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Review Article

# Why Do We Have Emotions? The Social Functions of Emotions

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#### **Abstract**

Every people have emotions, and these emotions sometimes could be positive such as happiness, pride, love and occasionally negative like anger, sadness or embarrassment. A question comes to people's mind at that point. Why do we have emotions? According to the evolutionary perspective, emotions have functional features for humankind. Emotions which evolved in the evolutionary history can provide many survival advantages people against to predators attack, dangerous situations and threats. Besides these, emotions are socially functional for humans. Humans are social creature and emotion we express, and experience may regulate their behavior, thoughts, interactions and relationships. There are some ideas about the social functions of emotions. Thus, the aim of the present review study discuss and examine social functions of emotions according to the individual, interpersonal and group level with in light of the literature.

## **Key Words**

Emotion • Social function • Emotions and social functions

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Every people have emotions, and these emotions sometimes could be positive such as happiness, pride, love and occasionally negative like anger, sadness or embarrassment. A question comes to people's mind at that point. Why do we have emotions? What are emotions functions or are emotions really functional? Are there emotions social functions? Some scientists (e.g. Fischer & Manstead, 2016; Fischer & Roseman, 2007; Keltner, 2003) are interested in these questions and functions of emotions.

There are some views about the functions of emotions (e.g. Fischer & Manstead, 2008; Hwang & Matsumoto, 2019; Keltner & Haidt, 1999) and it is obvious that emotions are functional. According to the evolutionary perspective, emotions can provide with individuals in terms of reproduction, action tendencies, and survive (Darwin, 1872). For example it may be a fear. Fear of others such as detrimental predators or dangerous people can be adaptive for individuals, and a sense of fear helps to survive (Morozov & Ito, 2019; Tooby & Cosmides, 2008). Because of a sense of fear, a person can refrain from negative conclusions or dangerous situations. Another example is disgust. People can avoid some poisonous food thanks to the disgust and moreover, individuals can recognise pathogens that cause some disease (Kavaliers, Ossenkopp, & Choleris, 2019; Tybur, Lieberman, Kurzban, & DeScioli, 2013). As mentioned above, emotions are adaptive, notably for the evolutionary approach, and increase the survival chance. Nevertheless, do emotions have social functions for humankind? At that point, some scientist pointed out that emotions have many social functions in people's life. For instance, Fischer and Manstead (2008) emphasise that emotions are socially survival. This may be considered an exaggerated expression. However, people can establish social ties through emotions, and overcome many social troubles such as ostracism, social exclusion, rejection and loss of status (Fischer & Manstead, 2008; Keltner & Haidt, 1999). Different researchers (Fischer & Manstead, 2008; Hwang & Matsumoto, 2019; Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Niedenthal & Ric, 2017) have expressed their views on the social functions of emotions, and this review aims to discuss the social functions of emotions in the different aspects. Although the opinions about the social functions of emotions are similar, some authors (e.g. Fischer & Manstead, 2008; Hwang & Matsumoto, 2019; Keltner & Haidt, 1999) have made different classifications and handled in different ways.

Keltner and Haidt (1999) discussed the social functions of emotions in terms of four levels. These four levels consist of individual level, dyadic level, group level and cultural level. Other researchers discussed the social functions of emotions regarding interpersonal relationships, group and intergroup relations (Fischer & Manstead, 2008). Hwang and Matsumoto (2019) examined the social functions of emotions regarding intrapersonal functions, interpersonal functions and social and cultural functions. Although the authors have different classifications on the social functions of emotions, it is possible to state that these classifications are similar in general terms. Social functions of emotions will be examined in this review regarding individual level, interpersonal level and group level.

Every people want to create a satisfying and pleasant relationship and want to maintain these social relations. The emotions we express and experience assist us to maintain these satisfying relationships. According to the evolutionary perspective, emotions evolved in this type of social relations and social community (Niedenthal & Ric, 2017; Tooby & Cosmides, 2008). Moreover, individuals have some psychological needs like need to belong, self-esteem, meaningful existence and control (Williams, 2001; 2007). Humans are social beings and want to satisfy their psychological needs (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Emotions can provide many advantages in

satisfying psychological needs, maintaining social relations, protecting from dangers, and being alert to threats that threaten group membership. For instance, a group member may have behaved contrary to the norms of the group. This person may be subject to social exclusion or ostracism because of violating the norms. Nonetheless, if he/she feels embarrassment as a result of his/her behavior and can transmit this via body posture, voice, facial expression to the group members. The expression of the emotion of embarrassment may allow the members of the group to accept the person as a group member again and to maintain their social relations.

Firstly, the social functions of emotions will be examined on the individual level in this study. Secondly, it will be discussed in the dimension of the interpersonal relationship. Finally, the social function of emotions will be examined on a group basis. Because it is generally thought that emotions have evolutionary and functional roles in people's lives, however, studies which interested in social functions of emotions are limited. Moreover, conduct emotion studies also difficult, and studies on the social functions of emotions are even more difficult to carry out. For these reasons, in this study, it is aimed to examine the opinions about the social function of emotions. It is thought that this study will be also important in terms of giving an idea to the future researches.

