Reappraising Cognitive Appraisal From a Cultural Perspective

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In his target article, Lazarus summarizes several problems associated with what he calls *cognitive-mediational theories of emotion* and considers correctives to them. The basic thrust of these theories lies in their emphasis on meanings, or appraisals, in the construction of emotional experience. The emphasis on meaning has recently expanded the perspective of emotion research and carries great promise for further research (Kitayama & Markus, 1994). It is quite timely, therefore, to reappraise the meaning-centered approach in order to reorient ourselves for the future. Further, as one of the key figures, Lazarus has actively promoted this perspective for almost 50 years, since the heyday of behaviorism in the 1950s, when the meaning-centered approach was deemed unscientific and too loose. Thus, it is doubly timely that he has opened up this dialogue, for which we feel greatly appreciative.

Although Lazarus discusses problems of cognitive-mediational theories in general, implicit in his discussion is his own version. According to this particular formulation, through the cognitive act of appraising the nature of a focal social and nonsocial situation, individuals are thought to abstract themes of their current relation with the situation. And each of these themes is said to causally lead to an experience of the corresponding emotions. Thus, for example, a demeaning offense results in anger, an unrecoverable loss results in sadness, an uncertain threat with existential significance results in anxiety, an enhancement of ego identity results in pride, and so on. Although admirably broad in perspective and both subtle and flexible enough to accommodate a variety of rich emotional phenomena in everyday social life, this particular formulation entails numerous problems, some of which are candidly addressed in the target article. In this commentary, we discuss some of the problems in our own terms. These critiques, however, are mutually related, and, taken as a whole, they begin to suggest a new direction in emotion research. Specifically, we argue that meaning and, therefore, emotion is both social and cultural—much more so than Lazarus himself believes it to be.

Reappraising Cognitive Appraisal

In What Sense Is Emotion Inside a Person?

Our first quibble with the cognitive-mediational theories concerns the proposition that cognitive appraisal of a focal situation leads causally to an emotion. Although the notion seems familiar, resembling closely our folk understanding of mental life, it is not at all obvious that appraisal can be so neatly separated from, let alone causally placed prior to, an emotion itself. The formulation may unnecessarily be according a privileged status to internal, both biological and subjective, aspects of emotion while relegating its social and cultural facets to the periphery or even to the outside of the "emotion per se." One may wonder, however, what will really be left in, say, anger if an appraisal of "demeaning offense" is taken out? Is the anger without this appraisal still anger? We are dubious. Perhaps anger itself is made up of this very appraisal of "demeaning offense" and of the actual social act that is readily interpreted as "demeaning offense," and, if so, the appraisal and the very pattern of social transaction from which it derives may more reasonably be seen as the integral components of emotional experience. This implies that emotion may be more accurately theorized primarily as a special type of socially shared script in which many participating internal sensations are integrated—a possibility we get back to later in this commentary. Further, with this social expansion of the concept of emotion, the problem of causal order would seem rather illusory, sensible only to the extent that emotion were narrowly conceptualized as a reified internal entity of some sort.

Nonsocial Appraisal of Social Situations

The same bias that highlights the inside or the intramental in lieu of the outside and the intermental—akin to what Ross (1977) called the *fundamental attribution error*—is manifest in the theory's central premise that appraisal is cognitive in its narrow sense of information transfer within an individual psychological system. Although there is no denying that thought processes are importantly implicated, emotions are arguably much more social. More often than not, they are socially shared, interpersonally constructed, transformed, and communicated through social interaction. Other individuals in social relationship can influence one's own emotional state in a variety of different ways. Most significantly in the present context, individuals communicate, both subtly through nonverbal channels and explicitly via verbal statements, what they think

about their common situation. One important consequence of interpersonal communications is that they modulate both the amount and the kind of active, constructive information processing in which each individual engages.

To begin with, with interpersonal communications, each individual's active appraising of a focal situation may become unnecessary for an emotion to arise. Active apprasing may be skipped. Many aspects of the situational meaning are appropriated and negotiated in social interaction, and they are communicated, both verbally and nonverbally, from one individual to another. Thus, for example, an individual may experience a certain emotion, not because the he or she has managed to arrive at a particular configuration of appraisals through active information processing, but rather because certain appraisals are "lit up" by communications from others. Moreover, these communications are often patterned after culturally inscribed conventions and pragmatics of language (to be discussed). Thus, they reflect the tacit cultural knowledge and practice, as much as the communicator's private thought. To complicate the issue even more, the evocation of emotion may also be nonlinguistic. Thus, emotions may be covertly induced in a person by, say, frowning faces of others around via the mechanism of unconscious mimicry (e.g., Field, 1985; Zajonc, 1985). In these situations, cognitive appraisal as a form of active, constructive information transformation within a bounded psychological system may also be skipped. Again, emotions may be constructed socially, through patterns of interpersonal interaction.

