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Are all emotions social? Embracing a pluralistic understanding of social emotions

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Abstract

While the importance of social emotions is widely recognised, the question of whether all emotions are social, and what this would mean for the category social emotions, has yet to be addressed systematically. So far, emotion theorists and researchers have proposed a number of candidates for social emotions. These include non-basic emotions, self-conscious emotions, higher-cognitive emotions, and definitions of social emotions via their social functions. This paper looks at these different candidates for social emotions and briefly discusses their respective issues. This discussion will motivate us to embrace a pluralistic approach to social emotions. In a further step, the paper will look at approaches exploring how social factors impact emotions in general. This will serve as a basis for explaining what it would mean to propose that all emotions are social. After reviewing candidates for social emotions and looking at the impact of social factors on emotions in general, this paper will propose that a pluralistic understanding of social emotions is needed in order to embrace the different ways in which social emotions may function. Embracing a pluralistic understanding of social emotions does not, however, mean that all emotions are social emotions.

Keywords: social emotions, emotion theory, social norms, social construction, basic emotions, non-basic emotions, social function of emotion

1. Introduction

In emotion theory, there is much talk of "social emotions," but researchers have not reached a common ground about what this term means. Ideas range from all emotions being social constructs (see Section 3.2; Averill 1980; Lutz and White 1986), to social emotions being the opposite of basic emotions (see Section 2.1.2; Buck 1999; Plutchik 1994), to social emotions being emotions that involve higher cognitive processes than non-social emotions (see Section 2.2; Griffiths 1997), to social emotions being equivalent to self-conscious emotions (see Section 2.3; Lewis 2016; 2014; Leary 2004; Tangney and Fischer 1995; Tracy and Robins 2004; Wierzbicka 1999).

Major debates in emotion research revolve around the question of how culture and sociality influence how we feel and the ways we express our emotions, but the concept of social emotions often goes unanalysed. When definitions are available or inferable, disagreement abounds. The value and import of the term "social emotions", therefore, deserves attention; I will ask: is there a specific subcategory of emotions, *social emotions*, that can be clearly distinguished from non-social emotions? Surprisingly, there may be no satisfying way to

carve out such a special class. I will briefly look at a number of candidates for social emotions in order to motivate a pluralistic account of social emotions. I will present some issues that these accounts face, but will not argue for or against any of them. Rather, after providing an overview of these candidates for the category *social emotions*, I will provide reasons for embracing a pluralistic account of social emotions. Such an account may consist of any combination of the criteria offered by the candidates reviewed in Section 2.

As its title indicates, this paper goes further than this by asking whether all emotions are social. This idea has been endorsed by views that emphasise social constructionist understandings of phenomena, particularly of emotions (see Leys 2017). I will draw on social constructionist accounts and argue that recent research developments invite the idea that all emotions are social in a variety of different ways, which places further emphasis on the need to embrace a pluralistic account of social emotions.[1] However, I will also pose the question of whether the fact that all emotions are social in some way means that all emotions are social emotions.

But why is it important to elaborate on social emotions when there are already general accounts of emotions? One could argue that social emotions are implicitly addressed by talking about emotions in general, and that general accounts of emotion have (more or less) implicitly acknowledged the inherent sociality of at least some emotions. But implicitly addressing social emotions and the sociality of emotions does not provide an answer to the question of whether all emotions are social. This question deserves to be addressed, however, since an explicit analysis thereof will help to advance the debate around what social emotions are. It will also address the nature-versus-nurture debate that is frequently found in general emotion theory and philosophy of science.

In what follows, I will look at how social emotions have been categorised in the emotions literature (Section 2) and analyse how emotions are impacted by the social (Section 3), and will thereby present reasons to embrace a pluralistic account of social emotions, albeit one that remains sceptical about classifying all emotions as social emotions.

2. Candidates for Social Emotions

What would count as a useful basis for distinguishing between social and non-social emotions? Emotion theorists and researchers, as well as theorists working on issues other than emotions, differ in what they conceive of as "social." Some views and disciplines purport that everything is social (think of sociology, for example). But there are also views that try to limit the scope of the social (think of views defending biological determinism, for example). Views along these lines can be found in emotion theory as well (for a discussion, see e.g. Leys 2017). So, an emotion might be about something social, might be affected by social factors, communicated to other people, etc. But does the involvement of social factors in any of these ways make an emotion a social emotion to the same extent? Furthermore, it seems obvious that at least some cases of even supposedly non-social emotions (e.g. disgust, fear) are caused by or directed at social factors, but does that mean that disgust and fear are social emotions after all?

In the following, I will briefly look at possible candidates and criterions for the category *social emotions*, all of which have been invoked in debates about social emotions or the sociality of emotions. All of the candidates reviewed below are controversial; that is, whether they sufficiently conceptualise the category *social emotions* is up for debate. Let's now look at the different candidates for social emotions in detail, to see whether there is a need for a pluralistic understanding of social emotions.

1 An issue not discussed in this paper is whether the emotion types distinguished here (anger, fear, etc.) themselves count as cultural and normative constructions (see e.g. Russell 2003).

