Emotions and social construction: is there still a place for socioconstructivism in the philosophy of emotions?

Emoções e construção social: ainda há lugar para o socioconstrutivismo na filosofia das emoções?

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ABSTRACT

In the 1980s, a research program became popular in the field of philosophy and psychology of emotions. This program, called social constructionism, claimed that emotions were products of social factors and could not be understood in an adaptationist vocabulary. However, over time these theories lost much of their strength and popularity, and practically disappeared from contemporary philosophy of emotions. The goal of this paper will be to diagnose this predicament, and ask whether social constructionism could still be an interesting theoretical path for the study of emotions. To do this, we will clarify the meaning of the "construction" metaphor and examine some of the main constructionist theories of emotions. Although our conclusions will be mostly negative regarding the social construction label, they may nevertheless bring some relief to those who are sympathetic to its theoretical goals, methodological prescriptions and focus of analysis.

Keywords: Emotions. Social construction. Situated affectivity. Cultural variation. Debunking project.

RESUMO

Na década de 1980, um programa de pesquisa se popularizou no campo da filosofia e psicologia das emoções. Esse programa, denominado construcionismo social, afirmava que emoções eram produtos de fatores sociais e não poderiam ser compreendidas em um vocabulário adaptacionista. No entanto, ao longo do tempo essas teorias perderam grande parte de sua força e popularidade, e praticamente desapareceram da filosofia das emoções contemporânea. O objetivo do presente artigo será diagnosticar esse predicamento, e perguntar se o construcionismo social ainda poderia ser uma via teórica interessante para o estudo das emoções. Para isso, iremos clarificar o significado da metáfora da "construção" e examinar algumas das principais teorias construcionistas de emoções. Embora nossas conclusões sejam negativas em relação ao rótulo da construção social, elas podem ainda assim trazer algum alívio para aqueles que se simpatizam com suas pretensões teóricas, prescrições metodológicas e foco de análise.

Palavras-chave: *Emoções. Construção Social. Afetividade situada. Variação cultural. Debunking project.*

Introduction

> Given the multiple uses of the term 'social construction,' one might wonder why it matters whether this or that project is properly characterized as a form of social constructionism. And of course, in the abstract it matters very little. But in the current academic context, the classification of some view as social constructionist can mean that it is not worth taking seriously or, alternatively, that it is one of the views to be taken seriously (Haslanger, 2012, p. 113-114).

During the 1960s and 1970s, the adaptationist research program on emotions gained prominence in scientific-philosophical debates. Strongly anchored in the evidence produced by Paul Ekman & Wallace Friesen (1971), Carrol Izard (1971), and Robert Plutchik (1970) on the supposed universality of facial expressions of emotion and the neural circuits underlying particular emotions, the adaptationist program understood discrete emotions such as anger, fear, sadness, etc.[1] as adaptive responses selected by evolution because they helped our ancestors cope with recurring environmental challenges (such as threats, losses, conflict etc.), each with its own characteristic set of involuntary facial and body movements, neural and autonomic nervous system activation, etc. These theoretical commitments can be clearly seen in the following passages:

> Emotions have evolved through adaptation to our surroundings. Though we are a species capable of enormous cognitive load, we are also endowed with biological mechanisms that allow us to react to fundamental life tasks – universal human predicaments such as losses, frustrations, successes, and joys. Each basic emotion prompts us in a direction that, in the course of our evolution, has done better than other solutions in recurring circumstances that are relevant to our goals (Ekman & Cordaro, 2011, p. 364).

> In order to provide a general definition of emotion, we need to use the functional or adaptational language. (...) An emotion is a patterned bodily reaction of either protection, destruction, reproduction, deprivation, incorporation, rejection, exploration, or orientation, or some combination of these, caused by a stimulus (Plutchik, 1970, p. 12).

