

SELF-REFLEXIVE EMOTIONS

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Abstract

In this paper it has been explored a category of emotions that received relatively scarce attention in the psychological research – self-reflexive emotions. Recently, psychologists and sociologists are interested to find their structure and social rules or conventional standards that influence their's expression and regulation. Self-reflexive emotions include: shame, embarrassment, humility, guilt, envy, jealousy, pride, and gratitude. All self-reflexive emotions (positive and negative) share the same characteristic: another person's behavior or attitude is affecting the self. It could be very fruitful for the affective life understanding if the specialists will profoundly explore the cultural and gender differences in experiencing the large register of self-conscious or self-reflexive emotions.

Cuvinte-cheie: emoții auto-referențiale, rușine, vinovăție, invidie, mândrie.

Keywords: self-reflexive emotions, shame, guilt, envy, pride.

1. INTRODUCTION

Scientists have been extensively studied the physiological and psychological aspects of emotions and their's consequences on cognition, behaviours, physical health, and social relations. They have devoted many researches on how to strength psychological functionality. Due to the great complexity of the affective life, it has been very difficult for the specialists to find a model who classify and exhaustively explain all human emotions. The diverse explanation and theories make quite impossible to define emotions in a consensual way. All scientists agree that emotions are a multicomposite psychological construct. There are ongoing debates about primary/basic, secondary and tertiary emotions. It is known that self-reflexive emotions have stimulated scant research interests of specialists, due to the focus on basic/primary emotions. Recently, self-reflexive emotions have begun to be explored. Psychologists and sociologists are interested to find their structure and social rules or conventional standards that influence their's expression and regulation.

2. DEFINITION OF THE SELF-REFLEXIVE EMOTIONS

The main features of emotions suppose: “focusing on specific events; involving the appraisal of intrinsic features of objects or events as well as of their

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motive consistency and conduciveness to specific motives; affect most or all bodily subsystems which may become to some extent synchronized; are subject to rapid change due to the unfolding of events and reappraisals, and have a strong impact on behaviour due to the generation of action readiness and control precedence” (Frijda & Scherer, 2009, p. 143). The primary emotions (“anger, fear, disgust, sadness, surprise, happiness, joy, acceptance, and anticipation” – Plutchick, 2002, *apud* Chelcea, 2008, p. 34) are universal (invariant across cultural), have a biological infrastructure, short duration, rapid and spontaneous emergence, generating an automatic appraisal of stimuli and specific facial expressions. In the category of secondary emotions have been included the self-reflexive or self-conscious emotions: gratitude, pride, shame, embarrassment, humility, guilt, envy, and jealousy. All self-reflexive emotions (positive and negative) share the same characteristic: another person’s behavior or attitude is affecting the self. J.J. Fontaine (2009, p. 359) considered that „the concept of self-reflexive or self-conscious emotions is an umbrella concept for all emotions in which the self rather than a particular (survival) concern is at stake”.

Because self-reflexive emotions suppose development of self-conscious, self-representation, and understanding of standards used in social comparison to other people, they appear much later than primary emotions (fear – eight-ten months; anger – four-six months; joy – three months). Some self-reflexive emotions begin to develop in the second year of life, most of them, including guilt, only emerge in the third year.

If the primary emotions seem to be automatically elicited, the secondary emotions require more cognitive processing (in the stimuli appraisal and interpretation). K. Scherer (2009) notified that in the literature there is the tendency to include the more complex emotions (linked to social values and norms). Those connected to self-esteem (self-referential or self-reflexive) should be included in the category of tertiary emotions (this denomination is more rarely used). The main psychological function of self-reflexive emotions is enhancing attainment of complex social goals, meeting conventional, moral, and competence standards.

Why genesis of self-reflexive emotions have as baseline the dynamic interplay between personal and social aspects? Because they are generated in the social contexts, being very important how the child perceive, believe or imagine what he/she is mirroring in the eyes of significant others; depending on theirs positive or negative feedbacks. Favourable evaluations increase self-confidence and self-worthiness, while unfavourable feedbacks decrease self-esteem, triggering negative emotions. Ch. Cooley (1902, *apud* Turner & Stets, 2005, p. 183) described the three elements of looking-glass self: “the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance to the other person, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification [shame].”

It is accepted in the literature that self develops in interpersonal settings, children learning about themselves from others, and changing in self-knowledge often depend on interpersonal validation or match between how individual perceives himself and how he believes that others perceive him. We can assert that evaluation by others, especially how individual interprets it, represent a precondition for experiencing self-reflexive emotions. In other words, emotions elicited by the reactions of other people can transform into self-reflexive emotions.

