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Collective emotions in rituals: Elicitation, Transmission, and a “Matthew-effect”

Sociological theory frequently assumes that rituals exhibit a number of latent social functions, in particular the promotion of social cohesion and the reproduction of social order. A key mechanism in realizing these functions is often seen in processes of “collective effervescence,” a concept first introduced in the context of rituals by Emile DURKHEIM (1912) denoting the elicitation of mutually shared emotional arousal. DURKHEIM ascribed crucial social functions to collective effervescence, in particular with respect to the genesis of values and the affective charging of symbols representing the group (cf. JOAS 2001). Moreover, he argued that collective effervescence contributes to the emergence of a “collective conscience” and thus the reinforcement of group ties and social solidarity.

In modern sociological theory, this approach is most elaborately reflected in the works of Randall COLLINS (2004a). Although COLLINS focuses on ritualized interaction in a sense proposed by Erving GOFFMAN (1967), he assigns a key role to his concept of “emotional energy,” which is generated when actors mutually engage in various forms of “interaction ritual chains.” This “emotional energy,” COLLINS holds, can take the form of collective emotions in face-to-face encounters and contribute to the emergence and reproduction of social solidarity, much in the same way as proposed by DURKHEIM.

Although there are marked differences between DURKHEIM’S and COLLINS’ accounts of the relationship between ritual and emotion, both uniformly emphasize the importance of collective emotions or “collective effervescence” for the emergence and reproduction of social solidarity, cohesion, and – ultimately – social order well beyond the actual interaction situation. Far from being sociological mainstream, these ideas have spread into social theorizing and inspired the literature on, for instance, collective action and crowd behavior, the formation of social movements, and group processes (COLLINS 2001; JASPER 1998). What remains largely underdeveloped in both theoretical accounts, however, is the conceptualization of collective emotions (and collective effervescence) and a precise definition and empirical substantiation of what collective emotions are. How are collective emotions elicited? How are they “transmitted” between actors, i.e., what makes them “collective” in contrast to “individual” emotions? How do they differ from individual emotions qualitatively and with respect to their social functions? And what are the conditions under which collective emotions exhibit their supposed social functions?

Although the literature on collective emotions is sparse not only in sociology, but throughout the social and behavioral sciences, there is a number of theoretical elaborations and empirical studies that are worth considering in sharpening the picture of the nature and the social functions (and dysfunctions) of collective emotions in rituals. In this contribution, I will develop answers to the above questions, elaborate a number of foundational affective mechanisms of collective emotions in rituals, and give insights into the ways in which

collective emotions impact the reinforcement (or disruption) of group ties. I will proceed in three steps: First, I will discuss existing theories on the relationships between collective emotions, rituals, and certain group parameters, such as cohesion, solidarity, and collective conscience. Second, I will highlight a number of shortcomings and problems that are evident in existing theories with respect to the question of how collective emotions are elicited. In referring to select psychological and philosophical theories of emotion, I will develop an original approach to tackle this *elicitation problem*. Third, I will discuss the assumptions existing theories make about the “transmission” of emotions between actors as a crucial ingredient of collective emotions in rituals. In using evidence from social psychological approaches to emotion, I aim at clarifying this *transmission problem* and at developing original insights into the question of how the transmission problem is related to the (alleged) social functions of collective emotions.

Two accounts of collective emotions in rituals

One of the earliest sociological accounts of the role of collective emotions in rituals is developed by one of the founding figures of sociology, Emile DURKHEIM, in his writings on *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (DURKHEIM 1912). DURKHEIM’S analysis is mainly based on the analysis of religious practices of Australian Aborigines, in which he sought to excavate the basic principles of religion and religious experience (CARITON-FORD 2005; OLAVESON 2004). He was interested in the question of how religious beliefs and belief systems emerge and are reproduced within a community, and how they contribute to everyday systems of classification and categorization, mainly with respect to distinguishing “the profane” from “the sacred.” He assumed that religion and religious practices are key in establishing the moral order of a group or community by shaping their core values, bringing about collective identity and collective conscience, and ultimately forming strong group bonds and creating a sense of community.