#### Social Functions of Emotions in Individual Level

Emotions have a substantial role in people's life process. As previously stated, emotions functional for us. Emotions have an important function in the processing of information rapidly, and this rapid information process can help move individual in less thinking and faster decision making (Tooby & Cosmides, 2008). Emotions we have evolved in evolutionary history, and if there were no emotions of people, there could be many problems. One would have to think for a long time in the face of a situation without emotions. Individuals can make a decision quite fast through rapidly information processing (Adolphs, 2002; Smith, 2011). Rapidly information processing can save one's life, especially, during an attack, threat or defence. Furthermore, the organism can act with less cognitive effort (Petty & Briñol, 2015; Smith, 1989). Besides these, individuals can make faster decisions in their social relationships and maintain relationships with the group and form new interactions, other groups or individuals.

Emotions by appraisals allow individuals to act according to social events and situations or to change their behavior and these emotions provide informative functions (Campos, Campos, & Barrett, 1989). Happiness can be given as an example at this point (Buss, 2000). Happiness can give positive signals to the other party in a social context. Another example could be anger. Anger can also give negative signals to the other people and other group members or individuals who interactions can move according to these emotional signals (Lee & Lang, 2009; Stewart et al., 2010). Emotions enable to act with cognitive processes (Schwarz, 1990) and physiological responses (Levenson, 1992) to problems. To illustrate, the emotion of anger causes the blood to move towards the internal organs and help the organism remain vigilant (Levenson, Ekman, & Friesen, 1990). In this way, the person is ready to act and can protect himself/herself against threats. Moreover, people can preserve their social status and power in the group or interaction with anger (Fischer & Roseman, 2007).

Furthermore, the emotion we express and experience can motivate future behaviors and effect thoughts. Hwang and Matsumoto (2019) stated that emotions serve as neural glue and emotions can form some connections our thoughts and memories. For these reasons, people can remember - memories and ideas related to their emotions easily. When someone feels happy, he/she does not remember an angry memory, and also vice versa is possible. It is an evidence that, as mentioned above, emotions trigger action tendencies and prepare

people to move against to troubles or threats. In addition to these functions, people learn some information through emotions and these learnings can help the person in the future and can determine future behaviors. It can be explained better with an example. An individual who ate spoil or disgusting foods or beverages he/she can be more careful against these foods and drinks in the future. Similarly, as this example, the emotions experienced in social relations also motivate their behaviors and thoughts.

#### **Social Functions of Emotions in Interpersonal Level**

Emotions can be expressed nonverbally like body posture, voice, facial expressions and verbally such as via words. Every people always show their emotions to other people during social interaction, inmate or romantic relationship. Therefore, emotions play a key role as a signal, and these signals influence both receivers and senders (Keltner, 2003; Matsumoto, 2001). It may be discussed the social functions of emotions in interpersonal levels at that point. According to Fischer and Manstead (2008) emotions basically, have two functions - affiliation and distancing functions. Affiliation function may be described as creating and maintain cooperatively social interactions and relations. On the other side, social distancing functions of emotion can be described as one differentiate the self from other individuals or groups.

Emotions provide many advantages with affiliation function and social distancing function. Emotions help to maintain and establish interpersonal, long-term, intimate relations. Researchers studying this interpersonal area focus on how emotion create relations or maintain these relations (e.g. Crossman, 2007; Ekman, 1984; 1993; Simpson, Collins, Tran, & Haydon, 2007). People know other people's thoughts, beliefs through emotions expressed and experienced. Hence, individuals manage their social interactions very easily and rapidly (Keltner & Haidt, 1999). In social interaction, individuals may feel almost the same emotions. A study which carried out by Anderson, Keltner and John (2003) pointed out that romantic partners and students who go to the same college much more similar each other after a semester. These process called emotion contagion. Emotion contagion can facilitate affiliation functions in particular among intimate friends relations. For instance, the fans of the same team experience similar emotions in both wins and defeats situations. These similar emotions affiliate peoples in interpersonal interactions. Especially, positive emotions such as happiness or love obviously can facilitate affiliation functions, but negative emotions also can do this function. Sadness can be a good example. Crying and expression of sadness could mean a call for support from intimate people (Fischer & Manstead, 2008). As said above, embarrassment may lead to the repair of impaired relationships and positive views of other individuals.

Another interpersonal function of emotion is social referencing. Emotional communication affects other peoples behavior and thoughts. People can make inferences about the environment and other people by looking at others' emotions. Babies are very appreciated examples. Babies benefit from other people, especially caregivers, to have information about their environment. Then, an infant can move with this information and learn the world. In a visual cliff study, when their mothers show negative emotional facial expressions on the far end of the cliff, infants who one year old showed less progress. When their mothers show positive emotion facial expressions, infants showed more progress in that situation (Sorce, Emde, Campos, & Klinnert, 1985). Other researches supply similar results for social referencing (Bradshaw, 1986; Bohn, Zimmermann, Call, & Tomasello, 2018).