2.1 Non-Basic Emotions

One way to implicitly tackle the question of what social emotions are has been to portray a dichotomy between basic emotions and non-basic emotions. One can then say that social emotions are non-basic emotions. But what are basic and non-basic emotions?

2.1.1 Origins of the Basic Emotion Debate: Ekman and Darwin

In psychology and neuroscience, a prominent approach to basic emotions is the Affect Program Theory (Ekman 1972; Izard 1977). According to Affect Program Theory, basic emotions are distinctive, biologically based, universal signals—i.e., basic emotions are accompanied by expressions that serve to inform conspecifics about the felt emotion; basic emotions also feature distinctive patterns of autonomous nervous system activity; and basic emotions have a quick onset and are of brief duration (Ekman 1999, 52; Ekman and Cordaro 2011). The six emotions that have been most intensively studied by Paul Ekman in this framework are disgust, anger, fear, joy, sadness, and surprise (1972; though see Ekman 1999 for a longer list). According to Ekman, basic emotions are universal. This universality claim is largely based on previous work by Charles Darwin (1872). According to the standard reading of Darwin's view, each emotion elicits an emotional expression, and some expressions are universal—this in turn points to the universality of the underlying emotions. Ekman's main conclusion, following Darwin, is that we have six fixed basic emotions that are universal, i.e., which are shared across cultures. Ekman not only follows Darwin, but has also conducted cross-cultural studies in order to examine the universality of facial expressions (Ekman and Friesen 1971; Ekman 1972). Ekman tested recognition of the six basic emotional expressions among the Fore, a group in Papua New Guinea. Ekman's main claim was that the Fore assign the same meaning to the basic emotion faces as individuals in a Western comparison group. This is the most relevant empirical evidence that he presented in favour of his account. However, his findings have been criticised, and his account is considered outdated by many scholars.[2]

2.1.2 Non-Basic Emotions as Social Emotions?

There has been a lot of controversy around the distinction between basic and non-basic emotions, and the debate is messy since, often, terms like "non-basic emotions," "higher-cognitive emotions," and "self-conscious emotions" are used interchangeably. Theorists who work with the concept of basic emotions (Ekman 1999; Izard 1977; 2011; Panksepp 2007) have yet to arrive at a common ground on which emotions to consider as basic and which emotions to consider as non-basic. Indeed, Ekman, in some texts, states that he "does not allow for nonbasic emotions" (1994, 19), as all emotions seem to share certain characteristics that have developed through evolution as adaptations to fundamental life tasks : "It is our past as a species in dealing with fundamental life tasks and how that organizes and at least initially influences how we appraise and respond to a current event which marks the emotions" (1999, 56). That is, Ekman has claimed that *all* emotions are basic (1994; 1999). This claim is not widely shared among emotion theorists, however.

Among theories assuming that there are both basic and non-basic emotions, there is no consensus over which emotions are non-basic; thus there is no consensus over which emotions are social. Still, there is a view at least implicit in some of this literature that basic emotions are non-social and non-basic emotions are social. Non-basic emotions have often been characterised as developing later in ontogeny than basic emotions (see e.g. Buck 1999) and as being more complex than basic emotions (Barrett and Campos 1987). Buck (1999), for example, considers the bio-physical structures of emotions to be primary, and argues that social emotions developed from earlier and more basic emotions. Some accounts declare that basic emotions are naturally given, and that non-basic emotions are not (e.g. Plutchik 1994). If they are not naturally given, they are assumed to have

2 For an extensive critique of Ekman's experimental work, see Gendron et al. 2018; Russell 1994; 2003.

resulted from learning, which often constitutes a social process for human beings. Basic emotions, here, are considered to be innate, whereas non-basic emotions are considered to be learned socially. In this sense, the category of non-basic emotions qualifies as a candidate for the category *social emotions*.

But, first, the claim that emotions can be neatly divided into basic and non-basic emotions has been criticised by many authors (e.g. Clark 2010; Colombetti 2014; Hufendiek 2015). Rebekka Hufendiek (2015), for example, argues that emotions should be individuated as whole-organism responses with reference to their functional profile. All emotions may have biological aspects that get elaborated through learning (Prinz 2004a). Moreover, the claim that alleged non-basic (and, thus, social) emotions develop later has also been reassessed and criticised (Draghi-Lorenz et al. 2001; Griffiths 2003; Parkinson et al. 2005). Indeed, there may be innate emotions (or emotions that are just as good candidates for innateness as Ekman's six) that have social functions. Some authors have suggested that social emotions can be considered to be basic (e.g. Fessler 2004; Tracy and Matsumoto 2008). Fessler argues that shame—which is typically regarded to be a social emotion—is a product of natural selection; i.e., shame is a social emotion, but a rudimentary form of it qualifies as a basic emotion in the sense that it is an evolved human universal (Fessler 2004). If some social emotions are basic and innately rooted, merely defining social emotions via the non-basic criterion, which boils down to the assumption that emotions that are socially learned are non-basic social emotions, is inapt. Indeed, the intuitions driving this objection—e.g., that shame is social—suggest that we have some purchase on the idea of social emotions that does not presuppose an answer to the innateness question. We must therefore consider other candidates for social emotions.