For DURKHEIM, the mere cognitive acquisition of religious beliefs was not sufficient to generate this sense of community and to foster the emergence of a collective conscience. In his sense, too strong were the distractions of the everyday and profane world and the temptations of the gains of purely individual courses of action, and too ephemeral the world of religious thoughts, beliefs, and ideals. What was missing, in DURKHEIM’S terms, was the “grounding” of religious beliefs (i.e., of the moral and social world) in the world of subjective phenomenal experience (i.e., in the “natural” world) (SHILLING/MELLOR 1998). According to DURKHEIM, precisely this grounding is achieved in rituals, in which the members of a group gather collectively to perform various rites, for example worshipping the gods, forgiving sins, or commemorating certain events. For DURKHEIM, the central feature of these gatherings is that they are “effervescent” assemblies in that they generate heightened and mutual emotional arousal from the collective performance of various ritual practices (PICKERING 1984, p. 385). Crucially, this heightened arousal is directed at symbols (e.g., totems) or individuals representing the group and – through these symbols – at the (religious) beliefs and moral values held by the group. “It is the *collective effervescence* stimulated by assembled social groups that harnesses people’s passions to the symbolic order of society” (SHILLING/MELLOR 1998, p.196, italics original). Moreover, DURKHEIM indeed assumed that under conditions of collective effervescence in rituals, individual psyches can be “transformed” and primed towards a decidedly *collective* conscience. Collective effervescence and its key ingredient – collective emotional arousal – is “experienced mentally and physically, and binds people to the ideals valued by their social group” (SCHILLING/MELLOR 1998, p. 196).

Importantly, DURKHEIM also assumed that beliefs and symbols which are affectively imbued during rituals unfold their functions for a group or community in the absence of actual ritual practices, i.e. in everyday life. For example, the presence of affectively “charged”

symbols does not only convey a specific emotionally-laden meaning, but may also activate traces of emotional memory related to the experience of collective emotions in ritual contexts. The same holds for the affective charging of beliefs, in particular normative beliefs and moral convictions, which in part derive their compelling and commitment generating qualities out of their association with affective arousal. Both assumptions are corroborated by modern psychological and neuroscientific research (LABAR /CABEZA 2006; KENSINGER/SCHACTER 2008; BLESS 2001; BOWER 1991; FORGAS 2000; CLORE/SCHWARZ/CONWAY 1994; cf. also VON SCHEVE 2009 for an overview).

DURKHEIM'S key arguments concerning the social functions of collective effervescence and emotions are paralleled by modern sociological theories of group cohesion and solidarity. One of the most prominent examples is Randall COLLINS' (2004a) theory of "Interaction Ritual Chains" (IRC). Although COLLINS' model focuses on ritualized interaction in a sense first proposed by GOFFMAN (1967), he considers DURKHEIM'S perspectives on collective effervescence and emotions as building blocks of his own approach. He emphasizes the compatibility of DURKHEIM'S model with more general sociological theories of stratification and conflict by highlighting its explanatory qualities with respect to the generation of solidarity within different social groups. In COLLINS' view, DURKHEIM'S analysis of emotions in rituals provides an answer to one of sociology's key questions – "What holds society together?" – in providing insights into processes that generate social solidarity and cohesion on the group level (COLLINS 2004a, p. 40, COLLINS 2004b). COLLINS' theory of IRCs contributes to this understanding by introducing the concept of "emotional energy" as a motivational force that is produced in ritualized social interactions and encourages individuals to repeatedly engage in interactions producing high levels of emotional energy. Conflict and stratification enter this framework by making reference to different techniques and resources that groups have at their disposal to realize and implement rituals that generate the necessary amounts of emotional energy (ibid.).

From this perspective, COLLINS' theory differs from DURKHEIM'S approach in that it focuses on the repetitiveness of social interactions – of encounters – and the patterns they create. These encounters derive their regularity from the amount of emotional energy they are able to produce. The more emotional energy actors can absorb in an encounter, the more likely they will engage in this kind of encounter again. In this model, the explanatory power of emotions lies in their status as a valued resource and in their potential to generate "interaction orders."

