

# Emotions: reflections from a socioconstructionist perspective

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Emotions have been a topic long forgotten by psychologists, something, which is especially serious given the importance they have in our lives and in the proper constitution of the human being. Nevertheless, this important mistake has been corrected during the last years. Although there is still a long way left, however, we have probably advanced in the psychological study of emotions much more during the last ten or fifteen years than during the previous decades. This advance has taken place basically through two different paths: on the one hand, through the acknowledgement of the complexity of emotions and their multiple composition, given that they have biological, psychological, social and cultural elements; on the other hand, through the growing confirmation of their social and cultural nature, up to the point that this nature is now widely accepted. This happens because emotions, as in fact the rest of psychological phenomena, are mainly *social constructs*. In other words, the *socioconstructionist perspective* is probably the most promising when it comes to accurately understand what emotions are and which is their role in our lives and even in our own constitution as human beings.

*Las Emociones: reflexiones desde una perspectiva Socioconstruccionista.* Las emociones han sido un tópico demasiado olvidado por los psicólogos, lo que es especialmente grave dada la importancia que ellas tienen en nuestras vidas y en la propia constitución del ser humano. Sin embargo, a lo largo de los últimos años se está corrigiendo este grave error. Aunque aún hay mucho camino por recorrer, sin embargo, en el estudio psicológico de las emociones probablemente hayamos avanzado más en los diez o quince últimos años que en muchas décadas anteriores. Y este avance viene fundamentalmente por dos vías: por una parte, por el reconocimiento de la complejidad de las emociones así como de su multicomposición, dado que poseen elementos biológicos, psicológicos, sociales y culturales; y por otra, por la cada vez mayor constatación de su naturaleza social y cultural, hasta el punto de ser cada vez aceptada su naturaleza social y cultural. Y es que las emociones, como los demás fenómenos psicosociales, son ante todo constructos sociales. Esta, la perspectiva socioconstruccionista, probablemente sea la más prometedora de cara a entender adecuadamente qué son realmente las emociones y qué papel juegan en nuestras vidas e incluso en nuestra propia constitución como sujetos.

Ever since the Greek period, the whole Western philosophy has made two really essential mistakes: they have believed in the existence of individuals and they have believed in their rationality. A third mistake was added: the belief in reason as the authentic reflection of the absolute truth, the same as in their two biggest realizations: education and, mainly, science. It was believed that through education and science we would be able to master both physical nature and the social and moral one, in such a way that the progress of science would mean, inevitably, a material, social and moral progress. However, Nazism ruined all those beliefs all at once, because it sprung up exactly in one of the countries where Philosophy, Education and Science were more advanced. And it happens when one comes to explain human behavior, emotion is more important than reason, and culture institutions and human groups are more important than individuals. That is because the

human being is more relational than individualist, and more emotional than rational. That is why the study of emotions provokes a huge intrinsic interest.

On the other hand, as Ortega y Gasset said ninety years ago, «in the XV and XVI centuries, the man's inside, the subjective world and psychological issues were discovered. Opposed to the world of fixed things, firmly settled in the space, the volatile world of emotions appears, essentially turbulent, flowing in time» (Ortega y Gasset, 1983, Vol I, p.488). It was not by chance that it was precisely at that time, exactly in 1538, when the Spaniard Juan Luis Vives published the first known essay on passions or emotions (Vives, 1923). In fact, the third book of *Tratado del alma* is a complete essay on emotions, (which Zajonc, 1998, did not even mention), not excelled by the famous treaty written by Descartes, as Vonilla de San Martín (1929, Vol.2, pp.240-241) pointed out. As Carpintero (1994, p.32) wrote some years ago, there are interesting similarities between these ideas and «Tratado de las Pasiones», by Descartes, who mentioned Vives in some occasions; that is why it has been suggested that «Tratado del Alma» could have been a «source» of that Cartesian essay (Rodis-Lewis, 1948). For Vives, the variety of affections is immense. «From there we get the necessity of classifying them to be studied. We will not follow Vi-

ves' statement, but we will observe that in the developing, Vives' classification is more complex than Descartes'. This is not so for the basic principles, because it is well known that Descartes admitted six simple or primitive passions... while Vives, with a better philosophical criterion, accepted only two passions: *love and hate*; that is, a movement of attraction towards goodness and another of repulsion towards evil. Following those preliminary considerations, Vives began the exhibition of nature, characters and relationships of the main affections, dealing successively with *love, desire, sympathy, respect, mercy, happiness, joy, pleasure, laughter, anger, disregard, wrath, hate, envy, jealousy, indignation, vengeance, cruelty, sadness, weeping, fear, hope, modesty and pride*, pointing out even the most subtle feature of each of them» (Bonilla de San Martín 1929, Vol.2, pp.240-241) (refer to Noreña, 1992, for an interesting study on emotions by Vives).