2.2 Higher-Cognitive Emotions

The second candidates for social emotions that I'll look at here are higher-cognitive emotions. The term "cognitive" brings to mind theories that claim that cognitive elements—e.g., thoughts or judgments—are constitutive parts of emotions.

This candidate, the higher-cognitive emotions, closely parallels the non-basic emotions proposal, but with a greater emphasis on cognition. According to Griffiths (1997), there are some emotions that require more cognitive processing than others. He differentiates between emotions typically considered to be basic emotions—such as anger, fear, and sadness—and higher-cognitive emotions.[3] Griffiths equates the former with Ekman's affect programs, which he sees as innate and automatic. He does not provide a full account of higher-cognitive emotions; rather, he focuses on pointing out that accounts of emotion that are primarily concerned with basic emotions cannot capture higher-cognitive emotions. Proponents of basic emotions sometimes suggest that non-basic emotions are simple extensions of combinations of basic emotions that require learning (Plutchik 1994). Griffiths thinks that this underestimates the differences between basic emotions and others (1997, 102). He argues that higher cognitive emotions may have long durations, unlike basic emotions, which are short-term, and that many lack stereotypical behavioural displays or physiological effects. For example, he puts guilt into this category and says that it lacks a facial expression. Most importantly, affect programs do not do justice to emotions that are integrated with complex cognitive processes (Griffiths 1997).

Griffiths' approach faces several challenges. First, he assumes that some emotions are more cognitive than others, but many other emotion researchers assume that all emotions are equally cognitive. Solomon (1973; 2003), for example, defends an account of emotions as involving (perhaps unconscious) evaluative judgements. Nussbaum (2001), similarly, defines emotions as judgements about value and importance. Likewise for

3 In more recent work, Griffiths has questioned his use of the term "higher-cognitive emotions." For discussion, see Griffiths and Scarantino 2009.

defenders of appraisal theories in psychology (e.g. Arnold 1960; Lazarus 1991; Moors et al. 2013). There are also emotion researchers who assume that all emotions are equally non-cognitive (e.g. Prinz 2004b). Both non-cognitivist and cognitivist views of emotion aim to encompass all emotions, and not just a specific subset of emotions (such as social emotions).

Griffiths has also been criticised for positing an evolutionary divide between basic and higher-cognitive emotions. Focusing on shame, Clark (2010) criticises Griffiths' distinction by arguing that a lot of emotions that are categorised as higher-cognitive emotions actually share all of the relevant characteristics with basic emotions and could thus be categorised as basic emotions as well.

Moreover, if we define social emotions on the basis of the higher-cognitive criterion, we may end up dismissing emotions that carry social elements. So-called basic emotions such as anger might be excluded from the category *social emotions*, even in cases where the anger is clearly rooted in social factors (e.g. being angry at a friend for behaving inappropriately in a social scenario).

It may, thus, be unhelpful to define social emotions merely via the higher-cognitive emotion criterion.

2.3 Self-Conscious Emotions

As a third candidate, we may consider self-conscious emotions to be social emotions (see Lewis 2016; 2014; Leary 2004; Tangney and Fischer 1995; Tracy and Robins 2004; Wierzbicka 1999). Self-conscious emotions have been said to be central to motivating and regulating people's behaviours, i.e., to contribute significantly to people behaving appropriately according to a given situation (Tangney and Fischer 1995; Tracy and Robins 2004); that is, self-conscious emotions are directly related to norms around socially acceptable behaviours. Social norms determine aptness conditions for emotions. This prescriptive force of social norms in emotions is particularly present in self-conscious emotions; i.e., the connection to social norms via aptness conditions is a necessary criterion for defining self-conscious emotions. According to Leary (2007, 45), "self-conscious emotions are fundamentally social emotions that are elicited by real and imagined events that have potential implications for how the individual is perceived and evaluated by other people". In order to ascertain how others perceive and evaluate us, we need self-awareness (cf. 45). This leads the category of "self-conscious emotions" to also be associated with events that seem to threaten our self-evaluation or social status (Hareli and Parkinson 2008; Tracy and Robins 2004). If aptness conditions are harmed, social status is threatened. Here again, self-conscious emotions can be considered directly relevant to social life. This makes them apt candidates for social emotions.

Let us look at a specific approach to self-conscious emotions so we can understand how exactly they're linked to sociality. According to Wierzbicka (1999), self-conscious emotions are emotions involving a kind of experience or belief about others' attributions or meta-cognition about one's actions. For example, you might think that the other person present thinks highly or poorly of you. Or you might self-reflect on a past behaviour or action of yours. Self-conscious emotions can thus be considered candidates for social emotions, since they involve cognition about what others think of you or cognition about your own social behaviour. It is difficult to imagine any of these emotions occurring without being placed in a social situation (be it imaginary or real). The most common examples of self-conscious emotions are shame, guilt, pride, and embarrassment (Leary 2004; Tracy and Robins 2004; Wierzbicka 1999). Jealousy and admiration are sometimes considered to be examples as well (see e.g. Bennett and Gillingham 1991; Hareli and Eisikovits 2006; Hareli and Hess 2010).