A significant reaction to the adaptationist program came in the 1980s with socioconstructivist theories that strongly criticized the validity of theoretical constructs from evolutionary biology for an adequate understanding of emotions. Of course, the socioconstructivists did not mean to imply that biological systems were not somehow involved in the production of emotional episodes and states; the main point was that an

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[1] In other words, the so-called "basic emotions" described by Ekman & Cordaro (2011): anger, fear, sadness, disgust, surprise, contempt and happiness. Different researchers within the adaptationist program disagree whether other emotions, such as jealousy or shame, are part of this same category. For a contemporary discussion see Keltner *et al.*, 2019.

adaptationist language could never adequately explain emotions because it did not operate at the level of analysis appropriate for such a theoretical endeavor. Instead, socio-constructivist theorists claimed that emotions were socio-cultural phenomena, and therefore could only be understood by looking at the broader social norms and cultural systems in which affective agents are embedded and which give meaning to their emotions. As James Averill says, "Emotions are not just remnants of our phylogenetic past, nor can they be explained in strictly physiological terms. Rather, they are social constructions, and they can be fully understood only on a social level of analysis" (1980, p. 309).

At the time of this writing, some 40 years after the publication of the major socioconstructivist theories[2], It is curious to note that while basic emotion theory, and adaptationist theories in general, are still widely developed and debated in the literature[3], little is heard of socioconstructivist theories of emotion, except perhaps as remnants of the past, appearing in textbooks as part of the history of contemporary philosophy of emotion.[4]

But what explains the almost complete disappearance of these theories from the current panorama? It's not that the adaptationist program has somehow "won" the debate- indeed, many of the recent developments in the philosophy of emotions understand emotions as constitutively social phenomena, intersubjectively realized and sensitive to socio-cultural norms and contexts.[5] None of these theories, however, bears the label "socioconstructivist" or claims that emotions are "social constructions". But why has philosophy of emotions evolved in this manner, away from social constructionism? Why do we feel comfortable investigating the social dimension of emotions, but not implementing such an investigation in a socioconstructivist vocabulary?

At first glance, we can think of several reasons for such a suspicion and resistance. Firstly, perhaps we are not so comfortable with this research program's strong criticism of theoretical tools from evolutionary biology, or of an adaptationist vocabulary in general. As Prinz notes, "Every emotion that we have a name for is the product of both nature and nurture. Emotions are evolved and constructed. The dichotomy between the two approaches cannot be maintained" (2004, p. 69). In other words, if we are to somehow maintain an adaptationist explanation of our emotions, however partial, it seems that we must do so

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[2] We are thinking here mainly of Averill, 1980; Armon-Jones, 1985; Harré, 1986.

[3] See Hutto, Robertson & Kirchhoff, 2018; Keltner *et al.*, 2019; Levenson, 2011; Scarantino & Griffiths, 2011.

[4] See for example Scarantino, 2016; Prinz, 2004; Griffiths, 1997.

[5] See for example Griffiths & Scarantino, 2008; Colombetti & Krueger, 2015; von Maur, 2021; Candiotto & Dreon, 2021.

outside of social constructionism, which seems to advocate the abandonment of any explanation or vocabulary derived from biology. Secondly, it is particularly difficult to know exactly what social constructionists mean by the claim that "emotions are social constructions", since the metaphor of "construction" is rarely made explicit or clarified by its proponents. In this scenario, it might actually be more prudent to study the social dimension of emotions without committing ourselves theoretically to an obscure and dubious construct such as "social construction", which might lead us back to more radical strands of sociology that are far removed from our theoretical goals.[6]

Yet, are such concerns really justified, and should we really abandon social constructionism as a viable theoretical path for the philosophical study of emotions? The goal of this paper will be to understand the social constructionist program in some of its various aspects, so that at the end of our discursive path we will be in a better position to evaluate its theoretical viability.

