

## **Cognitive social and discursive psychological perspectives on the study of emotions**

**by Patricia Karsten**

Human emotion is an important topic in social psychology and is studied from different perspectives in mainstream and critical social psychology. The differences and similarities of the cognitive social and the discursive psychological perspectives will be presented with reference to ontology (view of the person), epistemology (what is considered to be knowledge) and methodology. It will be shown how the perspectives differ in research focus and methods, and consequently in the knowledge they produce, specifically in light of their respective understanding and the relevance they attribute to 'the social' when studying emotions (individual-social dualism). Their positions with respect to the possibility of individual control over emotions (agency-structure dualism) will be explored, before concluding by positioning the perspectives as complementary in their contribution to the social psychological study of emotions.

The study of emotions in social psychology can be traced back to the works of William James, who theorized based on introspection that emotions are the experience of physiological changes in response to environmental events (1884; as cited in Parkinson, 2007). This view was challenged by Walter Cannon, who argued that patterns of physiological responses are too similar to account for the multitude of different emotions, and who saw emotions as mental rather than physiological experiences (1927; as cited in Parkinson, 2007). Both views favoured individualistic explanations of emotions, with a focus on internal perceptions as causal for emotional experience.

Based on these early works, Stanley Schachter and Jerome Singer (1962) studied emotion from a cognitive social psychological perspective. They introduced the social psychological aspect by specifically considering the influence of other persons' emotions on individual emotional experience. Based on Schachter's Two Factor Theory of emotion (1959; as cited in Parkinson, 2007), which posits that specific emotions are resulting from physiological experiences in combination with cognitions about the social context, they devised an experiment to assess whether an emotionally laden situation was able to induce corresponding changes in individual emotional experience.

To test their hypothesis, they presented their research to participants as a study in the effects of a new vitamin compound on visual perception, and injected some participants with adrenaline, which would cause a physiological arousal state, and others with a placebo. Part of the participants who received adrenaline were correctly informed about the expected physiological responses to the injection, the others were misinformed and thus had no adequate information to logically explain their arousal. Schachter and Singer were specifically interested in the emotional experiences of the misinformed participant group in the subsequent 'anger' or 'euphoria' conditions, which were staged while participants believed to be waiting for a test of their visual skills. In the anger condition, participants had to fill in a questionnaire with increasingly embarrassing questions, while a confederate of the experimenters, who also filled in the questionnaire, pretended growing anger with the experimental situation and finally left the room in rage. In the euphoria condition, there was no questionnaire, and the stooge was cheerful and acting in a playful manner. It was predicted that participants in search for an explanation of their internal physiological arousal would integrate their cognition about the external situation and use it as an interpretative framework for their experiences. It was therefore expected that the

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misinformed participants should report higher levels of anger in the anger condition, and higher levels of euphoria in the euphoria condition, while the correctly informed participants were expected to not report an emotional experience because they would be able to correctly attribute physiological arousal to the effects of the substance injected.

The findings from this experiment were not clear cut. Schachter and Singer found that their data grossly supported the hypothesis, but were aware that the self-report measures of emotional state tended to understate participants' anger experience, because participants had been reluctant to admit negative feelings towards the experimenters (Schachter and Singer, 1962). Also, as Parkinson (2007) points out, "participants experiencing 'unexplained arousal' did not consistently report more emotion than placebo participants, a possible consequence of an experimental situation which in itself might have caused emotion, even without prior adrenaline injection.

But Schachter and Singer laid the groundwork for the development of Appraisal Theory, which further extended on the idea that individual emotional experience is strongly related to cognitive appraisals of the social context. For example, Smith and Lazarus (1993; as cited in Parkinson, 2007) explained emotions as caused by the 'motivational relevance' and 'motivational congruence' of events i.e. in how far the event is important for and in line with personal goals. Only if an event has motivational relevance, will it cause an emotion, pleasant if the event fits with our goals and unpleasant if not. The specific nature of the emotion would then depend on 'secondary appraisals' which take into account 'accountability' (responsibility for the event) and 'coping ability' (how to deal with the event). For example, if our application for a new job was successful, we'd feel pride if we thought it was due to personal effort, and gratitude if we believed it was thanks to a convincing referee.

These examples demonstrate how the social cognitive perspective has approached the study of emotions. The research focus is on explaining human emotion itself, why emotion is experienced in response to events and how different emotional qualities can be explained with reference to cognitions about external social factors. Schachter and Singer's study illustrates how the experimental methodology is employed to determine a causal relationship between physiological, cognitive and situational factors and the resulting emotional experience. The approach is firmly based in the scientific epistemology, searching for generalizable evidence in support of hypotheses about cause and effect in human emotion. Social aspects are considered with a focus on how they influence individual experience, for example through interpretation of others' behaviour. Deception of research participants, for instance in the Schachter and Singer study about the effects of substance injection, but also about the aims of the research, is accepted as necessary prerequisite of gaining knowledge about the nature of emotions.

