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Commentary on 'How Emotions, Relationships, and Culture Constitute Each Other:
Advances in Social Functionalist Theory' by Keltner, Sauter, Tracy, Wetchler, and Cowen

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relational concerns.

Abstract

This paper is a commentary on the paper by Keltner and colleagues (this issue). Although Keltner et al.'s expanded version of a social functionalist theory of emotion is a welcome addition to theoretical thinking about the relation between emotion and social life, I argue that their paper accords too much importance to the ways in which emotion is shaped by the relational needs of the individual, and too little to the cultural context in which relationships take place.

Dacher Keltner and colleagues (this issue) describe an expanded version of a social functionalist theory of emotion. There is much to like in their approach. As someone with a longstanding interest in the relation between emotion and social life (see Manstead, 1991), I welcome any effort to develop theoretical thinking about the way in which they are related, especially one coming from leading emotion theorists. Shifting the way that psychologists historically thought about emotion has not been an easy or straightforward process. The fact that emotions are subjectively experienced by individuals plays into the individualism that characterises much of Western psychology. The fact that some emotions are accompanied by physiological changes plays into the biological determinism that characterises some psychological thinking. The result is that traditional theories of emotion in psychology have tended to be individualistic and to give undue prominence to the role of physiology. Nevertheless, as a result of the joint efforts of many researchers, Keltner himself being a prominent example (e.g., Keltner & Haidt, 1999), the theoretical centre of gravity has shifted to a broad acknowledgement of the fact that emotions and social life are intimately connected. It is the nature of the connection that remains unclear. As Brian Parkinson (2019, p. 2) argued in the preface to his recent book, “Pretty much everyone has now come to accept that emotions are social in some way or other, but no-one seems to agree about exactly how.”

Keltner and colleagues seek to offer an answer to this ‘how’ question. Their answer comes in the form of six ‘relational needs.’ These, the authors argue, represent ways of relating to others that help us to meet social challenges. Everyone, it is proposed, is confronted by these challenges, and to overcome them requires relating to others in certain ways. An obvious example, given the fact that the human infant is not self-sufficient, is the need to be

cared for by others. This need for *security* is one of the six relational needs described by Keltner and colleagues, the others being *commitment*, *status*, *trust*, *fairness*, and *belongingness*.

Each of these six relational needs maps onto a distinct way of relating to others, which in turn is associated with a particular emotion or set of emotions, as summarized in Table 1 of Keltner et al.'s paper. Individuals construe their relations with others in terms of the degree to which they meet or fail to meet these relational needs. These construals are termed 'relational appraisals.' Indeed, the theoretical framework advanced in the paper is in many ways an extension of conventional appraisal theories of emotion, which perhaps helps to explain why it gives greater prominence to the needs of the individual who is doing the appraising than to the social context in which the appraisal is made. The core idea advanced in the paper is that emotions arise from relational appraisals. Here, then, is Keltner et al.'s answer to the 'how' question referred to earlier. Emotions function to help individuals to meet these fundamental relational needs, by signalling the extent of progress towards meeting the needs, and by guiding thought and action in relation to others in ways that meet the needs.

The theoretical framework developed in Keltner et al.'s article is a welcome advance on more general assertions that emotions are inherently social, or that they serve social functions. The concepts of relational needs and relational appraisals help us to understand the variety of ways in which emotions are socially functional. Rather than starting with individual emotions and seeking to explain their social origins and social effects, the authors begin with a general theoretical framework of social relations, informed by cultural and

evolutionary anthropology, and locate emotions within this framework. A benefit of thinking about emotion in this way is that it generates new lines of empirical investigation. Several lines of inquiry are identified by the authors, including the notion that emotions constitute ways of relating to others.

By the authors' own admission, in considering the two processes – the evolutionary and the cultural – by which emotions are linked to society, their focus in the paper is on the evolutionary: "In important ways, our focus here has been on the evolutionary: emotion-related expression, experience, and thought, shaped in the course of hominid evolution, constitute the relationships so vital to survival, and are archived in cultural forms that enable the shared experience and understanding of emotion central to strong collectives and group survival" (p. 20). In other words, when considering the eight double-headed arrows shown in Figure 1 of their paper, representing the links between the individual and the relational, and between the relational and the cultural, the 'centrifugal' arrows flowing from the centre to the periphery are given greater prominence in their argument than the 'centripetal' arrows flowing in the reverse direction.

Despite the authors' assertion that emotions, relationships and culture 'constitute each other', it is hard to escape the notion that the chief role of emotions in their scheme is to service the relational needs of the individual. Furthermore, the main function of culture in this scheme is to 'archive' emotion, serving as a repository of shared knowledge.

Admittedly, this archiving gives rise to socially shared and culturally specific types of beliefs, norms and practices concerning emotion, which can in turn shape social relations in a given culture. However, in their paper relatively little attention is accorded to the ways in which

cultures structure social relations and thereby influence the types of relational needs that are salient in a culture.