It was not by chance that it was then, during the Renaissance, when the *novel* appeared as a literary genre, because, as Ortega y Gasset wrote at the beginning of the century, «the essential kingdom of affections found, suddenly, its aesthetic expression: the novel. The ultimate substance of the novel is the emotion: emotions are there to reveal men's passions, not in their plastic and active realisations, not in their actions—the epic poem reveals those—but in their spiritual origin, as contents flowing from the spirit. If the novel describes the characters' acts and even the landscape surrounding them, it is only to explain and makes possible the direct suggestion of affections, that are inside the soul» (Ortega y Gasset, 1983, Vol.I, p.488).

It was the appearance of subjectivity, hand in hand with the appearance of emotions, what made necessary the appearance of psychology and social psychology, which, therefore, should turn emotions into one of its main points of interest, something, which did not happen at all. But on the contrary, emotions have been forgotten during a large part of «scientific psychology's» history, although there is no doubt we are witnessing the rebirth of this topic during the last years. In fact, the issue of emotions, which had not appeared in any of the previous three editions of the famous *Handbook of Social Psychology*, did appear in the fourth one (Gilbert and cols., 1998), precisely in an essay by Zajonc (1998) that is, as the rest of the *Handbook*, very traditional, forgetting the contribution of the socioconstructionist point of view, and not even mentioning neither Gergen nor Harré and their two famous books on emotions (Harré, 1986; Harré and Parrot, 1996).

In sum, for the past years two opposite points of view have co-existed when it comes to face emotions, the *psychobiological*, which aims to investigate the universal emotions and is based on Darwin's first studies (1872) and currently represented by authors like Ekman or Izard; and the *anthropological* one, whose aim is the opposite: the study of the emotional particularities according to cultural differences, represented today mainly by authors such as Kitayama, Markus or Mesquita. However, the polemic between both points of view is not being fruitful mainly due to two reasons: because each of them is firmly attached to their own position, without any interest in moving a single inch, and, above all, because while some are concentrated on the similarities among different emotional manifestations, others are doing so precisely on the differences. And, at least apparently, there is evidence to support both positions (see Mesquita & Frijda, 1992). Moreover, and this is a serious problem in this field of study, each one finds what they want to, in such a way that while some see universality, others see specificity. Therefore, a possible solution comes probably from the

consideration of emotions as a complex phenomena (Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991; Ortony and Turner, 1990), in a way that a component, such as for instance, the physiological would be invariable and, so, universal, while the other ones would be variable, adaptable and, so, specific of the cultural situation.

On the other hand, the research body pretending to study emotions cross-culturally, to find universals or to find intercultural differences, presents some serious methodological problems, mainly because, as Mesquita, Frijda and Scherer stated (1997), they compare different countries simply, or more exactly, a specific group, generally students, in a great urban centre (New York, Chicago, etc), or, in the best cases, groups of students from different countries and supposedly different cultures. And I say pretently because, in my opinion, aside from the gradual disappearance of cultural differences, this erosion is more important among students, especially if they are studying the same degrees, as is common in this kind of research. So, I am convinced that there are less cultural differences between a student of Psychology from, for example, Mexico, Santiago de Chile, Buenos Aires or New York, and a second student of Psychology from Madrid (apparently all of them belonging to different cultures), than between that student from Madrid and a Spaniard shepherd from Las Hurdes (Extremadura) or from Castilla (apparently belonging to the same Iberian culture). If we add the methodological problems inherent to the used method (construction of scales, individuals' willingness, problems with the survey, etc), we will face a problematic situation and unreliable and doubtful data. Why then do we not leave the laboratory and go beyond closed empiricism of data and turn, for instance, to the study of emotions *also* in the literary genre (novels, autobiographies, etc).

In any case, the cross-cultural study of emotions, being very interesting in many aspects, presents many and very serious difficulties due to other added reasons (Mesquita, Frijda & Scherer, 1997):

First, the different components of emotions are not independent. Differences found to occur in one component probably tend to bring along differences in other components, and thus may be expected to have consequences for other components as well.

