

Emotions and Social Structure: A Sociological Theory

Jonathan H. Turner, University of California, Riverside

It is rather surprising, in retrospect, that sociological theory virtually ignored the dynamics of human emotions for most of its history. True, Karl Marx emphasized alienation and the arousal of anger that would prompt workers to rebel; Émile Durkheim stressed the effects of emotional effervescence and rituals on solidarity as well as the effects of anomie, egoism, altruism, and fatalism as emotional states generated by social structures; Vilfredo Pareto analyzed sentiments and derivations as they changed under varying cultural and structural conditions; and Charles Horton Cooley saw pride and shame as the two key emotions of social control. Still, a moment of reflection reveals that social structures are sustained or changed by virtue of people's emotional reactions to their circumstances. Indeed, it is not too much to argue that emotions are the "glue" that holds societies together, or the dynamite that blows them apart—to phrase the issue metaphorically. Thus, it is doubly surprising that for almost 150 years of explicit sociological inquiry, little was said about human emotions and social structure. Since the 1970s, new theories and research programs have emerged; and some of these programs have addressed the linkage between social structure and emotions but typically within a rather narrow theoretical tradition. (see Turner and Stets, 2005; Stets and Turner, 2006; and Kemper, 1990, for reviews). In this paper, my goal is to present a more general theory of emotions and social structure which, I hope, incorporates the useful elements from existing theories and cumulative research findings.