One problem with this approach is that self-consciousness in relation to emotions seems to entail a broad range of phenomena. Self-consciousness is defined both with reference to the process of thinking about oneself

and to the process of thinking about others (see Wierzbicka 1999; Tracy and Robins 2004). For Wierzbicka (1999), "self-conscious" means thinking about other people's judgements about oneself or thinking about one's own actions. Tracy and Robins provide an ostensibly similar definition. For them, self-consciousness is constituted by self-awareness and self-representation: "Together, these self-processes make it possible for self-evaluations, and therefore self-conscious emotions, to occur" (2004, 105). By entailing such a broad range of phenomena, the category of emotions that are not self-conscious becomes blurry: is self-directed anger not an emotion that results from thinking about one's own actions?

Self-consciousness also does not address cases of feeling angry or sad or disappointed in social situations where self-consciousness is not at the core of the experience. Consider the example from above again: being angry at a friend for behaving inappropriately in a social situation. This case of anger seems to be social—in the sense that the anger is elicited in and due to a social situation—but not necessarily self-conscious. Likewise when one is sad about being let down or disgusted by hypocrisy. That is, the category "self-conscious emotions" does not provide a rich account of what "social" means. This need not be an issue, and might actually help to demarcate the border between social and non-social emotions. I will come back to this question in Section 3.2.

Self-conscious emotions provide us with a promising candidate for defining social emotions because they are directly connected to social norms around emotions. The emotions considered to be self-conscious emotions (such as shame, pride, embarrassment, guilt) are also typically categorised as social emotions, as they appear to be directly relevant to our everyday social lives. But for self-conscious emotions to define the category *social emotions* more neatly, the category of self-conscious emotions would have to provide a clearer account of how sociality is connected to self-awareness/self-consciousness.

2.4 Social Function

There have been very few explicit efforts to provide a unifying account of social emotions. One such effort is made in the work of Shlomo Hareli and Brian Parkinson (2008). Hareli and Parkinson explore the question "*What's Social About Social Emotions?*" While admitting that all emotions are social in some sense, they consider social emotions to be a specific subset of emotions. That is, "social emotions are social in a different way" (131). They argue that, for an emotion to be social, it needs to be necessarily connected to social concerns (131). Social concerns are, for example, concerns about one's social status and concerns about what others think of you.

> Shame, embarrassment, and jealousy are social emotions because they necessarily depend on other people's thoughts, feelings or actions, as experienced, recalled, anticipated or imagined at first hand, or instantiated in more generalized consideration of social norms or conventions. Each of these emotions derives its defining quality from an intrinsic relation to social concerns: at the conceptual level, it would not count as a proper instance of the emotion category in question, and at the empirical level it would not have its distinctive relational quality, unless the relevant social concern was in play. (131)

That is, according to this view, social emotions serve social functions. Hareli and Parkinson argue that tokens of any emotion type may potentially be influenced by social factors or serve social functions, but that only "social" emotion types have a necessary and exclusive dependence on social concerns. Hareli and Parkinson's argument is that in cases where supposedly social emotions operate in non-social ways, non-social events are being appraised as if they were social (e.g. getting angry with one's computer attributes social agency to that non-social entity).

In an earlier approach to emotion and social function, Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt (2001) argued that emotions have social functions and evolve due to these social functions. They differentiate between primordial emotions and elaborated emotions. According to Keltner and Haidt, primordial emotions are composed of physiological, perceptive, and communicative aspects. Elaborated emotions, on the other hand, are "the total package of meanings, behaviours, social practices, and norms that are built up around primordial emotions in actual human societies" (11). Keltner and Haidt grant that primordial emotions influence social interactions since they, too, communicate the emotional state of the person expressing the emotion. However, on their view, while primordial emotions influence social interactions, they are not influenced by social interactions in turn.

Claiming that primordial emotions are not influenced by the very social interactions they influence may seem unconvincing, though. For example, the way I feel and express fear may be influenced by the social interactions in which I have experienced fear (Eickers 2023a). If I was never in a social interaction where somebody shouted at me before, it might be hard to experience fear when somebody shouts at me for the first time. I might feel estranged instead of afraid. If I am constantly met with praise when I express anger, that may influence the appropriateness conditions I learn about anger.

Once we see this, the "social functions" approach starts to look problematic. It's perfectly true that social emotions serve social functions, but that doesn't help those who want to argue that social emotions are different from other emotions. In response, defenders of these views might say two things: they might say that some emotions are not evolved to be social while others are; or they might say some emotions are not always social, while others are. I will bypass the evolutionary hypothesis, since evolutionary claims are hard to verify, sociality is part of our evolutionary history, and because it would be good to have a criterion about how emotions function now, not just in our evolutionary past.