Second, emotions are multi-layered processes, among other reasons because the emotional response to an event is itself a significant event to be appraised emotionally (Ellsworth, 1994; Fischer, 1991). Thus, the initial appraisal of the event may be modified by a secondary appraisal focusing on the emotional response elicited by the event. Cultural differences in the course of emotions may thus be due to differences in secondary appraisal. There is evidence to suggest that cultures vary in their beliefs about which emotions are most significant or revealing, which emotions are good or bad, and which emotions are appropriate to particular social roles or social settings (Ellsworth, 1994; Gerber, 1985; Markus y Kitayama, 1994; White, 1990, 1994).

Third, emotion as such, or the behaviors following from these emotions, may affect the environment, thus changing the situation in which the emotions were elicited in the first place. Emotions, in other words, represent transactions with the environment (Lazarus, 1991). An appraisal of the situation as something which has been modified may override or change the original appraisal.

Finally, the process character of emotions appears rather clearly in that emotions have cognitive consequences such as belief changes. These various cognitive consequences may well cause cultural differences in emotional inclinations to be amplified.

In fact, two of the main distinctions on which Western Psychology is based are first, the clear difference between individuals and society, that is, the belief that individuals exist independent from their social context (personality) and, secondly, a clear difference between reason and emotion (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Kitayama and Markus, 1994). However, it does not seem that things work like that in reality (Averill, 1985; Lutz, 1988,1996): there is no separation whatever between the cognitive and the emotional aspects, and there is no separation between both aspects and the social and cultural ones. That is why there are so many variations in the emotional vocabulary depending on the cultures (Heelas, 1986,1996; Rusell, 1991).

«In short, there is a substantial body of cross-cultural evidence which throws doubt on the universal validity of many of the categories with which the discipline of Psychology has been operating. Contrary to common belief, these categories do not occupy some rarefied place *above* culture but are embedded in a particular professional sub-culture. There myriad alternative ways of speaking about individual action and experience, the language of twentieth-century American Psychology accurately reflects the natural and universal structure of the phenomena we call “psychological”. If such arrogance is to be avoided, a closer examination of this language has to be undertaken» (Danzinger, 1997, p. 5). It is necessary to avoid such arrogance and analyze that psychological language, even though it is a very difficult task, if not impossible, given the difficulty of defining what is really the psychological part: How to distinguish the psychological language from other languages, and how to differentiate one psychological category from another?. In any case, it is necessary to focus on the conception that we, Western people, have about what is the psychological aspect, which is no more than the categories used by the so-called «scientific psychology», that is, both through the academic psychology and through the professional one (intelligence, motivation, attitudes, emotions, etc). Categories which, on the other hand, have their roots, the same as the whole Western philosophy, in Classical Greece, particularly in Aristotle, although it was during the XVIII century that some of them, such as emotions, acquired their current meaning (Danzinger, 1997, Cap.3). «They are the products of a historical process of reconstructing human subjectivity in psychological terms, a process that was particularly in evidence in certain parts of post-medieval Europe. Without this development there could be no modern discipline of Psychology. The subject matter of that discipline depends on a culturally embedded tendency to experience much of human life in psychological terms» (Danzinger, 1997, p. 16)<sup>1</sup>. Subsequently, those objectives were turning into the target of both investigation and intervention of psychology as a discipline, a practice that, effectively, rebuilt them particularly in the United States of America and, through their influence, at least in the whole Western world. «The thirty-year period, approximately defined by the dates 1910 and 1940, was a time of revolutionary change. It was revolutionary, not because the phenomena themselves changed. They changed because the categories that defined them changed» (Danzinger, 1997, p. 19). And as Gergen wrote (1992, p.285), we often talk about our thoughts and purposes, feelings and hopes, dreams and fears, desires, beliefs and values, and without those terms we would not be able to advance in our private or institutional life. A love affair, would not be such a love affair if we did not have a language to label our emotions. A criminal offence could not be judged without a speech related to the purposes of those involved in it; and if so-

me religious institutions were deprived of the concept of soul, they would collapse. And it happens that although such categories (emotion, motivation, intelligence, etc) have been built by the community during centuries, psychologists contribute in an important manner to provide them with a specifically psychological meaning and, through their empirical studies, give them the appearance of having an empirical nature, that is, give the appearance they really represent an important part of reality. But, nevertheless, it is completely impossible to understand the meaning of those terms, apart from their historic and cultural meaning. And this is more important given the already endemic *ahistoricism* of Western psychology, resulting from the mistaken decision that was made when it was included among the natural sciences: if psychology is a natural science, it cannot be historical and it will have to study its objects (emotion, cognition, motivation, etc.) as historically invariable phenomena.