Contrasting to this, the discursive psychological perspective takes a different approach to studying emotion. The discursive perspective came to a fore with the 'turn to language' in social psychology and studies emotion as it appears in discourse, i.e. in text and talk (Hollway, 2007). Discursive psychology is specifically interested in the ways how language is used to construct meaning. Applying this idea to the study of emotions means analyzing how language is used as a resource to present one version of reality rather than another, and looking for possible rationales behind the chosen constructions (Parkinson, 2007).

For example, in his presentation of a transcript from a counselling session with a couple, Derek Edwards (1999) showed how the woman and the man offered quite different narratives about an event related to jealousy and anger. While the woman emphasized a general emotional disposition towards jealousy in the man, which to her seemed completely exaggerated, the man

presented a more detailed account of the sequence of incidents and his jealousy and anger as a reaction to continuing provocations from the woman. These narratives attribute responsibility and blame differently – the woman constructs a version of personal innocence and inappropriate reactions of the man, while the man constructs a version of justified anger and jealousy in response to the woman's actions.

This illustrates one of the main tenets of the discursive perspectives, that there is no objective truth independent of place and time, but multiple versions of subjective viewpoints which differ because individuals have different understandings of events, related to a context and shared through discourse (Parkinson, 2007). Similarly, it would not make sense to argue about the objective truth in an emotional discourse, because discourse is assumed to represent a 'subjective truth' which aims at communicating a message rather than being a neutral representation of facts (Edwards 1999). Edwards further points to a set of 'rhetorical contrasts' which can be identified when analyzing emotion discourse. These relate to the types of positions that can be build up in emotion discourse, for example labelling internal events as emotions vs. cognitions like opinions and thoughts, presenting emotion as rational and justified vs. irrational and exaggerated, or in how far emotions and actions are constructed as controllable vs. uncontrollable.

It becomes apparent how the discursive psychological perspective is rooted in an ontological view of the person whose understandings (and emotions) emerge in discourse with others, rather than existing as fixed, identifiable entities inside an individual's mind or personality. Studying emotions from a discursive psychological perspective focuses on language and meaning, rather than on cause and effect, in line with its hermeneutic epistemology. Consequently, methods are oriented towards exploring individual understandings as they appear in discourse, instead of exploring a decontextualized 'true nature' of emotions.

Consequently, the discursive psychological and the social cognitive perspectives have rather different ideas with respect to 'the social'. In the discursive psychological view, emotion is studied as it appears in the interplay of social actors, essentially as a social phenomenon. Contrasting to this, in theorizing and researching how emotions are influenced by social events, the cognitive social perspective maintains a dichotomy between the individual, where the emotion is localized, and the social, which provides a context and thus exerts a theoretically separable influence on individual emotions.

The question in how far the individual is able to exert control over his or her emotions is thematized neither in Schachter and Singer's two-factor approach to the study of emotion, where physiological arousal plus evaluation of the context is thought to cause specific emotions, nor in Appraisal Theory, which posits that specific emotions result from cognitive appraisals of the social context. This situates the social cognitive perspective in a 'stimulus-response' understanding of human emotion, as derived from behaviourist traditions. The social cognitive approach extends to include consideration of internal events, but sees the social as a determining structure for individuals, which does not leave room for individuals controlling and shaping emotions or their expression. Interestingly, Schachter and Singer (1962) themselves pointed to the problem of participants disguising their negative emotions about the experimental situation in the anger condition, which resulted in difficulties to draw valid conclusions from their data.

The discursive perspective instead leaves room for agency by postulating that individuals are actively constructing emotions in discourse to pursue goals, for example with the intention of supporting the rationality of their actions and to attribute blame (Edwards 1999). These goals are achieved by employing the abovementioned rhetorical contrasts, which serve to present emotional behaviour as intentional or reactive, making a difference between emotional feelings

which may emerge as uncontrollable response to events, and actions for which control and accountability is possible.

Nevertheless, cognitive social and discursive perspectives can be seen as complementary and mutually enriching. This becomes especially apparent in Parkinson's (2007) presentation of both approaches. When analyzing Edwards' (1999) study of emotion discourse, Parkinson points to the attributions implied in the discourse of the couple seeking counselling. He describes the man's discourse as implying an appraisal of the woman's behaviour as provocation, to which his anger is a justified response. Parkinson's presentation thus makes an explicit reference to Smith and Lazarus' theoretical model of appraisals and the relation between appraisal and specific emotions, where anger is understood as an unpleasant emotion caused by motivationally incongruent events for which others are to blame (1993; as cited in Parkinson, 2007). This shows how theoretical models about the causes of emotion from the cognitive social perspective can help the discursive perspective's to trace back the motives that may shape emotion discourse.

The preceding discussion has shown that the cognitive social and the discursive perspective on the study of emotions greatly differ in ontology, epistemology and methodology. The cognitive social perspective is interested in finding out about the nature of emotions by researching emotions in the scientific tradition, exploring which factors may be causal for emotional experiences. The discursive perspective, by contrast, does not assume the existence of emotions as an identifiable entity which exists outside of the context of social interactions and thus studies emotion in the hermeneutic tradition by exploring meaning in emotion discourse. Still, both perspectives present valuable insights which are complementary in their contribution to knowledge about human emotion.

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