As for the objection that some emotions are not always social, there is some intuitive pull to this. For example, one might say that disgust is non-social when applied to rotting food, and social when applied to moral transgressions. Emotions such as embarrassment, in contrast, do seem to have a necessary dependence on social concerns, so we might distinguish these two in this way. Of course, it is not clear that an emotion like embarrassment always has social elicitors; some people might be embarrassed to swim nude even if privacy is guaranteed, and someone can be envious of asteroids that fly across the cosmos. But Hareli and Parkinson account for that by arguing that, in cases where social emotions operate in non-social ways, non-social events are being appraised as if they were social.

But there is one issue with social function approaches: they seem to assume that there is no way in which food-directed-disgust is social. For Keltner and Haidt (2001), disgust is considered a primordial emotion. And for Hareli and Parkinson (2008), disgust may be considered not to have a necessary relation to social concerns. Now consider the following: the definition of what counts as "rotten food" may vary from culture to culture. This will ultimately also affect when disgust is elicited. Thus, in some sense, disgust may be social. Does this mean that disgust is a social emotion? And does this pose a counterargument to the idea of distinguishing social from non-social emotions? To analyse this, I will take a closer look at the relationship between sociality and emotions in the next section.

3. Sociality and Emotions

So far, we have seen that there are different candidates for the category *social emotions*; each of which defines social emotions via specific criteria. I pointed to some issues with these candidates. Proponents might propose replies, but the review of these candidates in this paper is intentionally incomplete, as it stands to motivate a different question, namely: are all emotions social? To explore this further, I want to pose some questions that might shed light on how to understand emotions as social in a broader, more generalised sense. Are all emotions impacted by social factors, social norms, and values? And, if all emotions are socially impacted, what does that mean for the nature of emotions? In particular, might it suggest that there is a sense in which all emotions are social?

Before proposing that a pluralistic understanding of social emotions is needed to embrace the different ways in which social emotions may function, this paper needs to engage in a further step: exploring how social factors impact emotions in general. This will serve as a basis for explaining what it would mean to propose that all emotions are social. To explore the relationship between emotions and sociality in more detail, it is important to turn to the question of how social factors' impact on emotions might take place. Here, I consider it vital to look at social norms, as there is research that points to the involvement of social norms in shaping emotions.

3.1 Social Norms and Emotions

Emotion theorists largely agree that all kinds of emotion are subject to social norms. The pressing question here is how deeply these norms penetrate into the emotions themselves. Ekman (1994, Ekman & Cordaro 2011), for example, sees display rules as only impacting on the public manifestation of a pre-existing intact private emotion that itself cannot be seen as social. Social and psychological constructionists take a very different position about the role of social norms and social factors more generally. For example, early constructionists defend an account of emotions as culturally learned patterns of behaviour that have no consistent relationship to biological or physical factors (see e.g. Averill 1978; 1980). Before diving deeper into the relationship between social norms and emotions, let me clarify what I mean by social norms here.

Broadly speaking, we can define social norms as norms about how to comport ourselves in the (real or imagined) presence of others (Hochschild 1979; Averill 1980).[4] A central, and more contemporary, author to consider when looking at social norms is Cristina Bicchieri. Bicchieri explains that social norms are informal and "public and shared" (2006, 8), but nevertheless differently from conventions. A social norm, according to her, may be described as a behavioural rule (R) for specific situations (S), which is known by individuals (i) in a specific population (P) (cf. 11). These individuals also need to prefer to conform to R in the respective situations,

> on the condition that: (a) *Empirical expectations*: i believes that a sufficiently large subset of P conforms to R in situations of type S; and either (b) *Normative expectations*: i believes that a sufficiently large subset of P expects i to conform to R in situations of type S; or (b') *Normative expectations with sanctions*: i believes that a sufficiently large subset of P expects i to conform to R in situations of type S, prefers i to conform, and may sanction behaviour. (11)

4 What I call social norms here have been referred to as social guidelines or social rules by, for example, Hochschild (1979), and social roles by, for example, Averill (1980). See e.g. Hochschild 1979, 563: "The social guidelines that direct how we want to try to feel may be describable as a set of socially shared, albeit often latent (not thought about unless probed at), rules." I refer to these factors as "social norms," since I consider this to be a term that encompasses guidelines, rules, and roles.

That is, expectations, conformity, and social sanctions play an important role in how social norms function. The difference between conventions and social norms is that social norms have more normative force—that is, the pressure to conform and sanction is more significant.

In order for this section to provide insight into how social norms impact emotions, let's look at a kind of social norm that has been explicitly addressed in emotion research: gender norms. Expectations, conformity, and social sanctions all seem to play a role for gender norms in significant ways—think of the gendered expectations we have around clothing, for example, and think of how some people may react to someone who does not conform to those norms (reactions range from seemingly harmless comments to physical violence). The socially-built binary gender categories have enormous consequences for how we are constructed as individuals, and on the broader organisation of society (Butler 1990; Ahmed 2006). Gender stereotypes are transmitted very efficiently through socialisation and education. This affects our emotional development in that we grow up learning norms around which emotions are appropriate to have and show for which gender(s), and which thus influence how we display and understand, and potentially how we experience, emotions. Let's look at some examples to see how gender norms influence our emotional life.