And, however, psychology, and even more social psychology, should be located historically and culturally in the place were they belong. That is, psychology and social psychology are eminently historical and cultural disciplines because the phenomena under their study, including, obviously, emotions, are historical and cultural. That is why the integration of those traditional points of view we have mentioned, the biological and the anthropological, has been difficult, not to say openly impossible, if the cultural and historical influence on the development of the biological and the physiological human being had not been included. And it has been impossible to integrate both points of view because of the representation and concept the experts have not only about emotions but also about life and human being and its process of formation. For instance, a positivist and empiricist, who possesses a naive realism, could never reach an agreement on this topic, or any other, with a socioconstructionist antipositivist who defends an antirealist and relativist position. Here, we find one of the most important nucleus of the polemic in the study of emotions. For instance, even when basic emotions are studied, results will be necessarily different when the advocated position is that language is the mirror of reality, external to language and individual, and when it is stressed that language does not reflect reality, but *constructs* it (Harré, Gergen, etc), or when the human being is thought of as an eminently biological being, or is seen as an eminently sociocultural and historical being. Consequently, I will leave aside in this essay the biological and neo-darwinist theories on emotions, the same as the sociological ones and I will focus only on two main aspects of this complex topic: the sociocultural context of emotions, on the one hand, and above all, the social construction of emotions, on the other.

#### Emotions and sociocultural context

Efforts to construct a sociocultural psychology are not new, but it has been precisely during the 90's when their intensity grew. It is known that there are important differences among people from different cultures both in their cognitive function and in the motivational and interpersonal one (see Markus, Kitayama & Heiman, 1996; Markus and Kitayama, 1998; Fiske and cols., 1998). Just to give a few examples, comparing people from Western cultures, basically European and North American ones, to people from Eastern cultures (Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Indian or Arabs), many important differences have been observed, some of them referring to the motivational-emotional field. Thus, while Western people

show a strong personal tendency towards optimism, self-praise, or to have illusions of particularity, searching for the sources of it (Harter, 1990; James, 1890; Lau, 1984), Eastern people show very different trends (tendency towards pessimism, modesty and a wish to be ordinary or normal, and a tendency towards experiencing themselves as similar to the rest, not being better than others but interdependent of the rest) (Heine and Lehman, 1995; Markus and Kitayama, 1991b). In a similar way, in Western cultures self determination and freedom to choose is the most powerful behavior impulse (Deci and Ryan, 1990), while in Eastern cultures it is others' expectations: they are constantly receptive and responding to others, to their wishes and needs (Bond, 1986; Miller, Fung and Mintz, 1996; Sheti and Lepper, 1995). Cultural differences in this field can be important up to such a level that, as Harré and his colleagues wrote (1989, p.19), it is even possible that different cultures, when they underline an emotion more than others, could create people whose physiological systems could be different from each other. Some civilizations foster fear to danger, while others try to avoid it. This can be applied especially to human anatomy, diet and exercise could provoke very different physical appearances in people from the same origin because of different cultural conventions.

More exactly, as Church and Lonner (1998) stated, the most relevant cross-cultural studies on emotion from a personality analyses use to deal mainly with these two topics: 1) Do people go through the same emotions in all the cultures?, and, 2) Are there any differences in the frequency, intensity, etc, in the way those emotions are experienced or expressed by individuals from different cultures? If biological theories on emotion (Izard, 1994) predict an important universality in the experienced emotions, at least in the most basic ones (joy, fear, anger, etc.), less universality is perceived by the socioconstructionist theories (Harré, 1986; Harré and Parrot, 1996; Wierzbicka, 1992). In any case, the cross-cultural acknowledgement studies on the expression of emotions provide a clear evidence of the universal emotions (Ekman, 1994; Izard, 1994), although that evidence has begun to be under debate recently (Carroll and Russell, 1996; Russell, 1994, 1995), apart from the little clarity as regards to its meaning.

In short, although available information is not enough and even when there are some relatively inconsistent data, we do have some clear conclusions. For instance, in more collective cultures, individuals feel and express emotions towards others (sympathy, empathy), more than those from individualist cultures who, on the contrary, feel and express emotions towards themselves (anger, pride, etc.) (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994; Triandis, 1995). In the same way, in the Western world, it is usually believed that people's behaviour tends to be consistent through different situations, because that behaviour depends more on the people's features than on the characteristics of the situation. That is, there is a trend to believe in personality. And this belief is here so strong that when the behaviour changes with the situation it is attributed to cynicism, hypocrisy or to some psychological pathology. Those beliefs have conditioned Western studies in this field completely, at the same time that such studies have reinforced such beliefs in a great manner.