The primarily social nature of appraisal can also be illustrated with a phenomenon of perspective taking, which is all too common in conversation. From one's taking of others' perspectives, an entirely different set of appraisals—and, therefore, a very different emotion—may ensue. The empathetic stance may radically transform the nature of cognitive appraisal in a way never fully acknowledged or articulated in the current cognitively oriented theories, including the one by Lazarus, who argues that cognitive appraisal is performed in respect to an overarching goal of maintaining and enhancing one's own well-being. This might be true in some fairly limited set of situations in which one is competing and struggling with everyone else in a quasi-hostile fashion. But, in many cultures, and in many situations in any given culture, individuals live, think, and feel in the context of more benign social relations that are more communal, cooperative, and mutually engaging (e.g., Fiske, 1991). It should be noted that just because emotions are empathetic does not mean they are less powerful or less immediate or personal. Interpersonally engaging emotions, which are anchored in a focal relationship as a whole (e.g., feelings of unity, *amae,* and *fago*), are as powerful and as real as nonempathetic, interpersonally disengaging emotions, which locate the internal self as the primary reference in situational appraising (cf. Kitayama, Markus, & Matsumoto, in press).

The Problem of the Unconscious

Reasonably enough, Lazarus points out that individuals are not always aware of the act of appraising. From this assumption, he jumps at a conclusion that appraisal always precedes emotion even when it is not evidently present in one's subjective report. In a nutshell, he argues that, because appraisal is necessary, a priori, for emotional experience to arise, appraisal ought to have been engaged whenever an emotion exists: If you don't see it, it must be in the unconscious. Is this a great theoretical feat or an untested and perhaps unnecessary assumption? We suspect the latter. Indeed, a reasonable argument can be made that, at least in some circumstances, emotion does precede, guide, and canalize situational understanding—appraisals (Zajonc, 1980). Further, as already noted here, if one examines emotions in social interactional context, appraisals, as a form of an intramental process of active information processing, may actually be skipped by any single individual, both because they are readily provided and communicated by others and because they are implicitly inscribed in the behavioral conventions and knowledge shared in the culture by which the communication is made possible.

Cross-Cultural Validity

The problems just identified converge to raise a serious doubt on the cross-cultural validity of Lazarus's formulation. How, for example, can the theory deal with apparent diversities in emotional experience across different cultures (cf. Kitayama & Markus, 1994; Markus & Kitayama, 1991)? For example, from an "unrecoverable loss" of a loved one, many might feel sad, as Lazarus would predict on the basis of his relational themes analysis, but it is also obvious that some others might feel frustrated and experience anger or hostility (e.g., scapegoating) instead. Further, whether the emotion experienced is sadness or anger, such "emotionalizing" (Shweder, in press) might not even be the norm in many other cultures outside the West. Thus, many in, say, China or even in lower socioeconomic classes in the United States may feel tired and experience headache and chest pain (e.g., Kleinman,

1988) instead of reporting any emotions of sadness or anger, as they perhaps should according to Lazarus's analysis. Or consider a Japanese student who "feels embarrassed" when she outperforms her male peers and, thus, according to Lazarus's analysis on core relational themes, ought to be experiencing pride. Is she somehow experiencing pride deep in her heart but merely reporting to the contrary because of social pressures? Or is pride successfully repressed and thus totally unconscious but somehow "really" present somewhere in her heart or brain? Or she might not have categorized her apparent success as such? It might have been a social failure for her. Lazarus offers no principled way to decide among these equally plausible possibilities.

Needless to say, the problem of interpretation is formidable, especially when we examine people in a culture different from our own. By the same token, however, it defines the central issue in psychological theorizing of emotion (Schwartz, White, & Lutz, 1992; Shweder & LeVine, 1984). We suggest that the problem can be better handled once it is recognized that Lazarus's formulation itself is deeply wedded, a priori, to the Western folk understanding of what (e.g., relational themes) can lead to what else (e.g., discrete emotion categories common in the West, such as anger and sadness) in emotional processes (cf. Markus & Kitayama, 1994). The theory may have to be reoriented in a culturally better informed fashion.