The structure of the text will be as follows. In the next section, we will attempt to clarify the metaphor of "construction" and the meaning of the constructionist thesis, drawing on the work of Ian Hacking (1999) and Sally Haslanger (2012). We will then apply these findings to two popular constructionist theories, by Rom Harré (1986) and James Averill (1980), and explain the sense in which emotions are social constructions in these theories. The following section explores the possibility of theoretically investigating the social factors that influence emotions outside of a constructionist framework, while the final section outlines some conclusions about why social constructionism is no longer as popular as it was in the 1980s, and about whether there is still room for some kind of social constructionism in contemporary philosophy of emotion. Although we embrace the idea of exploring the various ways in which cultural and sociomaterial contexts influence and shape affective phenomena, we also believe that the label "social constructionism" adds little theoretical value to this endeavor and can therefore be abandoned.

Social Construction: General Elements

As mentioned in the previous section, one of the main difficulties in evaluating socioconstructivist theories is the lack of clarity about the meaning of the metaphor of "construction". The term seems to suggest something stronger than mere social "influence";

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[6] Such as Berger & Luckmann, 1966, *The Social Construction of Reality*.

it is as if the object of construction is something that only comes into being through the action of historical, social and cultural forces. In other words, even though our emotional reactions are in some sense realized by biological systems, social factors make these reactions an emotion.

These observations, however, still say very little about what a socio-constructivist theory of emotions would be. What are these historical, social, and cultural forces? And why should we assume that these forces *construct* emotions, rather than merely influence the expression and management of emotional responses, as Ekman & Friesen (1975) suggest with their "display rules"? To say that emotions are social constructs is to say that they are closer to human inventions such as money or soccer than to physiological states such as hunger or fatigue, but what is there in common between the claim that the monetary system is a social construct and the claim that emotions are social constructs?

These difficulties were addressed by Ian Hacking in *The social construction of what*? (1999). As he observes, so many different things have been claimed to be social constructions - from "facts" to "reality", from "gender" to "knowledge", from "nature" to "nationalism", from "refugees" to "serial killers"[7] - that it is difficult to know whether there is indeed a general answer to the meaning of the constructionist thesis. Hacking's solution to these difficulties is to shift the focus of analysis and begin by asking not about the content of constructionist theses, but about the point of articulating such a thesis (1999, p. 5). In other words, what do we mean when we say (SCx): x is socially *constructed?*

According to Hacking, (SCx) functions as a kind of denouncement, made with the aim of creating or intensifying social awareness of a domain in question, in order to change the way we think and act in relation to that domain. From this perspective, (SCx) can be understood through the following scheme:

(1) X need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. X, or X as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable;

(2) X is quite bad as it is;

(3) We would be much better off if X were done away with, or at least radically transformed (Hacking, 1999, p. 6).

Later in the text, Hacking adds a precondition to the above scheme:

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[7] Indeed, Hacking's list includes 23 different types of things, found in academic works until the book's publication (1999).

(0) In the present state of affairs, x is taken for granted; x appears to be inevitable (*ibid.*, p. 13).

This precondition is important, because if there is doubt about the social status of x, there is no reason to argue that x is a social construction. That's why you won't find academic papers arguing that money or laws are social constructs; that's already too obvious, something that doesn't need any argument. But let's take one of the favorite examples of social construction, gender. The feminist literature has already convinced us that (1) the attributes associated with one gender or the other are highly contingent, that (2) they are oppressive to women, and that (3) women would be better off if the traditional gender attributes and roles of the patriarchy were abandoned or reformed. In addition, condition (0) is also met: there is a cultural assumption that gender attributes are biologically determined, and that women are more submissive, docile, and maternal due to biological characteristics. Thus, by saying that a person's gender is socially constructed, we are denouncing the fact that gender roles are oppressive and that, despite their seeming inevitability, these roles are contingent and the result of human practices and choices, which is why they can (and should) be changed.

But while Hacking's scheme helps us understand a bit more about what is at stake in the assertion (SCx), it is not yet clear how it can be applied to the case of emotions, our main topic of investigation. What exactly do we want to denounce with the claim (SCe): that emotions are socially constructed?