Nevertheless, the cultural psychology of personality shows that it is not like that, on the contrary, in the first place behaviour depends on the situation, and in second place, that situational variations depend on cultural facts to a great extent (see Markus & Kitayama, 1998). What is more, cultural or sociocultural psychology

(see Wertsch, del Río & Alvarez; 1999) admits not that psychological processes (personality, emotions, motivation, intelligence, etc.) are influenced by culture, but that they are *constructed* by culture, and at the same time that it is personality and its behaviour which create the culture. That is why it is impossible to study both things separately: personality and culture, or emotion and culture, should be studied together as a dynamic of mutual constitution (Kitayama & cols., 1997): we cannot study emotions separate from the culture in which they have been created and where they are expressed. And it happens that the individual level is not previous or posterior to the cultural level: they both go together and they create each other at the same time. So, sometimes it is fiercely argued if the human being is more animal or cultural, often concluding that human beings are both things, with different percentages depending on the authors. For instance, some say that we are above all social and cultural beings, not forgetting that we are also animals, for instance a 75% and a 25% respectively. And it is not like that! We are a 100% animal and also a 100% social and cultural. We do not have anything that is not proper of animals (obviously, of that animal species known as human species), which coincides more or less with the characteristics shown by other animal species. But we do not have anything that is not social and cultural either. Because our entire animal features (even those which are considered by some as exclusively animal, such as the need for being fed, the aggressive behaviour of attack and the defense, or the sexual behaviour) are socialized and educated. And not even one of them is not like that. Even more, if that is possible, an emotion, which is completely interdependent of the meaning and the practices of the particular sociocultural contexts. Although the physical or physiological aspects of emotion have been the focus of the traditional studies on emotion, however the need for taking into account the cognitive and linguistic components of emotion, the same as the social, cultural and historical ones has steadily been acknowledged. However, as Parrot and Harré (1996) have stated, if the traditional view forgot the social and cultural aspects, now we cannot do the same, for getting the somatic and biological aspects of emotions, something that would be really grievous given its importance for the nature of emotions and for the human emotional life. The biological aspects are basic when it comes to emotion, but we need to reinterpret the relation between body and emotion. A reinterpretation that points clearly to the social constructionism which grants an important role to culture and socialization when it comes to being an influence on the structure and on the neurological and physiological function. That is, as pointed out by Averill (1996), the neurophysiological is a fundamental component of emotions, but it has to be understood in a way quite different from the traditional one. The neurophysiological aspects are not in any way independent from the social and cultural ones.

Nevertheless, in Western countries, the generalized belief in the human being as an independent individual, turned to himself, separated from the rest, with whom he/she could have (not necessarily) relationships, is an idea that comes partly from the Greeks, was reinforced during the Renaissance and acquired authentic nature during the Enlightenment, mainly through Kant and through the relevance it gave to individual reason and to free will. Moreover, this view was even more reinforced during the Industrial Revolution and Capitalism. That is why individualism is a basic element for Western society (Guisinger & Blatt, 1994; Triandis and cols., 1988), and the psychological study of a person in the Western social science is deeply rooted in the ontology of individual-

lism (Greenfield, 1994; Ho, 1993; Markus and cols., 1996; Sampson, 1988). However, in the East (China, India, Japan, Korea, etc.) those things are considered in a very different way. Here, a person is regarded as someone completely interdependent, someone who takes part in the social relationships that surround him/her, and behaviour is not something that comes from within, that has its source in the individual's inside, but something that responds to others, that therefore, has its source in the outside, in the social world. Thus, neither emotions, nor personality or any other psychological phenomenon have a meaning when they are separated from the social and cultural context (see Church & Lonner, 1998; Fiske & cols., 1998; Kitayama, 1997; Kitayama & cols., 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 1997, 1998; Piker, 1994, 1998, etc.): because the social and cultural context does not go with them, but *constructs them*.