A Cultural Perspective on Emotion

We view emotions as much more social, mediated significantly by tacit cultural knowledge and attendant practices of everyday life (Kitayama & Markus, 1994). This view is premised in part on the idea of an emotion as a fuzzy set of component processes such as facial expressions, patterns of cognitive appraisals, and action tendencies (Ortony & Turner, 1990). Not one of these components is either necessary or sufficient to define the emotion. Yet, as a whole, they form a cluster that retains certain characteristic functions vis-à-vis a pertinent social (or nonsocial) situation.

From this functionalist point of view (Campos, Campos, & Barett, 1989), emotions may be seen as an assortment of socially shared and collectively enacted scripts, which are made up of physiological, subjective, and behavioral components, but which are also embedded in and, further, importantly constituting the immediate sociocultural, semiotically constituted environment. As a specific type of socially shared, collective scripts, emotions may be usefully conceptualized as an interface between the inside and the outside. Thus, emotion scripts are afforded and constrained by a number of biologically hard-wired component processes of each participating individual (e.g., autonomic arousal systems, regulation of facial musculature). At the same time, however, the emotion scripts develop as individuals actively—both personally and collectively—adapt and adjust to this cultural environment. Through the process, the internal components are adjusted and tuned to the latter. Internal components of emotion, some of which are demonstrably hard-wired through phylogenic evolution, are "configured" through sociocultural processes of ontogenic development to form distinctly human emotions. As a result, the internal processes tend to reflect the culturally shared tacit knowledge and corresponding practices of everyday life. In other words, there should exist a degree of fit between the specific nature of the cultural environment (e.g., widely shared values, practices, and social systems) and the members' intramental organization of emotion.

From this point of view, there is no theoretical basis to privilege cross-culturally common emotions such as sadness and anger as more primary, more basic, or even more biologically grounded. They are as social (and, of course, as biological) in both origin and function as culture-specific emotions such as *amae* in Japan, *fago* in Ifaluk, and *liget* in the Philippines. We may find similar intramental processes of emotion across seemingly divergent cultures to the extent that these cultures share common elements such as ecological conditions and prototypic models of social relationships (Fiske, 1991). At the same time, to the extent that the cultures vary in some other important regards, the intramental processes of emotion may also take correspondingly divergent forms.

This general view of emotions as socially shared, collective scripts can be seen as an extension of the cognitive-mediational theories. At the same time, however, the heritage should not obscure several important differences that, in our opinion, are critical in resolving some of the difficulties we pointed out earlier for the cognitive theories in general and for Lazarus's formulation in particular.

Cognition and Emotion: Elusive Categories

To begin with, the idea of an emotion composed of different elements is an important import from the cognitive theories. But many of these theories give causal priority to cognition. In the cultural view, no such sequential order is assumed a priori. To be sure, the emotion scripts can be cognitively represented to

form folk understandings about how the emotions work. In many of these folk understandings, perceptions or appraisals of an impinging situation are understood to precede and lead to an emotion, which in turn is seen to cause distinct behavioral tendencies. But this need not be the case in actual workings of emotional processes as an on-line process of interaction between an actor and his or her surrounding environment. Any one of many components constituting an emotion can be a trigger of a fuller experience and behavioral manifestation of the emotion. It is possible, for example, that a relatively ambiguous experience of autonomic arousal may be combined with a linguistic label of, say, *anger,* to generate a general and relatively vague sense of "me being angry," which may in turn initiate a series of backward inferences (cf. White, 1994) to selectively encode pertinent information that fits the anger script and thereby cognitively reconstruct the nature of the surrounding social situation in accordance with the initial emotion as experienced (cf. Schachter & Singer, 1962).

The Social Nature of Emotion

We observed earlier that, in the cognitive-mediational theories, social situations are implicated in emotional experience only to the extent that they are individually recognized and encoded in the form of appraisals. In Lazarus's theory in particular, social situations are thought to influence emotional experience only insofar as they are actively interpreted and evaluated in respect to one's own well-being. By contrast, in the current cultural view, emotions are, by themselves, social in nature. Emotions are scripts that are socially shared, constructed, and often conventionalized, and they are collectively enacted within a given cultural group.