In principle, there is no need for COLLINS to postulate collective emotional phenomena such as collective effervescence – for emotional energy to emerge, dyadic interactions are sufficient. However, COLLINS emphasizes that the sociology of ritual is predominantly a "sociology of gatherings – of crowds, assemblies, congregations, audiences" (COLLINS 2004a, p. 34). He further states that "When human bodies are together in the same place, there is a physical attunement: currents of feeling, a sense of wariness or interest, a palpable change in the atmosphere." For him, this physical attunement seems to be the necessary precondition for collective effervescence and collective emotions to occur. In this sense, it paves the way for the alleged functions of collective emotions, at least at the dyadic level of analysis: "Once the bodies are together, there may take place a process of intensification of shared experience, which DURKHEIM called collective effervescence, and the formation of collective conscience or collective consciousness. "We might refer to this as a condition of heightened intersubjectivity" (COLLINS 2004a, p. 35). "The key process is participants' mutual entrainment of emotion and attention, producing a shared emotion / cognitive experience" (COLLINS 2004a, p. 49).

Both DURKHEIM and COLLINS seem to imply in their writings that bodily co-presence together with shared practices and activities – either sacred rituals or profane social exchange – are sufficient conditions for physical and psychological "synchronization" to be established

and for collective effervescence and collective emotions to occur. In doing so, both theorists offer only sparse explanations of how exactly effervescence is established and collective emotions occur. They provide no elaborated theory – in terms of emotion theory – of either individual or collective emotions and their elicitation, but are rather quick in drawing conclusions concerning their specific qualities and socio-cognitive effects.

It is evident that collective emotional phenomena play a crucial role in many societal affairs, which is theoretically well elaborated by DURKHEIM and COLLINS, and thus deserve further investigation. The aim of the following sections is thus to extend DURKHEIM'S and COLLINS' theories where they show obvious deficits: In their assumptions on the elicitation and transmission of collective emotions in rituals, crowds, and gatherings, and the cognitive and social preconditions necessary to establish the social functions of collective emotions. To do so, I will discuss the assumption that the functions ascribed to collective emotions and effervescence require a number of non-trivial preconditions that have to be fulfilled and that some of the *functions* of collective emotions or collective effervescence mentioned by DURKHEIM and COLLINS are in fact *preconditions* for these phenomena to occur.

The elicitation problem

How are collective emotions elicited in the first place? DURKHEIM and COLLINS are relatively silent about the exact mechanisms and process that instigate collective emotions. Here I will provide insights into these mechanisms and processes by referring to current emotion theories from sociology, psychology, and philosophy which almost exclusively deal with the elicitation of individual-level emotions, and adapt these theories towards the level of collective emotions.

One step in this direction can be found in work on collective emotions understood as “group-based” emotions (WILDER/SIMON 2001; SMITH/SEGER/MACKIE 2007; MACKIE/SMITH 2002; MACKIE/SMITH 1998; MACKIE/DEVOS/SMITH 2000; BREWER 2001). In these theories, it is not the face-to-face gathering and the contagious and effervescent processes of social interaction in bodily co-present groups that are at the center of attention, but rather the fact that actors tend to *identify* themselves as members of a group or a social collective (BREWER 2001). By way of identifying with a group or the belief that one is a member of a social group, collective emotions can also be elicited *in solitude*, e.g., when other members of the group perform certain actions or are ascribed certain qualities by third parties. Imagine, for example, cases of nation-based collective guilt, or the cheering when your favorite football team scores (ALLPRESS *et al.* 2010; DOOSJE *et al.* 1998; BRANSCOMBE 2004; KESSLER/HOLLBACH 2004). These group-based emotions are frequently elicited even when people are alone and no processes of collective effervescence or contagion in close face-to-face encounter can occur.

Theories of group-based emotions primarily refer to social identification theory (TAJFEL/TURNER 1986) to explain collective emotions. However, identification with an in-group is only one way by which collective emotions may arise. Think, for example, of a heavy traffic jam in which you are stuck, and of people starting to leave their cars and shouting and complaining in mutual anger about the reason for the road blockage. In this case, we may well speak of collective emotions, but would hardly speak of group-based emotions relying on identification with the group of stuck drivers. To further explore this type of collective emotion – and other kinds of collective emotions as well – it might be helpful to take a look at theories dealing with emotion elicitation primarily at the individual level, which will be done in the following section.

Socially shared appraisal contents in emotion elicitation