Emotions do not only provide an affiliation function but also provide social distancing function, notably, with emotions of anger, contempt or disgust (Fischer & Manstead, 2008). Angry and hatred can be given an example of this function. The angry person wants to change the behavior of others. People who are the targets of anger regulate their behavior as others wish (Fischer & Roseman, 2007). A study conducted by Van Kleef, De Dreu and Manstead (2004) showed that verbally expressed anger gives more advantages to other individuals in a negotiation. In other studies, it is mentioned that anger can provide a similar advantage (e.g. Fox, Lester, Russo, Bowles, Pichler, & Dutton, 2000; Winkielman, Berridge, & Wilbarger, 2005). On the other hand, people want to regain their social status or power in interpersonal relationships and anger can serve an advantage at that point. For instance, according to Williams' (2007) a need threat model (ostracism), people ostracised can behave with the emotion of anger. Especially, if the control and meaningful existence needs of the excluded or ostracised individuals are threatened, they can be particularly aggressive with anger. And this emotion, as mentioned above, can enable the individual to regain his/her status in social relations. Moreover, the opposite is also possible. In other words, people or groups can exclude people who do not comply with the rules and norms and exclude them from social relations with anger (Leary, 2005; Williams, 2001; 2007). According to Fischer and Manstead (2008) anger may help to both affiliation functions and social distancing functions. The situation in which anger occurs is very important. According to the condition sometimes serve affiliation function sometimes social distancing function.

### **Social Functions of Emotions in Group Level**

Humans are a social creature, and every people live in a group context in the society. Individuals are mostly members of more than one social group. Furthermore, these groups have some rules, norms, cultural features and expectations (Kağıtçıbaşı & Cemalcılar, 2017). Emotions influence individual and groups. Even though it sounds strange at the beginning, it is talked about group emotion. Many of the emotion theories such as appraisal, common-sense or biological approach (Parkinson, 1995) say that individuals experience emotions (Parkinson, Fischer, & Manstead, 2005). Nonetheless, every people live as a group member, and a member of social groups have some similar appraisals, similar concerns. For these reasons, these group members can experience more similar emotions together (Barsade & Gibson, 1998; Mao, Yang, Li, & Li, 2018). These thoughts based on self-categorisation theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). As given before, team supporters can be a good example again. Team fans called a type of group, and this group member can experience similar appraisals and emotions when their team loses or win. It can be called a group based emotion.

Emotions can provide both affiliation function and social distancing function in interpersonal levels. It can be said that this situation is valid for group emotion. Because groups are formed mainly, individuals and individuals have emotions. Emotions have some beneficial effects on group contexts. For instance, emotions can strengthen relationships within the group. Emotions can increase the continuity of the group by highlighting the similarities in the group. In this way, the group cohesiveness may increase, and these are examples of affiliation functions. Moreover, emotions trigger cooperation within the group (McElreath et al., 2003). Political parties may be given as an example. Members of a political party feel similar emotions and can act with similar emotions. Emotions can enhance the cohesiveness of these political parties and cause them to work towards their aims, and their social bond strengthens. However, the positive emotions experienced can increase cooperation, and negative emotions can have the opposite effect.

Nevertheless, group emotion affects not only intragroup processes but also intergroup processes. Emotions can bring groups closer to each other, but may also cause groups to experience conflict. Because of the injustices made in the past, one group can behave more closely to the other (Iyer, Leach, & Crosby, 2003; Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000). In terms of social distancing function, emotions can deepen the differences between groups. On the other hand, emotions may also pave the way for some prejudices against outgroups (Tapias, Glaser, Keltner, Vasquez, & Wickens, 2007). The groups that feel embarrassment against the other group may behave more positive to them. Groups that feel anger to the other group may show aggressive behavior. On the other hand, prejudices, hatred, contempt impelled against third groups, people can cause similar feelings ingroup members. Therefore, the coherence of the group may enhance. This means that affiliation function. As mentioned above, affiliation function and social distancing function of emotions should be evaluated within the framework of the current situation.

#### Conclusion

It was mentioned above this question: Why do we have emotions? We have emotions because emotions have not merely regular functions but also social functions. It was aimed that the social functions of emotions are handled within a specific framework in this review study. The social functions of emotions were examined at the individual level, interpersonal level and group level and it was explained with examples and researches. In sum, emotions have social functions in human being's life. Thanks to these social functions, individuals maintain social interactions and strengthen their social bonds. It can be examined in three-part on social functions of emotions. After all these discussions it can be asked that are emotions always socially functional? According to Fischer and Manstead (2008) emotion particularly jealousy, anger and contempt or hatred can be socially dysfunctional. Anger or hatred have some functional influences, but much more anger, hatred, contempt or jealousy may negatively affect people. Finally, emotions are socially functional, but they are not always functional. The functions related to emotions may vary depending on individuals, their appraisals, thoughts, environments, situations and social contexts.

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