To illustrate this point, take what appears to be one of the most egocentric, individual-centered emotions—pride. As Lazarus points out, an "enhancement of ego identity" is closely associated with pride. Of course, this relational theme can arise within a socially isolated individual. Thus, the person may assess his or her own achievement, perhaps privately comparing it with that of others and subjectively confirming his or her own unique and positive identity, and all these cognitive computations as a whole may give rise to the feelings of pride. More typically, however, this cognitive construction of a personal situation takes place within a social, collective, mostly conventionalized process of interpersonal communications (Kitayama, Markus, & Lieberman, in press). For example, different cultures have different conversational conventions in respect to personal achievement. Indeed, some linguists have commented that, in American English, mutually giving and receiving compliments and praising one another's accomplishment are well scripted to a degree that is unheard of in many other cultures (Wierzbicka, 1994). Within such a linguistic community, a person's achievement or more general positive attributes of himself or herself may be constantly reminded of or primed, so that the feelings of pride may result straightforwardly from the compliments provided by the person's friends. No cognitive appraisals, whether conscious or unconscious, may be required. Indeed, they may often be absent and even unnecessary in shaping the experience of this emotion. Instead, culturally shared conversational conventions can guide the ways in which specific emotions are developed and experienced by each participating individual. This is not to deny the obvious importance of individual, cognitive processes, but it does suggest that more is involved in the evocation of emotions.

Perhaps more important, once the socially mediated nature of emotion is realized, what Lazarus might otherwise interpret as a case for unconscious self-defense may in fact be better understood in terms of the culture's way of socially and collectively regulating emotional responses. For example, Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, and Gramzow (1992) examined American college students and found that shame is often readily transformed into anger. In the American cultural context, because shame is typically associated with a painful shrinking of the self, whereas anger is more empowering, implying an affirmation of the self as an autonomous and independent entity, this transformation may be easily interpreted as a form of ego defense.

But it is noteworthy that the transformation is often supported and facilitated by other "casting staffs" in a relationship, who "conspire" to help the protagonist to accomplish this end (cf. Goffman, 1959). Thus, in American society, what good friends are supposed to do in facing someone depressed in a shameful feeling is to encourage the person by reorienting the person's attention away from his own shortcomings to external objects or events the person can reasonably blame for the impeding problem. According to this analysis, the "conspiracy" need not be individually motivated. In fact, it may be inscribed in collectively shared cultural conventions, and, therefore, it is most likely to be unconsciously enacted without any obvious individual goals that are to be attained from it. To the extent that such a script is shared and taken for granted in the American culture and that this pattern of social interaction is an important constituent of the shame-to-anger transformation commonly observed in the U.S. middle-class populations, the transformation is much more

social and collective a process than is implied by the notion of psychological defense. The defense may surely be operating, but it is conventionalized and scripted within the American culture, and the etiology of the defense may better be sought not in the realm of each individual's psychodynamic mechanisms, but in the realm of the historical development of culturally scripted practices of emotion, such as conversational conventions regarding shame and anger in the American middle-class culture.

The Emotional Unconscious: Always Real?

By dint of the burgeoning literature on nonconscious information processing (see, e.g., Niedenthal & Kitayama, 1994, for a review), the scientific status of the unconscious as cognitive and affective computations that fail, for one reason or another, to achieve conscious awareness has received considerable credibility in recent years. Thus, it is all too easy to attribute appraisal, ego defense, and perhaps more to the domain of the unconscious when they are not obviously present in the subjective experience of the person. Nevertheless, we psychologists have to be extremely cautious: It may be misattribution. For example, Lazarus argues that the Inuit Eskimos described by Briggs (1970) as rarely experiencing anger might in fact have been experiencing anger in the unconscious. This assertion is derived from Lazarus's purely theoretical presupposition that "adult anger has a universal cause in all people regardless of their language and culture. We are made angry when we have been slighted or demeaned, which provides a human analogy to animal dominance hierarchies." In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, however, we cannot escape the impression that Lazarus may be misattributing too much of unconscious anger and the corresponding unconscious appraisals to the native's mind. There may in fact be none of these. Instead, an event that would cause a burst of outrage in American society may be handled very differently within an Inuit system of socially conventionalized and culturally shared scripts. If so, it is quite possible that the same event leads to an entirely different set of subjective experience and feelings in the Inuit cultural context.

Nevertheless, Lazarus goes on to advise us to make the observations "in the right way," by which he means we should "employ clinical skills to probe below the surface." We are not sure if such a clinical probing can do anything more than promote a psychological explanation grounded implicitly in the social reality of the clinician's own, often American middle-class culture. We are concerned that the clinician might end up merely projecting his or her own construals, hunches, and experience to the native's mind. In our view, the overtly psychological approach of the current cognitive-mediational theories may inadvertently be masking the possibility that the absence of anger can more accurately be understood in terms of the system of social conventions and routinized everyday communications unique to the native's culture. These theories, therefore, are taking a risk of promoting an ethnocentric understanding of the inner world of the people in other cultures—the risk many of us, including Lazarus himself, are overtly cautious about.