3. MORAL AND SELF-REFLEXIVE EMOTIONS

Shame is a complex moral and self-reflexive emotion elicited by the perception of a negative evaluation of the self by other people. It is difficult to manage shame (especially when it is intense), because it supposes psychological discomfort, hopelessness due to the imagined standpoints of others, and tendency to take a gloomy perspective of things. It is known that shame is related to a conflictual state regarding self-esteem and self-confidence (Brillon, 2005). This painful emotion (due to the perturbation effect on individual of the social interaction, especially the situations in which he/she is in the center of attention of other people) jeopardizes the homeostasis. Physiologically speaking, it intervenes/occurs a hyperactivity that manifests through excessive sudation, blushing, motion difficulties, and at the psychological level: low efficiency of the cognitive functions, evasive behaviour and eye contact, biased interpretation of feelings, attitudes, and others' reactions.

Ontogenetically, shame emerges after eighteen months. Erik Erikson (1980) described in the identity development theory the stage defined by the conflict between autonomy and shame. When the child becomes conscious about his motor skills, he wants to acquire an autonomy for which he is not fully prepared to obtain it. M. Brillon (2010) pointed out that shame has the benefit because it helps the child to discover own limits and to adapt his/her behaviour to the social context. At the same time, child could realistically evaluate his strength and weakness. Developmental psychologists found that shamed children are more withdrawn, scarce self-confidence, some of them being aggressive (trying to compensate the frustration that they felt when others monitored their own actions). Those children who have positive self-esteem, don't feel overwhelmed in shameful social situations, and try to cope, solving the problem.

Parenting practices are very important for children's healthy emotional development. If parents are hypercritical and ironic, especially when the child fails to accomplish his purposes, there are not good conditions to create a safe psychological background for the identity development, arising depreciatory self evaluations, and emotions such as shame and guilt. Another source of shame emergence in childhood is generated by the very high standards or expectations. Impossibility to

meet them represents a great source of psychological discomfort, distress, sadness, and shame. Another effect could appear when the child can accomplish his goals in those conditions (high standards) – facing difficulties to enjoy his/her victory, thinking at what he/she has to do in the future to become more and more successful. Specialists name this tendency perfectionism. They took empirical evidence for this idea, arguing that perfectionistic people are less happy than those who have realistic standards, because they are never pleased by theirs' accomplishments, thinking on other goals – more and more difficult. At the first glance, we may interpret this reaction such as a sign of a great self-determination, but it is necessary to notice that there is a predominance of the negative emotions that could influence more or less the affective balance, and that suppose a great absorption of energy.

Parental' critics could generate shame, but stimulate at the same time (when they are not exaggerated) the interest to find the causes of the unsuccessful situation. We emphasize again that intensification of emotional negative experiences in childhood could generate an affective structure based on insecurity and shame, related to the poor self-acceptance, self-respect, and sense of self-worthiness. Parents have to appreciate not only the success, but also the effort to accomplish the diverse tasks in which children are involved. It is suggestive the finding of the Burrhus Skinner (1971) who showed more than seven decades ago that aversive stimulation (negative conditioning based on punishment) have a negative impact on the psychological functionality.

Embarrassment is another self-reflexive emotion. Specialists have been preoccupied to explain if there is a clear distinction between embarrassment and shame. It is assumed in the literature that embarrassment it is a mild form of shame. G.M. Breugelmans (2009) notice that in Dutch, Spanish, and Indonesian languages is absent the distinction between these two self-reflexive emotions. As we noted earlier, shame is usually triggered by the violation of moral standards, and embarrassment results more often from the violation of conventional or social standards. June Price Tangney (1990) emphasized that phenomenological experience of shame is more similar to guilt than to experience of embarrassment, self-image being profoundly flawed. If shame supposes evitative behaviour, embarrassment generates prompting engagement in remedial or ameliorative behaviours, but is characterized also by feeling of exposure, acute self-awareness, bodily sensations (blushing, increased hearth rate), and tendency to explain own reaction, invoking external attributions, such as: never happened to me such things, in fact I am not culpable. The presence of an audience (real or imagined) represents a precondition of embarrassment arising.

Humility represents a negative self-reflexive emotion that shows a flawed status caused by a voluntary harsh behaviour of another person. It has been mentioned in the literature (Sander & Scherer, 2009) that humble attitudes could

generate rage and aggressivity, in order to repair the damaged status. Thinking beyond of this idea, we can assert that those people who have a strong sense of self-worthiness, being appreciated by the significant others, can manage the challenging situations in which those who they interact, intentionally degrade, ridicule or put down.