On the other hand, the question of what is a person is, is quite fundamental, because the answer we give can influence our lives, our feelings regarding ourselves, our emotions and our behaviour. Cultural and social practices, educational ones among them, will differ in a great manner according to the answer we give to the abovementioned question (Markus, Mullalley & Kitayama, 1997). In that sense we could say, legitimately, that one's own personality is a social and cultural construction, a collective construction. From this we may extract the huge differences between Western and Eastern personality (Fiske & cols., 1998; Kitayama & cols., 1997; Markus, Mullalley & Kitayama, 1997). For instance, while self-criticism is something seldom found, and even unbelievable in certain situations in Western countries, it is something very common and spontaneous in Asia. As Markus and Kitayama write (1998, p.74) «perhaps less obvious, but crucial from a cultural psychological perspectives, is the fact that a unique, independent individual and the attendant system of personality that is autonomous, stable, and entity-like, are also socially and collectively constructed and maintained». For example, children are treated and taught like independent human beings, they are reclaimed personal and individual responsibility for all their acts, they are dressed in a «personal» manner, they are put in individual and independent rooms, etc. «In short, both the independent model of the person in the West and the interdependent model of the person in Asia are likely to participate in the “real” making of the person and thus constitute the respective personalities. This cultural psychological analysis suggest, then, that if models of personalities are different and if they are differently implicated in everyday functioning of both cultures, then actual personalities, namely, modes of on-line functioning of each person, are also likely to be very different» (Markus & Kitayama, 1998, p. 75).

#### Social construction of emotions

As we have already mentioned, although emotions are influenced by biological processes and mechanisms, they can also be usefully conceptualized as social constructions. The socioconstructionist perspective on emotion has been highly developed by cultural anthropologists like Rosaldo (1984), Lutz (1988), White (1993) and Shweder (1993). «Exactly what is meant by the social constructionist view varies among theorists. But what is common here is an emphasis on the constitutive role of cultural practices, interpersonal communications, and tacit cultural knowledge in emotional responses. A person's emotional responses are densely contingent on these practices and meanings. Although emotion is obviously grounded in bodily sensations, these sensations themself

may be formed through cultural practices and meanings of the self and its relationship with the surroundings» (Markus, Kitayama and Heiman, 1996, p. 889). From this point of view, the emotional experience is social and cultural above all (Kitayama & Markus, 1994).

We have also mentioned that there are basically two types of theories about the self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The first ones consider the self as being autonomous and independent, while the second ones consider it as part of the group and depending on the rest and on its relations with them. Thus, there are many emotions that depend in a great manner on how the self is considered and experienced (anger, frustration, pride, shame, remorse, etc.), which means that, undoubtedly, they depend not only on the cultural context but also that it is which constitutes them (see Crespo, 1986).

Another example of how emotions are socially constructed is *grief* (being sad). Frequently people believe that pain or mourning is a basic reaction against the loss of something dear, something that happens not only to human beings, but also to some animals, like dogs. But, we have to say that such emotion varies strongly from one culture to another. Some civilizations react against loss not with pain, but with anger, seeking of vengeance or revenge, while others, as people from Tahiti, limit the reactions against any kind of loss: grief is not clearly recognized. On the contrary, the Ifaluk try to decrease that pain while they are proud of their sympathy towards those who have lost someone dear (Stearns, 1993).

However, it is not only grief which is different from one culture to another. There are also important historical changes. Thus, in the Western culture, pain was given a huge importance since the first years of the XIX century (Lofland, 1985). For example parents felt pain when a little child died. But there were three elements that constrained the open manifestation of their pain and even, possibly, pain itself (Stearn & Knapp, 1996, p.133): First, undue grief could undue attachment to worldly ties, rather than appropriately focus on God's majesty. Neither Protestant nor Catholic Christianity encouraged grief. Children were taught to react to death more with fear than with indulgent grief, at least in Calvinism; death of others was an object lesson in how quickly one could be snatched away to face God's judgment (Fiore, 1992). Second, emotional ties within families were usually somewhat muted. Marriages were not formed primarily on the basis of emotional attraction, nor were intense bonds emphasized between parents and children. The overriding economic concerns of families could cushion the shock of death, which however regrettable was vital in order to keep family size in manageable bounds. Even spousal death could seem somewhat routine. Evidence of husbands' reactions to maternal mortality in the eighteenth-century South, for example, suggests what to modern ears would seem a shocking callousness (Lockridge and Lewis, 1988). Deaths of older parents could be positively welcome, particularly where land was in short supply, because they alone permitted attainment of full economic adulthood, through inheritance. And finally, the nature of death itself provided the third cushion against great grief. The act of dying appropriately, in the home, without great pain, seems to have allowed many people to adjust to the prospect of loss such that tremendous outpourings of grief were not necessary. Today, on the other hand, grief can be, on the whole, bigger, because there are more people dying away from their home (at hospital, on the road, etc.), or dying suddenly, mainly due to car-crashes.