According to the present view of emotion as deeply embedded in cultural systems of meaning and practice, the principles of emotion and emotional regulation must be sought in the mutual tuning between cultural systems and psychological organizations—or the ways in which culture and emotion shape each other so that one becomes an integral part of the other. The notion of emotion as culturally shared, collective scripts can be immensely useful in beginning to conceptualize emotion as both inside and outside the person. The inside components (e.g., physiology, subjective feelings) and the outside components (e.g., emotion-relevant knowledge, conventions and routines of everyday life that are shared in the culture) retain a degree of fit, even though they are also in a constant flux, always generating contradictions and tensions between them, thereby resulting in continuous changes in both.

Emotion as a Socially Shared Interpretive System

From the cultural view briefly sketched here, emotion can function as an interpretive schema or script that locates internal sensations within a dynamically changing pattern of interaction with the social and nonsocial environment. That is, emotion scripts may be applicable, on the one hand, to internal sensations and bodily experience and, on the other hand, to the external realities in which the internal processes are embedded. These scripts will integrate the internal sensations with the external realities to simultaneously yield both a "deeply felt" and "moving" perception of the external realities and a personally and socially meaningful construal of the internal sensations. Here arises the very moral force that emotion often entails (Shweder, in press; White, 1994). There is no reason to suppose, however, that this mode of experiencing inner sensations by integrating them with external situations is the only one available to the human species. In some situations, for example, it is more common to interpret

inner sensations "just as such." We might feel tired, we might feel cold, or we might feel a stomachache or chest pain. These perceptions of bodily sensations in terms of the idiom of soma are also interpretations of whatever "raw" sensations are arising from the workings of the inner, bodily physiology, but they are different in kind from emotional interpretations of them. *Soma* (state of the physical body as an interpretive frame) appears to allow the person to detach internal sensations from external realities rather than connecting them to the latter. Therefore, it is less dynamic, more static, and most of all less moral.

Notice, according to the cultural view, emotion as experienced is actually constructed through the culturally shared practice—or the collective habit of interpersonal coordination, of making use of, and communicating in terms of, emotional scripts. Through this collective practice, these scripts are made personally and individually available for use in perceiving and interpreting one's own internal bodily sensations. Once this is established in the social domain, the emotional experience can become private: One can "simulate" the same sort of scripts in private without having any inducement of these ideas by others around. Nonetheless, accordingly to this analysis, human emotions such as anger, sadness, joy, *amae,* and *fago,* among others, are primarily social and cultural in origin. Private, purely subjective "simulation" of emotion is possible, but, according to our view, it is derivative of the social process of emotion (Cole, 1989; Holland & Valsiner, 1988; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch & Tulviste, 1992).

The present cultural analysis also implies that there is no privileged status in emotion as a way of experiencing inner sensations. Further, it should also be clear that emotions are not reified entities that can be sought in the body or the brain of the socially isolated individual. To the contrary, they are primarily a social process that implicates the inside of participating individuals; they are culturally mediated, constructed, and maintained. Indeed, this mode of experiencing—or what Shweder (in press) aptly called *emotionalizing,* is not equally prevalent across cultures. Whereas emotionalizing seems predominant in Western, middle-class cultures, it may be "somatizing" that is more common in many non-Western cultures such as in China (e.g., Kleinman, 1988). It appears to us, then, that the cognitive-mediational theories, especially Lazarus's, are unnecessarily narrow in focus by their limiting the domain of inquiry to what is commonly understood as emotion. They can be expanded in scope to accommodate social practices and conventions and resulting psychological processes, such somatizing, that are demonstrably more common and more valid outside the Western, middle-class populations.

Conclusion

In sum, Lazarus's critical appraisal of cognitive-mediational theories is quite timely. His perceptive analysis reveals several important problems in this approach. Nevertheless, we find his suggested solutions for them somewhat wanting. We have thus presented a view of emotion grounded in the currently emerging field of cultural psychology, the basic tenet of which revolves around the notion that culture and the mind make each other up (Shweder, 1991). Informed importantly by the preceding cognitive-mediational theories, the cultural approach can greatly expand the scope of emotion research by reorienting our research attention to noncognitive causation and social mediation of emotional responses, as well as to other related phenomena such as somatization. Perhaps, in the history of emotion research, the single most important contribution of the cognitive-mediational theories has been to bring the social back into the psychological understanding of emotional processes (Ellsworth, 1994). We suggest, however, that these theories have not gone far enough. Emotions may be much more social in etiology, function, and meaning. As such, the cultural approach may be quite instrumental in future empirical inquiry of emotional processes as fully constituted by cultural knowledge and practices of social relationship.

Notes

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