Interestingly, Hacking analyzes the case of emotions as an exception. That is, for Hacking it only makes sense to say that our ideas, concepts, or *classification systems* are social constructions, not that things themselves are. After all, it is our ideas about gender, race, refugees, sexuality etc. that are socially constructed, not the individuals themselves who might be classified in this way. In the case of emotions, however, the thesis is not that our ideas about emotions are socially constructed (which seems obvious), but rather that emotions themselves are social constructions (1999, p. 18). Hacking argues that if this is the constructionist thesis, then it loses all meaning, since there is no way that an emotion can literally be a social construction in the same way that an idea or a classification system is. In this case, Hacking suggests that we should interpret the idea of construction merely as a kind of marker, signaling that emotions are culturally variable rather than automatic and universal biological responses, and that there would be no theoretical gain in using the term "social construction" that could not be obtained by simply talking about "cultural variation". In other words, the socioconstructivist theory of emotions is actually a conceptual confusion, and as such does not fit into the above scheme. As Hacking says, "since we are not talking

(in the case of emotions) about anything that is literally constructed, it is not obvious that these (constructionist) insights are best couched in terms of construction talk at all" (1999, p. 19).

But what does it mean for something to be "literally" constructed, and why can't emotions be a product of this process? This has to do with Hacking's view, briefly explained above, that only ideas, concepts, and classifications can be socially constructed. According to Hacking our ideas don't exist in a vacuum, but are part of a particular social matrix that gives meaning to the idea in question. To use Hacking's example, the term "refugee" exists within a complex social matrix that includes institutions, lawyers, court decisions, immigration procedures, passports, forms, detention centers etc. (1999, p. 10). To be a refugee in this sense is to be part of this matrix, and the constructionist thesis is that the term "refugee" is not simply determined by the "nature of things" (*e.g.*, a woman seeking political asylum in another country), but is part of this complex social matrix in which the classification carries a certain social stigma and influences the behavior and self-conception of the people so classified.

Yet, what is socially constructed is the classification "refugee" and not the person so classified (although the latter is psychologically affected by the classification in question). As Hacking says, "when we read of the social construction of x, it is very commonly the idea of x (in its matrix) that is meant" (1999, p. 11). Applying the schema above, the constructionist thesis aims to denounce that despite the apparent inevitability of x (*e.g.* gender roles), this inevitability is illusory; gender roles are contingently constructed by the social matrix in which this idea is found, and since this matrix is currently oppressive to women, we must change it. But since emotions don't exist in a social matrix in the same way that ideas do, it doesn't make sense to talk about the social construction of emotions.

But why can't emotions exist in a social matrix? Hacking doesn't make it clear what he means by emotions, but we suspect that he has in mind something like an internal state, in which case it makes sense to think that it is in fact a conceptual confusion to think that the internal state itself can exist in a social matrix, rather than the term we use to talk about this state. But if we assume, for example, that an emotion is a social role, as constructionist James Averill (1980) suggests, why not say that emotions exist in social matrices? After all, traditional social roles, such as "husband", "work colleague" or "teacher", exist within social matrices. The way I behave when I play any of these roles, something that includes things like body posture, tone of voice, appropriate clothing, verbal and affective orientations etc., is itself part of a social matrix, made up of institutions (family, university etc.), informal

arrangements, contracts, responsibilities, and so on. It's not just the idea of these social roles, or the term we use to classify them, that is part of this matrix, but the behavior itself.

Thus, we suspect that Hacking's diagnosis that the constructionist thesis on emotions is merely a conceptual confusion stems from a limited conception of emotions. But if we adopt a less orthodox conception, as the constructionists suggest, there is nothing to prevent them from being part of social matrices, and thus "literally" constructed in Hacking's sense. Thus, in line with Sally Haslanger's (2012) suggestions, we propose to understand social constructionism as follows:

- (SCxF) x is socially constructed constitutively as an F iff x is of a kind or sort F such that in defining what it is to be F, we must make reference to social factors (or: such that in order for x to be F, x must exist within a social matrix that constitutes F's (2012, p. 131).

