

Cultural norms  
determine emotions  
sociology essay



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Culture has been recognized by sociologists and anthropologists to carry a particular “display roles” or norms. These affect the supervision of emotions and establish commonality and predictable behaviour among individuals and their social environment in response to various emotional stimulations.

Therefore, it is of primary importance to address the issue how and why cultural norms can determine the emotional status of people. Levy (1984) defines culture as an internalized system of controlling people in order to construct adaptive, integrated and sane attitude. Culture influences individuals in a multi-level perspective and shapes human beliefs, emotions and behaviour through various traditions, ethnic belonging and national identification. In this paper I will attempt to illustrate how cultural norms have a profound effect on people’s emotions and demonstrate a clear understanding of the interaction between emotional state of mind and the culture and where they are positioned in society.

We witness culture since we were born. We are learning about culture mainly through socialization. Caruso and Salovey (2004) examine culture on a macro level, meaning how culture influence emotional expressions in different nations and ethnic groups. They conclude that cultural beliefs, symbols and emotional patterns are shared by a complex system of processes called socialization. These are the key points and issues to be discussed in this essay which aims to illustrate the dramaturgical and structural perspectives on the sociology of emotions by contrasting them. On another level culture also provides shared symbols such as norms, language, traditions, customs and frame in this way the value, feelings and behaviour of its members. On a group level culture influences emotional process

through the performance roles individuals have in society (Levy, 1984). In order for sociologists and anthropologists to comprehend and explain the emotional processes they have to study cultures from the point of view of cognitive social psychology (Druskat and Wolff, 1999). Lazarus (1991) proposes that there are two phases of the emotional process. The first one involved awareness of the events and the second one represents the behavioural response to the emotions stimulated.

Culture and social structure are interrelated. Both reproduce order and alter emotions during the course of interacting with other individuals. Lewis (2000) claims that there are at least five theoretical research traditions in the sociology of emotions which are related to the significant aspects of sociological analysis. Lewis (2000) enumerates the models as dramaturgical (Culture), structural (social structure), symbolic-interactionist (cognitive appraisal) and ritual and exchange (interaction) perspectives on emotions. I will concentrate on dramaturgical and structural ones. Dramaturgical approaches to the sociology of emotions focus on the importance of culture in supplying ideologies for emotions, feeling rules, knowledge and vocabularies. This structure is provided by Gordon (1981). According to him the elements of culture act as cognitive guidelines to what emotions might be experienced and conveyed in situations. An example of dramaturgical perspective on emotional sociology is made by Schmitt and Clark (2006). Their studies conclude how emotions are culturally decoded so as to when to feel and how to give raise to feelings. During the process of socialization individuals learn how to associate certain emotion vocabularies with particular situations and internal sensations.

What makes the approach dramaturgical is that individuals are screened as performing on a stage, constructed by social structure (audience). Each person employs different cultural scripts in order to perform his role. In this sense people are dramatic actors, because they utilize their emotions to manipulate others through expressive control of their behaviour on the stage. People take advantage of the knowledge they store for the appropriate feelings and their displays and follow strategies to reach their goal. Through various manipulations of postures, language, role play, or talk individuals consciously apply dramatic emotional displays to gain recognition, favour, control or social status (Schmitt and Clark, 2006). Recent research in dramaturgy reveals that there are cases when social structure demands from individuals to express emotions that they do not feel. Hochschild's (1983) research on flight attendants and bill controllers is an example and clear illustration how dramaturgy can be inseparable from emotions in a cultural and social context.

The emphasis on culture in dramaturgical perspective aids us in understanding how emotional responses are learned and applied in situations. Another example of cultural displays and emotional management is given by Pierce (1995). Her research highlights that emotions can be gendered and this is so, because of the different social positions men and women occupy and the social roles they are expected to perform. She gives an example of male and female lawyers. Lawyers who are male are supposed to be aggressive, whereas, women are generally considered paralegals and are expected to be more nurturing. Dramaturgical

perspectives of sociology of emotions involve emotions associated with already rehearsed social roles and conscious emotional manipulation.