Everything that had been said started to change during the first years of the XIX century creating what sociologists called the arri-

val of the modern reactions against grief (Lofland, 1985; Rosenblatt, 1983; Wells, 1994). And that was mainly connected to those two changes that took place in the Victorian age. First, love acquires a great importance amongst middle class families (Lystra, 1989): the love between a couple and the love towards children, mainly towards the youngest ones, increased mainly because of the reduction in birth rate. Secondly, with the growing deep belief in progress, a belief that derives from the Enlightenment, it is thought that many deaths are completely improper of the XIX century, mostly the death of children. Popular magazines for women bomb the readers with messages saying that if certain parental educational practices were left aside death among children would disappear. That brought about a growing feeling of guilt when there was a death in the family, mainly of a young member, and the subsequent increase of grief. «Cultural change, in sum, more than any concrete functional shift, lay behind the burgeoning attention to grief in nineteenth-century middle-class culture» (Stearns & Knapp, 1996, p. 134). Therefore, as Stearns and Knapp concluded (1996, p.149), «grasp of the modern history of grief, and its unexpected though understandable complexity, is an essential step in understanding the emotion itself. Grief is not pure response; it is conditioned by its dependence on an evolving cultural context, highly sensitive to functional and larger cultural issues». That is why, given the deep cultural changes produced along the last 150 years, emotion has also gone through important changes during that period, because, on the whole, the same as other emotions «grief reactions are, in sum, to some extent at least culturally constructed» (Ariès & Duby, 1991).

As we see, it is not the treatment of the topic of emotions that characterizes the new social psychology, something which is not new at all (in fact, it was dealt with by Aristotle, Saint Thomas, Vives, Descartes, etc.), but the *way of treating them*: the new social psychology considers that emotions, as other psychosocial phenomena, are essentially *socially constructed*. Let us analyze a curious phenomenon that seems to confirm what I have just said. We «feel» emotions physically, that is, physiologically, in one or another organ, but with huge cultural differences: in some cultures they «feel» love in the heart; in others they feel it in the liver, the back, etc. And this is because our organs are educated and psychologized. Therefore, for Western Europeans today it is in the heart where emotions lie (especially those such as love). And, in fact, we believe that we «feel those emotions physically in our heart». But people from other cultures believe they feel emotions in other organs. For instance, Tahitians feel them in their guts (Levy, 1973, p.515). Gahuku-Gama feel them in their stomachs (Read, 1967, p. 214), etc. In conclusion, emotions are social and cultural constructions from different points of view (Heelas, 1996): the physiological, social and cultural elements of emotions cannot be separated, although there is a clear primacy of the sociocultural element. Let us take up an example from Gergen (1992, p.30): the Ilongot tribe in North Philippines believe that one of the basic elements of a man's psyche is a state they call *liget*. As described by the anthropologist Michelle Rosaldo (1980), it would be more or less equivalent to the terms we use to refer to «energy», «anger» and «passion». However, that state cannot be identified with any of the terms we use and it does not respond to a possible combination among them neither. *Liget* is a masculine feature, whose expressions we cannot even imagine. When possessed by *liget*, a young Ilongot can burst into tears, start singing or express his bad temper. He may refuse certain food, start stabbing baskets, shout furiously, spill water or express

his anger or confusion in a thousand different ways. And when *liget* reaches its climax, he will feel himself forced to cut off the head of a member of a neighboring tribe. Once he has done all those things, he will feel that his *liget* has changed and that he is able to change others. His energy is increased, he has sexual desires and he acquires a profound feeling of his knowledge. It is difficult to imagine that *liget* is a basic element in the biological constitution, that is waiting somehow in our inside, it searches to be expressed and remains inhibited under the artificial layers of civilization. Thus, *liget*, as Gergen points out (1992, p.30), is a construction common to the Ilongot culture, in the same way the feelings of anguish, envy or romantic love are a construction common to our culture.