For Haslanger, what the constructionist is doing by asserting (SCxF) is engaging in a kind of "debunking project". That is, while it has been thought that F (race, gender, an emotion) is a natural kind, and that therefore to say that x is of kind F is to ascribe a biological property to x, (SCxF) will challenge the truth conditions of the statement "x is F" by showing that these truth conditions must refer to social factors that are part of the matrix of F. For example, the statement "she is a woman", in a debunking project, is not true iff the person referred to by the female pronoun has a pair of X chromosomes; rather, it is true iff the person referred to by the female pronoun occupies a certain position in a social matrix (see Haslanger 2012, p. 132). In the case of emotions, the constructionist would say that attributing an emotion to someone ("he is angry") is not identifying an automatic response selected by evolution, since anger can only be understood within its social matrix, and that therefore the truth conditions of the attribution must mention such social factors.

This, then, is the general scheme that adequately captures what is at stake in the constructionist thesis. Haslanger's idea of a "debunking project" is compatible with the goal of denouncement emphasized by Hacking, but we think Haslanger's definition is superior because it allows us to analyze how emotions themselves, and not just concepts or ideas, can be socially constructed - for example, in terms of social roles (Averill, 1980). In this sense, the constructionist thesis would generally say that in order to define emotions, we must make reference to social factors constitutively. This is a powerful thesis that places social factors in the very definition of what an emotion is. But what are these social factors? In the

following section, we will explore some options based on the theories of Rom Harré (1986) and James Averill (1980).

Social Construction: Specific Theories

After discussing what it means to say that something is socially constructed, it became clear that it is important to specify the social factors that constitute an emotion. This section will focus on a discussion of socioconstructivist theories that identify language and concepts as fundamental social elements in the constitution of emotions. As social constructs, *language and concepts* ascribe a cultural relativity to emotional phenomena, thus moving away from universalist and naturalistic theoretical conceptions such as those presented in the introduction to this paper.

The role of language in the social constructionism of emotions is emphasized by the New Zealander-British philosopher and psychologist Rom Harré. In defending the primacy of social aspects in the study of emotions, Harré emphasizes the preeminent role of language as a social construct. According to the author, both the moral order and language correspond to "two social matters that impinge heavily on the personal experience of emotion" (Harré, 1986, p. 9). These issues are inextricably linked to context, which leads him to understand emotions in their socio-cultural character, since, according to him, "the bulk of mankind live within systems of thought and feeling that bear little but superficial resemblances to one another" (Harré, 1986, p.12).

In this sense, Harré's approach is configured in opposition to naturalistic approaches, thus rejecting the search for an essence or causal mechanism inherent to emotions. From this perspective, physiological aspects are understood as more basic social phenomena (Harré, 1986) and relegated to the background, which places this approach in opposition to perspectives that understand emotions as immune to contextual and sociocultural variations. The articulation between biological and sociocultural elements in Harré's approach can be explained as follows:

> If emotions are the physiological, cognitive, and behavioral conditions that must be met for emotion words to be properly applied, and local grammars stipulate which emotion words require which conditions, it follows that "there might be considerable cultural variety in the emotion repertoires of different peoples and epochs" (Harré, 1986, pp. 7–8). That is, the rich palette of emotion terms across cultures and historical periods cannot be reduced to a short list of allegedly primary, fundamental, or basic emotions. Each emotion word must be treated as the index of a

unique set of conditions (Aranguren, 2017, p. 7).[8]

As explained above, language plays a preeminent role in Harré's socioconstructivist theory, signaling a sociocultural framework that cannot be separated from social practices, especially emotional experiences. Nevertheless, Harré understands human behavior as "[...] the implementation of a belief system in the course of which language plays a distinctive and irreducible part" (Harré, 1986, p. 4). Language occupies a prominent place because "social relations among human beings are created and maintained mainly by speech (and more recently by writing)" (Harré, 1986, p. 4). In this sense, Aranguren (2017, p. 6) points out that "[...] understanding action amounts to identifying the intention that the action expresses for the actor and for others", emphasizing the importance of dwelling on the semantics of experiences rather than looking for causal relationships of emotions.