Because there are important cultural differences in the ways in which people relate to one another, it stands to reason (especially if one accepts Keltner et al.'s argument that emotions reflect and promote relational needs) that different emotions will be valued in different cultures. The cultural context in which individuals develop and maintain their social relationships exerts an important influence on the kinds of emotion that are encouraged and rewarded. The relational needs described by Keltner et al. play out in the context of *relational concerns* (Rodriguez-Mosquera, Fischer, & Manstead, 2004) that are context-sensitive. An important dimension on which cultures vary is the relative importance of individual autonomy (characteristic of cultures in which independent modes of relating are valued) and relational harmony (characteristic of cultures in which interdependent modes of relating are valued; Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 1994). There is ample evidence that these differences in culturally valued modes of relating have an impact on the prevalence of emotions in a given cultural context, on the content of those emotions, and on the ways in which emotions affect well-being (for reviews, see De Leersnyder, Mesquita, & Boiger, 2021, and Tsai & Clobert, 2019).

To illustrate how culture constitutes emotion, De Leersnyder et al. (2021) invite us to consider two psychology students, one called Maya, the other Yuki. Maya was born and raised in Boston, Massachusetts; Yuki was born and raised in Kyoto, Japan. These two students, it is argued, are likely to experience different emotions as a result of their respective cultures: "Maya and Yuki have internalized the different goals, concerns and

values that are associated with their culture's model of self and relating. These goals, concerns and values constitute the backdrop against which they perceive, interpret and act upon daily emotional situations" (p. 89). In this way, culture constitutes emotion at the individual level: People raised in different cultures have internalised the goals, concerns and values that characterise their culture. Moreover, these differences in goals, concerns and values emerge from everyday interactions with caregivers, siblings, friends, acquaintances, and strangers. We learn what is valued in our culture through our interactions with others and by acting in ways that are consistent with these values we reaffirm their importance. It is through interacting with others that emotions become aligned with cultural models, because the interactions are shaped by culturally endorsed relationship goals, and thereby promote culturally congruent emotions. In this way, culture also constitutes emotion at the interpersonal level. The third way in which culture constitutes emotion, in De Leensnyder et al.'s analysis, is through the cultural products and 'situational ecologies' that cultures provide. The argument is that cultural products (such as children's books) and situational ecologies (the types of emotions that are encountered or avoided in a culture) serve to promote culturally endorsed emotions and to downplay emotions that are culturally inappropriate.

As argued above, the emphasis in Keltner et al.'s analysis is on the ways in which emotions (in service of relational needs) constitute social relationships, and thereby culture, rather than on the reciprocal processes by which culture structures social relationships, and thereby emotions. Thus they argue that "It is within ... emotionally rich interactions ... that individuals develop culturally rich ideas about their selves in relation to others" (p. 17) – as if the culture did not already provide 'rich ideas' about the self in relation to others. In this

way, the authors follow in a long tradition of theorists who tend to treat emotion as an 'inside-to-outside' phenomenon, one that originates in individual relational needs and proceeds through the individual's social relationships to exert an influence on culture, which is treated as a repository of these evolved emotion concepts and practices.

To be fair to Keltner and colleagues, they do argue that cultural products, such as stories, music, and dance "serve as efficient, memorable ways of eliciting shared experiences of specific emotions, inducting individuals into the emotional patterns of a culture" (p. 19), thereby acknowledging the ways in which culture can shape emotions. However, they emphasise the cross-cultural universality of these cultural products, consistent with their core belief that emotions reflect relational needs that are common to all humans, thereby diminishing the potential for cultural variation in emotion. If all humans have the same relational needs, and these needs shape emotions, it follows that representations of emotions are likely to be fundamentally similar across cultures, which is exactly what Keltner and colleagues suggest, namely that "the structure of cultural belief systems – for example laws, legends, fairy tales, or beliefs about the Divine -- will share a core emotional similarity" (p. 19). Although there may be some 'deep structure' cross-cultural similarities in emotion representations, there are also many striking differences (e.g., Tsai, Louie, Chen, & Uchida, 2007). Indeed, Keltner and colleagues presumably accept that there is some variation in cultural representations of emotion, for they also argue that "culture shapes emotion in profound ways, in the beliefs, practices, rituals, ceremonies, and institutions that shape the contexts, appraisals, and forms of conceptualization that imbue emotion with culturally-specific meaning" (pp. 20-21).

It is in the third of the four 'areas of empirical opportunity' stimulated by the authors' theoretical framework that Keltner and colleagues acknowledge the potential importance of the influence of culture on emotion. They note that, "A third question concerns how *culture shapes emotion through specific patterns of relating*" (p. 23, italics in original). Here they come close to acknowledging the interdependence of emotion and culture, suggesting that cultural variations in ways of relating to others should be able to predict cultural variations in emotion, which is exactly the point made by Mesquita and colleagues in their research program (De Leersnyder et al., 2021). If one assumes, as Keltner and colleagues do, that emotions arise from relationships with others, it seems odd not to focus more on the importance of culture, given that all relationships take place in a cultural context.

In summary, the theoretical model offered by Keltner and colleagues provides a valuable extension of previous thinking about the social functions of emotion, in that it specifies the ways in which emotions serve social functions (i.e., by fulfilling relational needs). However, their model (at least as described here) appears to give primacy to the ways in which emotion is shaped by the relational needs of the individual, over and above the cultural context in which the relationships take place; and by emphasising the universality of relational needs, the model appears to downplay the degree to which there is cultural variation in emotion. Emotions may be experienced by individuals but they are constituted by culture, and models of how emotions relate to social life need to take full account of this.

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