Research on blushing, for example, has shown that more women than men tend to blush (Eickers 2022; Crozier 2006; Darby and Harris 2013). This does not point to women being more prone to blushing by nature. Rather, women are more likely to be taught to be shy, apologetic, and adaptive than men—who are, on the other hand, more likely to be taught to be demanding, entitled, or even aggressive (for a detailed discussion of gender and emotion see Fischer 2000; Shields 2000; Fischer et al. 2004). It has been shown that men are more likely to express emotions associated with power in general (e.g. anger, disgust, pride), whereas women are more likely to express emotions associated with weakness (e.g. sadness, fear, shame) (Fischer and Manstead 2000; Fischer et al. 2004). We may see similar differences in emotions and their expressions for trans, intersex, non-binary, and gender-diverse people, but we do not currently have the data to look at those effects from an empirical perspective. All of which is to say that gender norms have an impact on our emotional lives, and specifically on how we experience and express emotions (see Brody and Hall 2010 for an extensive analysis). Gender norms are not the only social norms that influence our emotions this way: there are also social norms and expectations around race and emotions (Leboeuf 2017), social status and emotions (Tiedens 2001; Alexander and Wood 2000; Parkinson et al. 2005), and disability and emotions (Schalk 2016; Shapiro 1994; Scott 2006), for example, which, in turn, interact with gender norms.[5] Depending on the social groups we belong to (in terms of gender, race, class, abilities, etc.), the respective social norms determine which emotions and associated behaviours we have access to, and may thereby even perpetuate specific social groups' lack of access to specific emotions (Eickers 2023b).

Looking at how social norms play a role in how emotions evolve, how emotions are expressed and communicated, and how emotions are recognised can show us that the social not only affects emotions that are categorised as social emotions, but also affects basic emotions and emotions that are considered by some to be innate or universal, e.g. anger or fear—as shown above—as well as joy (think of cultures that denounce hedonism) and sadness (consider norms against men crying). It is hard to think of an emotion untouched by such norms. Likewise, the way we express emotions can be impacted by norms pertaining to age, ethnicity, class, and so on.

5 On social status, for example: "Research by Tiedens and colleagues (Tiedens, 2001; Tiedens, Ellsworth, & Mesquita, 2000) has shown that high-status individuals are expected to respond with anger (rather than sadness or guilt) to negative outcomes and with pride (rather than appreciation) to positive outcomes" (Van Kleef 2016 74).

Now, if social norms impact even so-called basic emotions, might that mean that the category *social emotions* is obsolete because, on this understanding, all emotions are social? In the following, I will answer that question.

3.2 Are All Emotions Social?

Section 2 surveyed candidates for social emotions, i.e., different accounts and criteria that have been referred to in emotion theory as, or may be considered to be, those fitting social emotions. Via brief criticisms of these candidates for social emotions, Section 2 motivated embracing a pluralistic understanding of social emotions. Section 3 so far has provided us with reasons to think that social norms impact emotions in general—which now poses the question of how to distinguish social emotions from non-social emotions. In the following, I will be concerned with asking whether, as a consequence of all emotions being deeply shaped by social norms, that all emotions are therefore social.

Social and psychological constructionist accounts of emotion may guide us in finding an answer to this question. Constructionists such as Hochschild (1979), Averill (1980), Lutz and White (1986), Mesquita et al. (2016), Parkinson et al. (2005), and Barrett (2009; 2017) provide accounts of emotion that are closely connected to social norms. Constructionists propose that human emotions are not simply innate responses, even if biology makes a contribution; rather, they argue that the way we emote is impacted by socialisation. For example, social factors can influence what elicits our emotions, how we conceptualise them, how we express them, how negative or positive they seem, and which actions they potentiate. Bear in mind that constructionist approaches to emotion also differ from one another: Barrett defends an account of how concepts and language set up our emotion categories which refers to Searle's concepts of collective intentionality and collectively ascribing functions: "A physical event like a change in heart rate, blood pressure, or respiration becomes an emotional experience only when we, with emotion concepts that we learned from culture, imbue the sensations with additional functions by social agreement" (Barrett 2017, 39). Other accounts, such as those put forward by Parkinson et al. (2005) or Hufendiek (2020), do not focus on concepts and language, but rather on the role of social structure and social practices in constituting emotion types. Analogously, Mesquita and Parkinson (2025) distinguish a social concept and a social role approach that also helps in seeing theoretical differences among constructionists.

What social constructionists have in common, though, is that they argue that the way that emotions are affected by social norms and social factors gives us reason to believe that emotions are socially constructed. This may seem like a radical view, but it shouldn't be regarded as such. As the case of gender norms shows, social influence is indeed pervasive. In fact, authors such as Ekman (1999; Ekman & Cordaro 2011) grant as much, saying that culture can influence how emotions are expressed. For Ekman, the relevant expression is part of the emotion, so his concession allows a degree of social construction. There are more radical views, of course, which downplay biological contributions, but the point I am making here applies even if we say that all human emotions are constructed (that is to say, deeply shaped by social norms) to some degree. In a sense, this might mean that all emotions are social, since emotions in general are socially impacted, not just social emotions. Let us look at some examples of how constructionists argue for the claim that all emotions are, in some sense, social.