In light of the important role of language, we can point to two principles that underlie Harré's socioconstructivism:

1) Human beings acquire their typically human psychological traits, powers, and tendencies in symbiotic interactions with other human beings (Harré, 1998, p. 27);

2) The psychological processes of mature human beings are essentially collective and contingently private and individualized (*ibid.*, p. 29).

In this context, the conception that "understands psychological activity as an act that is inherently individualistic and only eventually constructed in a social manner" (Abreu, 2021, p. 95) is replaced by one in which the sociocultural environment goes beyond the mere provision of stimuli and becomes an effective part of the configuration of emotional experiences. Nevertheless, this conception outlines a certain articulation between linguistic and evaluative aspects (*appraisals*)[9]:

> Harré's view of emotion articulates some aspects of valuation theory (Arnold, 1960), in particular an interest in the role of cognitive judgments in the construction of affection; and a concern with the discursive and performative action that this emotion advocates. According to the author, "an emotional feeling and its related demonstration must be understood as a discursive phenomenon, as the expression of a judgment and the performance of a social act" (Harré; Gillet, 1994: 147) (Abreu, 2021, p.

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[8] Although this perspective implies a certain relativism, since psychologists can only study emotions in the context of the native evaluation of meanings, either through the prism of the local moral order or through the social function of demonstrating certain emotions (Harré, 1986), this limitation is not really a problem, according to Harré. The author believes that this limitation motivates psychology to pursue new frontiers of research, breaking down the barriers that have kept it stagnant in certain respects.

[9] According to appraisal theory, emotions are the result of appraisal processes in which "events in the environment are judged as good or bad for us" (Cornelius, 2000, s/p). From this perspective, each emotion corresponds to a specific appraisal pattern that involves both aspects of the organism (history, personality, physiological state) and aspects of the situation in which the organism finds itself.

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Based on what has been presented, it is clear from Harré's perspective that there is a connection between the active functions of the individual and the environment. The former plays a role through its ability to evaluate, while the latter creates the socio-cultural conditions in which the former develops and acts. Thus, the author conceives a theory that he calls *emotiology*, whose method consists in the connection between bodily agitation, evaluative judgment and action tendency - the use of the term emotional will be in line with the socio-cultural patterns of the environment. In his words, "I would call myself 'angry' if I felt a certain kind of agitation, I thought that I had been unjustly injured in some way, and I had a tendency to respond to the situation in some rather strong manner" (Harré, 2009, p. 296). Although these elements are important, they are not always necessary for the correct attribution of emotional terms. As an example, we can take the cases of "loneliness" or "pride", which don't show a clear manifestation of physiological arousal. (Harré, 1986). Aranguren emphasizes the contribution that Harré's emotionology makes to the socioconstructivist field of emotion studies, elucidating the role of the "social" and "constructional" elements:

> The "social" element is provided more precisely by the culturally shared and socially enforced rules for the correct use of words, which can be termed, for short, the grammar. The "construction" element visualizes emotions not as given sealed units but as the outcome of active processes of assembling lower-level components according to those "rules" (Aranguren, 2017, p. 6).

Applying Haslanger's schema to this theory, we can say that, for Harré, emotions are somatic-cognitive-behavioral hybrids and are socially constructed because, in attributing anger to someone (or to oneself), one must refer to social factors in order for the attribution to be apt - namely, the sociolinguistic system and the moral order in which the agent finds herself. In other words:

- (SCxF) A given hybrid set e is socially constructed constitutively as 'anger' iff e is of a kind or sort 'anger' such that in defining what it is to be angry we must make reference to social factors (or: such that in order for e to be anger, e must exist within a social matrix that constitutes anger, *i.e.* the sociolinguistic system and moral order in which the agent finds him/herself).