All sociological perspectives studying emotions involve social structure as part of the analyses. However, it is not only an analysis of the social structure, but also how relevant is the relationship between emotions and social structures. Theories and researches in the sociology of emotions often emphasize on a relatively small specter of social-structural properties.

According to Lewis (2000) the most prominent theories in this direction, investigate micro-level power (authority) and status or prestige dissimilarities among individuals and emotions during the course of interaction, including stratifications, institutional spheres and macro-level processes. Berger and Webster (2006) create set of approaches that follow the micro-level order in interactions. They reveal that there are differences in relative power and in status among individuals. Berger and Webster conclude that the dissimilarities are forced by the existing social structures. In other cases they emerge in the course of the very interaction. Furthermore, the differences can be encoded in cultural beliefs for the people that stay high or low in the social ladder.

Here too, like in the dramaturgical perspective, emotions generate expectations. Therefore, there is a similar characteristic in the two approaches. In dramaturgical as well as in the structural the differences in emotional stimulations are likely to occur in ethnicity, age, social class, or gender. Berger and Webster (2006) state that when individuals react in accordance with the expectations what depicts them as belonging to a certain hierarchy, they display and experience positive emotions such as <https://assignbuster.com/cultural-norms-determine-emotions-sociology-essay/>

pride, happiness. In contrast, those who were in low-ranking status, are predisposed to experience negative emotions, for example anger or fear. Individuals perceive that their low rank is their own fault and blame themselves, and that is the reason why they are affected by negative emotions and dissatisfaction.

All these are consequences of structural arrangements which work quite unfairly. Social structure, therefore determines to a large degree the level of emotions and their polarity. Kemper (1978) comments that when individuals gain power their positive attitude and self-presentation grows accordingly. For Barbalet (1998) emotions are distributed unevenly and differently across segments of society, usually corresponding to each of the socio-economic status segments. People react emotionally in regards to their social standing and what advantages this brings them – particular shares of money, power, or prestige – something what they can not obtain in a lower social belonging. Fear is one of the emotions that Barbalet (1998) theorizes to differentiate between social ranking. Fear is generated from the lack of power. Usually individuals attribute this to their shortcomings. In his analysis Barbalet (1998) preliminarily speculates that emotions are like most resources and consequently are distributed unequally. Particular kinds of emotions emerge among some subpopulations and have rather predictable conditions. However, sociological theory will have to elaborate on the conditions determining those emotions and define the potential effects that they have on collective actions in society (Lewis, 2002).

Lewis (2000) says that most of the structural theories on emotions are oriented to the micro-level, meaning that they examine situations and <https://assignbuster.com/cultural-norms-determine-emotions-sociology-essay/>

processes and face to face and daily interactions such are power or social status. But, micro-level course of actions happen within the context of macrostructural operations. In the structural theory of emotions in order for them to emerge, there needs to be interconnections between the micro and macro level of the structure. These differentiations were no present in the dramaturgical perspective. For the structural theory of emotions a whole category of individuals regardless of their gender, class belonging, race or cultural values, can experience very similar emotions, because they are placed in the same stratification system (Lewis, 2000). They are structurally identical, thereby, they are likely to have the same experiences, which creates similar emotional reactions.

Cultural concepts determine in greater degree the emotional quality and the versatile emotions that people experience. While discussing various approaches, special attention was paid to dramaturgical and structural perspectives of the sociology of emotions. Examples were given illustrating the two methods and seeing that even though they differ they are similarities namely that emotions are the result of culturally translated elements. Integrated into the cognition processes, emotions are cultural just like traditions and values. We need to posses some cultural knowledge in order to recognize certain emotions. Evaluating emotions requires a comprehensive framework about different concepts of culture and cultural norms.

Emotions are socially constructed just like cultural norms and we can say that emotional are also collectively directed because they transfer the inward relation of the individual with the surrounding social structures. Both <https://assignbuster.com/cultural-norms-determine-emotions-sociology-essay/>

approaches, the dramaturgical and the structural are based on the social organization of human behaviour and how it is controlled through the means of psychology. Cultural norms determine emotions, because they are socially organized activities, they are psychological phenomena and they involve human behaviour.