions as sociologically understood. I would therefore say that, from its origins, the sociology of emotions appears to have been, by definition, interactionist; for the positivist perspective as well, which emphasizes the organic-biological dimension, the social component is very much present in the notion of emotion, therefore all of the sociology of emotions is to some degree interactionist. Of course, as we have also seen, it is the interactionist perspective that emphasizes interaction as a key element of the sociological notion of emotion, both as regards the aspects linked to culture (the dramaturgical-cultural approach) and those related to cognitive processes and the *self* (the symbolic interactionist approach). It is precisely because of its capacity to capture in a more detailed and therefore adequate way the sociological complexity of emotions that a preference for the interactionist

¹⁶ For a broad but very thorough look at the main sociological approaches to the emotions, see Turner, Stets (2005); more briefly, Iagulli, (2011).

¹⁷ Already in Hochschild, (1979), the author distinguishes between 'deep acting', in which the social actor really tries to control feelings and emotions by evoking or suppressing them, and 'surface acting', whose manifestations and goals are (only) external demeanour and expressions, including minimal ones like shrugging, for example.

perspective has not been concealed in these pages, even though it must be reaffirmed that all the elements/ingredients considered here, from culture to cognition to biology, are required for the emotional experience to be a sociologically relevant experience. In short, the sociology of emotions in general, and the interactionist perspective in particular, have demonstrated over the last few decades that emotions cannot be configured, *sic et simpliciter*, as individual physiological reactions to specific stimuli, because they are not only ‘incorporated’, that is, linked to physiological processes and reactions that take place within our bodies, but also and perhaps more importantly constitute ‘social behaviour’, that is, they are linked to social processes and relationships (see Sandstrom, Lively, Martin, Fine, 2014). For many years, human emotions have been studied principally from the point of view of their biological bases and components; only in recent decades has their social dimension, so important yet till then severely neglected, been addressed, not only by anthropologists, but also by sociologists, and in particular the interactionists. Not only has knowledge of the emotions increased, so has knowledge of society and its complex dynamics.

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