Guilt is a very complex self-reflexive emotion that mirrors a psychological conflict between love and aggressivity, being elicited when the individual becomes conscious that he/she told or behaved in a manner that took prejudice to other people, because of transgression of internalized or moral standards. This emotion appears ontogenetically after two years old, when the child is able to understand that he is in a dependency state of significant others (parents), of their support and love. When the intensity of guilt is disproportionate, it is possible to transform in an overwhelming experience. The capacity to feel culpability (an adequate level to the gravity of the situation that elicit guilt emotion) reflects beginning of the affective maturity and ability to realize healthy interpersonal relations. J. Fontaine (2009) noticed that have been mentioned in the literature four theoretical approaches to guilt: 1) the internal standards approach; 2) the moral transgression approach; 3) the behavioural focus approach; 4) the interpersonal approach.

All approaches agreed that guilt is a self-reflexive emotion that appears when someone notices a negative outcome by acts of commission or omission. The first approach focuses on the specific appraisal of the situation, relating it to the idea that individual is conscious that he has done something that violates his own internalized standards. It is asserted that doesn't matter if anyone else notices the violation, because the rumination is central to the guilt experience. The rumination has been defined such as "recurrent instrumental thinking about an unresolved goal, or matter of personal concern, (...) that has the potential to be constructive or unconstructive, depending, respectively, on whether it focuses on how to reduce the perceived discrepancy through active problem-solving or passively makes the unattained goal more salient" (Watkins, 2009, p. 349).

Septimiu Chelcea (2008) took into consideration an interesting aspect of guilty experience, questioning if "bad thoughts" and "wrongdoings" generate the same emotional reaction. There are important differences (linked to intraindividual aspects, especially to moral conscious). Not behaviour itself that violates a rule generates the guilty emotion, but attitude on this act. "There is not guilty emotion without an object of guilty (real entity or imagined), that suffered damages of physical, psychological, and moral integrity" (Chelcea, 2008, p. 221).

4. OTHER SELF-REFLEXIVE EMOTIONS

Envy and *jealousy* "can be considered to fall under the scope of self-reflexive emotions" (Fontaine, 2009, p. 358). Envy is elicited in the context of social comparison, and supposes a painful feeling due to the perceived own disadvantage,

and inferiority. The envied person is perceived as possessing a desired object, feature, advantage, or luck. Superiority of envied individual is triggered by: rewards, beauty, talent, reputation, personality, happiness, and success. Fr. Lelord and C. Andre (2003) made the distinction between “hostile envy” and “admiration envy”, on the basis of the presence or absence of a desire to deprive the envied person of the positive things, achievements or qualities (that seem impossible to obtain). Hostile envy is a malicious emotion because reflects an acute sense of inferiority, and hate of social target. Envy reaction becomes more intense when the disclosed inferiority is a valued psychological aspect by the individual, being considered essential for the own self-esteem. It is quite impossible to accept that an individual can envy a feature that seems to have a scarce importance for himself. In the individualistic cultures, hostile envy can be elicited more frequently than in the collectivistic culture (that focuses on cooperation, but not on competition and acute concerns for reputation and achievements). Admiration envy is a nonmalicious emotion because it stimulates a healthy emulation in order to become similar to the positive image associated with envied person.

Jealousy is an emotion that “typically occurs when a person’s place in an important relationship is threatened by a third party” (Parrot, 2009, p. 156). Jealousy is accompanied by other emotions such as: fear, suspicion, anger, anxiety, and distrust. A. Buunk (2009) showed that jealousy has a dual structure, defined by the cognitive (paranoid thoughts and scenarios about the partner) and behavioural aspects (spying the partner). In the literature, gender differences in jealousy experience are explained especially from the evolutionary perspective. In the course of evolution, males faced the problem of confidence in paternity, and females of securing the partner’s investment of emotional resources.