Lutz and White (1986) point out that emotions are linked to cultural and individual factors since they are all part of the social structure in one way or another. They identify different ways in which emotions are related to the social structure; these are: "The degree of individualism, notions of privacy and autonomy, multiplicity of selves, or sense of moral responsibility" (420). That is, Lutz and White also draw on connections between the social and the emotional, and essentially state that all emotions are constructed by different aspects of the social structure.

Similarly, Parkinson et al. (2005) analyse emotions with respect to their social relations. They look at how social groups affect emotions, for example. Expressions and feelings of anger, sadness, and fear can be mitigated by in-group and out-group effects. For example, we are more prone to feel and show fear towards someone we perceive as not being a member of our own social group than we are towards a member of our own social group. Leaving in- and out-group effects aside, there are also studies that indicate that we are more likely to smile when watching a film with friends than when we are alone (Parkinson et al., 2005). When discussing social emotions specifically, Parkinson et al. emphasise that "even so-called 'basic' emotions have interpersonal origins and develop in close attunement with social relations" (188), pointing out that all emotions are social in the sense that they are all parts of social interactions and relations.

Defences of constructionist perspectives on emotions can also be found in more recent work. Mesquita et al. (2016), for example, argue that emotions are constructed through cultural norms, and that culturally normative emotions, in turn, serve to maintain social relationships (within their respective cultures). "The combined research on cultural differences suggests that emotions emerge through processes of construction. … Emotions are iterative and active constructions that help an individual achieve the central goals and tasks in a given (cultural) context" (34). Is any emotion immune to social influences such as cultural norms? Consider disgust at rotten food again. Cultures differ in attitudes towards decay and edibility. Icelanders, for example, eat putrefied fish, which people from other countries may find disgusting. What we eat, how we eat, what we find disgusting, and how we express aversion are all socially impacted.

All in all, constructionists give us multiple reasons to think that social factors not only have an impact on emotions that we deem to be social in the first place, but on all kinds of emotions. Even those who don't like to call themselves constructionists must heed that lesson from constructionist theories. If we grant that some emotions are innate, for example, it still seems clear that they can be impacted by social norms. This may be interpreted as entailing that all human emotions are social in some sense.[6]

Does embracing that all emotions are social in some sense mean that all emotions are social emotions? The short answer is no. First, in many contexts, it is helpful to distinguish between social and non-social emotions: food disgust and social disgust may differ in that the latter is ultimately directed toward something social. Second, this points to the importance of differentiating a specific category of social emotions from other kinds of emotion, and of embracing a pluralistic account of social emotions. In what follows, let me propose what such a pluralistic understanding of social emotions may look like, and, in doing so, also address the claim that not all emotions are social emotions.

As we have seen through the objections to candidates for social emotions in Section 2, it is difficult to propose an account of social emotions that neither risks being too broad—i.e., which entails emotion phenomena that seem to be at odds with the specific category of social emotions—or too narrow—i.e., which does not entail emotion phenomena that seem to orbit quite closely around a specific category of social emotions. Since both the social functions approach to social emotions and the self-conscious emotions approach make for promising candidates, although each face a few issues, I will propose a pluralistic understanding of social emotions that combines elements of both of these approaches. Such an account acknowledges that all emotions are socially impacted, but recognises that not all emotions belong to the category *social emotions*, as it

6 The question I leave aside here is whether, and in what sense, non-human emotions are (always) social. For some animals, the answer may be no, but it is noteworthy that many animals have rich social lives (including interactions with us), and all are capable of learning through their lifespans.

demarcates social emotions from other emotions. However, there may still be cases of emotion that transcend the boundary between the category *social emotions* and other categories of emotions. I do not intend to provide a fully fleshed out approach to social emotions or a definition of the category *social emotions*, but rather to *propose* an understanding that I think is plausible, based on the previous analysis of different candidates for social emotions, and based on taking the contributions of social constructionists seriously.

As spelled out previously, the self-conscious emotions approach to social emotions claims that self-conscious emotions are necessarily connected to social norms via aptness conditions. The issue with this candidate for social emotions was that 1) it seems to include cases of emotion that are self-directed but not really social in an obvious sense (think of being angry at oneself for making a mistake), and 2) it does not address cases of emotion that occur in social situations but which do not entail self-consciousness.

Point 1 provides us with reason to think that the self-conscious criterion is too messily constructed and does not do justice to a specific category of social emotions. Including self-directed anger in such a category would make that specific category obsolete, and would instead speak for embracing the claim that all emotions are social, and that therefore no specific category of social emotions is needed. Point 2 might give us a hint about how to plausibly construct a pluralistic category of social emotions. There seem to be cases of emotion that occur in social situations or that are tied to social norm violations of some sort (e.g. being angry at a friend for behaving inappropriately). Anger seems to be a borderline case of a social emotion –it seems to be clearly tied to violations of some sort, and eventually those violations will consider social norms. Thus, I propose including such cases in the *social emotions* category. This calls for dividing the category of social emotions into subcategories, which together make for a pluralistic approach. A subcategory that such cases belong to may be called "optionally social emotions." An emotion that occurs in a social situation due to a social norm violation may be classified as an optionally social emotion. The existence of an "optionally social emotions" category calls for an "essentially social emotions" category. This is where we may turn our heads to the social functions approach.