A second example, also taken from Gergen (1992), is maternity. In modern times, we consider that a mother's love towards her children represents a basic aspect of human nature: it would be an emotion with a genetic basis. If a mother does not show her love towards her children (for example, if she leaves or sell them), we would think that she is completely inhuman, although we consider less inhuman the father who leaves his wife and children. But this has not always been the same, as the historian Elizabeth Badinter (1981) points out, during the XVII and XVIII centuries, in France and England, children lived as outsiders. The writings from those periods show a clear antipathy towards them. Among poor people, those who neither underwent abortions nor had an easy access to birth control, leaving children was a widely practiced custom. Clearly, the concept of «maternal instinct» would have been strange for those societies. Moreover, as Gergen adds (1992), even lactation was seen as a waste of time for the mother in some circles. If a family was rich enough, the baby was sent to the country most of the times to be taken care of by a wet nurse; and due to the ill-treatment children received from those wet nurses, and to the scarce milk they were given, it was very common that those children died. Those deaths were considered as routine matters, because in the short, or in the long, run a child was substituted by another one; the private diaries, when relating family customs, show that the death of a child provoked the same reaction in the family as in the neighbors, or even less; even the everyday economic activities of a family took up more time (Ariès & Duby, 1991). Badinter quotes Montaigne: «Two out of my three children died while they were with their wet nurses; I will not say that their death did not provoke a great pain on me, but none of them made me feel a great sorrow». Badinter's conclusion is that the concept of an instinctive maternal love is a product of the recent evolution in the West, that is, it is a social and cultural construction.

The current conception of emotions, the same as the language and the vocabulary that describes them is a product of the romantic period, as is the case, for instance, of *grief*, which we have already mentioned. As Rosenblatt writes (1983), given that individuals were able to experience a profound love, the loss of someone dear, provoked an immense pain, and a huge value was given to its expression because it allowed the man's inside to speak, and that was enriching. The private diaries from those ages reveal a strong tendency to preserve unchanged and omnipresent the image of the dead person, and to communicate with him/her through prayers or spiritualist sessions.

#### Conclusions

As stated by Parrott and Harré (1996, p.1), emotions have a special fascination, because they not only constitute the basic cha-

racteristics of human life, but also show the ways in which current psychology faces an irreducible flexibility. In fact, emotions are *at the same time* somatic, cognitive, social and cultural. There is also a great variability and variation among them: while some seem to be general features of the human etology, established after many generations of Darwinian selection; others are acquired as pure habits and, finally others have been learned in the same way that manual skills are learned. But all of them can be easily influenced by the cultural context and they acquire their real meaning in interpersonal situations, up to the point of being socially constructed (Harré, 1986).

However, the Western tradition is deeply similar to a view of the self as an independent unity. While this view is supported, the traditional problems of epistemology and the social knowledge will be unsolved (and insoluble), and the numerous social practices where this conception is found, will not be answered. And that is what happened with the topic of emotions, which have been erroneously considered in the Western culture. And I say erroneously because, as Gergen states (1996), the vocabulary of emotions (together with its similar realizations) is tied to the creation or erosion of history. In fact, we do not talk any more about our *melancholy or apathy*, as reasons that excuse us from work and social obligations, although we could have done that in the XVII century. We improvise without any effort about our *depression, anguish, about how sick* we are of our job, and of our stress; none of those terms would have had a significant importance even one century ago. That kind of sociohistoric variations are difficult to be adjusted according to the individualist presuppositions of universal and biologically fixed tendencies: thus, emotions are sociohistorical constructions.

On the other hand, emotions have a clearly gradual nature, where not only the feelings and affections take part in an interactive and dialectic play, but also the cognition's, motivations, behaviours and environmental variables. And something so complex

will clearly resist being studied in simple ways, purely quantitative, and measured through simple surveys with fixed answers. Consequently, as Mesquita, Frijda and Scherer (1997) concluded in their work, there are strong reasons to assume that cultural differences in emotions will be more pronounced (a) when the different components of emotion are studied in their temporal and functional relation; (b) when attention is focused on the way the meaning and social effects of emotions feed back into the emotion process; and (c) when the focus of research is shifted from individual emotions to emotion ecologies, and factors that influence cultural differences in emotion ecologies.

Therefore, emotions are, without any doubt, socially constructed but we cannot forget that they are also socially constitutive: «Emotion is socially constituted but it is also socially constituent: the type of civilization we are depends in a significant level on the type of emotions we consider and value» (Landman, 1996; p.112).

In sum, emotions are not as strange as has been believed, neither to the cultural context nor to the interpersonal context, or even to the responsibility and the will of the individual. This is once more proof that, as stated by Luria, human psychology is a complex model of cultural practices, discursive conventions and physiological processes, where none of them is a priority because each of them interact with the rest conforming them. None of those three components has an isolated meaning, separate from the other two elements, something that if true for general psychology, is especially important in the case of the psychology of emotions, which, subsequently, is forced to be the *social psychology of emotions*.

#### Nota

- <sup>1</sup> See Graham Richards (1987, 1989, 1992) for the process necessary for the development of a language allowing specifically psychological objects.

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