Pride is a complex emotion that reflects the social acceptance of individual, not being necessary actual presence of approving others. It consists in a favourable comparison between one’s behaviours and own standards (that are derived from internalized social standards). Ability to experience pride appears relatively late (comparing to basic emotions) – about three years, because it is required self-awareness. B. Mesquita and S. Polanco (2009) noticed that individual pride is neither valued nor communicated in the collectivistic cultures, instead, in the Western cultures are very important self-celebration and showing others own’s worth. It is emphasized that pride in East Asian cultures is related to a group of people, not to an individual. Success and pride confer honour on one’s ingroup, parents, or nation. Kitayama *et al.* (2006) found that experience of individual pride and self-celebration in American groups predicted general well-being, but it did not in groups of Japanese students. From an antropological perspective, this pattern could be explained taking into consideration the cultural meanings and practices of relationships in those cultures. As we have seen before, in Asian culture keeping relational harmony and feeling connected with others are very important.

Gratitude is an affective reaction to receiving help from other people or impersonal force. This characteristic has been considered “the prototypical affect that people experience when they perceive that someone has acted in the interest of their personal well-being” (Emmons & Shelton, 2005, p. 461). Reviewing the existing literature on this topic, it could be noticed that empirical findings have stressed that being thankful and forgiving were the prototypical qualities of the spiritual person (Walker & Pitts, 1998). Plenty of empirical researches have provided evidence that grateful people have high level of psychological well-being (Emmons, 2007; McCullough *et al.*, 2002; Worthington, 2008), maintaining a positive outlook on life. Gratitude is one of the most typical response to perceived benevolence from others. People report feeling grateful when they are conscious that either person or God have assisted them in obtaining a favorable result that could have been worse without assistance.

It has been considered that gratitude is also a moral emotion due to the variety of prosocial features and functions. R. Emmons & Ch. Shelton (2005, p. 464) postulated the next functions of the gratitude: *a) moral barometer function* – it is a response to the perception that one has been the beneficiary of another person’s benevolence; *b) moral motive function* – it motivates the grateful person to behave prosocially toward the benefactor and other persons; *c) moral reinforcer function* – it encourages benefactors to behave morally in the future.

Why some people are more grateful than others? A lot of factors contribute to this individual difference. A psychological explanation could take into consideration the nature of social influences during the childhood (parents’ or significant others model), and some personality traits that have frequently been linked to prosociality, namely, high agreeableness, altruism, straightforwardness, and low narcissism.

5. CONCLUSIONS

There is an increasing focus on the self-reflexive emotions, although the debate on the theoretical interpretation and on the methodological aspects of the empirical inquiries is still continuing. It could be very fruitful for the affective life understanding if the specialists will explore the cultural and gender differences in experiencing self-conscious or self-reflexive emotions. In individualistic culture, emotions are instrumental for the expression of the self and for the affirmation of the individual. It is accepted in the literature (Wang, 2003) that despite of the prototypes of emotions across cultures, there are differences in the interpretations of certain situations, especially those involving interpersonal conflicts (sadness, fear, guilt, and shame). In Western cultures children are stimulated to talk about their own feelings and concerns (social sharing of emotions), and in East-Asian cultures (mostly in China), emotions tend to be perceived as disruptive to interpersonal relations, therefore it is necessary to be strictly controlled. At early age,

Chinese children learn strict behavioural standards, and their parents are focused on emotional restraint that is considered a good manner and important for promoting group harmony. Other cultural differences in affective register suppose dialectical emotions (propensity to experience both positive and negative emotions over time, maintaining a balance between the two). The cultural context shapes the emotional style through a cultural script. Japanese are more likely than Americans to be included into the moderately dialectical emotion type; whereas Americans are more likely than Japanese to be included into the mostly positive emotion type (Miyamoto & Ryff, 2011). The dominant cultural script in East-Asian culture (build on dialectical thinking, characterized by a tolerance of contradictions and finding a middle way) stimulates experiencing a balance between positive and negative emotions. Future research may explore how cultural scripts shapes appraisal, interpretations and social rules that govern expression of self-reflexive emotions.

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REZUMAT

În acest articol a fost explorată o categorie a emoțiilor care a primit o atenție relativ scăzută în cercetarea psihologică – emoțiile auto-referențiale. Recent, psihologii și sociologii au devenit interesați să găsească structura și regulile sociale sau standardele convenționale care influențează exteriorizarea și reglarea acestora. Emoțiile auto-referențiale includ: rușinea, stânjeneala, umilința, vinovăția, invidia, gelozia, mândria și gratitudinea. Toate emoțiile auto-referențiale împărtășesc aceeași trăsătură: comportamentul sau atitudinea altei persoane afectează eul. Ar putea fi foarte folositor pentru înțelegerea vieții afective dacă specialiștii vor aprofunda diferențele culturale și de gen în experimentarea registrului vast al emoțiilor conștientizării de sine sau auto-referențiale.