Hareli and Parkinson (2008) argue that all emotions may be influenced by social factors or serve social functions, but that only social emotions have a necessary and exclusive dependence on social concerns. The issue with this candidate for social emotions was that the criterion of necessary and exclusive dependence on social concerns still leaves room for interpretation. As we saw in the discussion on the social construction of emotions, and the way (all) emotions are tied to social norms, we cannot really demarcate the category *social emotions* from other emotion categories via its ties to social norms. But perhaps what Hareli and Parkinson were getting at was more strict: there seem to be emotions—such as shame, guilt, and embarrassment—that are clearly always tied to social norm violations, and which are thus different from the optional social emotion category that I have proposed. I will call this subcategory "essentially social emotions." The pluralistic approach to social emotions I propose here, thus, entails:

1. *Optionally social emotions:* Emotions that occur in social situations due to a social norm violation. These emotions can also be non-social emotions, if they are not caused by a social norm violation. They are, thus, optionally social.
2. *Essentially social emotions:* Emotions that are always tied to social norm violations and are thus essentially social.

Finally, it's important to demarcate the *social emotions* category from other emotion categories. For example, the case of disgust I have briefly discussed in light of the social function approach to social emotions does not

qualify as a social emotion in this pluralistic approach. Why is that? In the case of disgust towards rotten food, I mentioned that it seems inevitable for us to look at the way that even food-related disgust is shaped by social norms and factors. Culture has an influence on what we find disgusting, but that does not qualify food-related disgust for inclusion in the *social emotions* category. Food-related disgust is clearly not caused by a social norm violation, nor does it require a social situation to occur. Disgust may qualify as a social emotion if it occurs in a social situation and is tied to a social norm violation—think, for example, of people being disgusted by someone bending gender norms. While this kind of disgust should certainly be criticised, we can nevertheless identify it and categorise it as a kind of disgust that is optionally social (perhaps: social disgust).

Section 2 has equipped us with reasons to be sceptical about trying to come up with a clear definition of social emotions, and about trying to distinguish social emotions from non-social emotions via one specific criterion. All of the candidate *social emotions* categories that we have encountered face the limitation of excluding or ignoring cases of emotion that may well be deemed social but which are not accounted for by that candidate's conditions. Furthermore, none of the candidates offer a clear explanation of the connection between sociality and emotions. This can be accounted for by a pluralistic account that considers the *social emotions* category to contain different subcategories—here, I have proposed to differentiate between emotions that are optionally social and emotions that are essentially social. In doing so, I hope to propose that we should embrace a pluralistic understanding of social emotions that acknowledges the importance of a *social emotions* category, while also acknowledging that all emotions are shaped by social factors and norms to some degree.

Summing up, the question "Are all emotions social?" may be answered in the following way: we have reason to believe that all emotions are social in the sense that all emotions are socially impacted, but we do not have sufficient reason to believe that all emotions belong to a distinct *social emotions* category. Not all emotions occur in social situations due to a social norm violation. While social norms influence all kinds of disgust, only specific kinds of disgust—such as disgust at a specific social behaviour that violates certain social norms—qualify as belonging to the category *social emotions*, as it is those kinds that are connected to social norms and social situations in a strict sense.

4. Conclusion

This paper has looked at a number of candidates for social emotions and has briefly assessed these. The majority of these candidates face the issue of demarcating a specific category of social emotions from other emotions that may be socially impacted or that may be social in specific situations. Acknowledging this point motivated an investigation into the relationship between emotions and sociality, and prompted the question of whether all emotions are social. While Section 2 focused on analysing candidates for social emotions, Section 3 proceeded to move the focus from looking at different candidates for the category *social emotions* to asking "Does the social impact emotions in general?" I specifically looked at social norms and how they affect emotions, and then asked whether all emotions are social. While each of the candidates reviewed in Section 2 implies that not all emotions are social, Section 3 provided us with reason to think that all emotions are social in some sense. But Section 3 also asked whether this means that all emotions are social emotions, and answered that question by saying that not all emotions are social emotions. Saying that all emotions are social in some sense doesn't jeopardise the category *social emotions* as such. How exactly, and to what degree, different emotions are socially impacted is an open question for research. Emotions may be social in a variety of different ways.

Exploring the connection between sociality and emotion together with the issues the analysed candidates for social emotions faced, then, has motivated embracing a pluralistic account of social emotions, i.e., an account that makes room for different sub-categories of social emotions. Here, I have suggested that these sub-categories are optionally social emotions and essentially social emotions. The implication of this final insight is not that we should abandon the possibility of any social vs. non-social emotion distinction, but rather that we should seek to be more precise in delineating different varieties and instances of social emotions.

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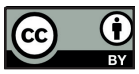
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