Like Harré, James R. Averill, an eminent scholar in the field of psychology, establishes a link between the linguistic element, related to the sociocultural patterns of the environment, and various other cognitive aspects of the individual. According to the author, an emotion can be understood as a "socially constituted syndrome" that can include a variety

of psychological events (Averill, 1980). In *A constructivist view of emotion* (1980), Averill emphasizes the predominance of the constructivist element in his theory:

> The term "constructivist" in the title of this chapter has a double meaning. First, it means that the emotions are social constructions, not biological givens. Second, it means that the emotions are improvisations, based on an individual's interpretation of the situation. These two meanings are not independent (Averill, 1980, p. 305).

In this sense, and in contrast to the universalizing idea of emotions, according to which there is something "[...] common to all instances of anger, and to which the term 'anger' ultimately refers" (Averill, 1980, p. 308). Averill uses the term syndrome[10] to refer to emotions, emphasizing their diverse, contextual, and dynamic aspect:

> A syndrome may be defined as a set of responses that covary in a systematic fashion. The two key elements in this definition are "set" and "systematic". The notion of set implies that a syndrome consists of a variety of different elements; that is, a syndrome is not a unitary or invariant response. But not any set of elements can form a syndrome. The elements must also be related in such a manner that they form a coherent system. In this sense, syndromes could also be defined as systems of behavior, as opposed to specific reactions (Averill, 1980, p. 307).

Thus, although certain components of an emotion may be glimpsed on different occasions, none of them is actually necessary to characterize an emotion - which confirms Averill's anti-naturalistic and anti-universalizing conception. To this end, Averill resorts to the notion of transitory social roles, which underlies the concept of a socially constructed syndrome, and it is therefore desirable to understand how emotions can be related to transitory social roles. According to the author, a social role corresponds to a "socially prescribed set of responses to be followed by a person in *a given situation*" (Averill, 1980, p. 308). This shows some correspondence with the concept of syndrome, as it involves behavioral systems made up of interacting elements.

This concept brings us back to the definition of the syndrome just presented, *i.e.*, behavioral systems composed of interacting elements. Certainly, the concept of social role enriches the understanding of the syndrome, since the former identifies the circumstances that, through social guidelines and norms, allow the formation of systems of appropriate behavior (Averill, 1980). As Cornelius (2000, s. p.) recalls, "part of the social function of emotions [...] is to regulate behavior in this way".

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[10] Averill recognizes that the term "syndrome" may be interpreted in a biological manner, and clarifies that it does not imply the notion of sickness, and in no way suggests that emotions are mental disturbances. Still, Averill argues that the term might still be useful, for it allows us to challenge basic emotion and natural kind theories of emotions, especially in respect to the essentialist criterion that underlie these approaches.

In fact, the standardized norms that form syndromes resemble cognitive structures, such as grammatical rules, that play a role in the formation of behavioral patterns as outlined by emotional roles (Averill, 1980). This underscores the important role that linguistic aspects play in Averill's socioconstructivist theory, insofar as they outline normative patterns that underlie the configuration of the transitory social roles of emotions. Meanwhile, Cornelius (2000, s/p) points out that "even our feeling of being out of control and possessed by something primordial and animalistic when we are angry is socially constructed". This may be because the assessment of *being out of control* in situations *of* anger results from an interpretation influenced by cultural norms and values that shape our behavior, which are permeated by linguistic patterns. (Cornelius, 2000).

Although emotional syndromes involve transitory social roles, they also involve biological aspects. However, as Averill points out, "the meaning of the emotion—its functional significance – is to be found primarily within the sociocultural system" (Averill, 1980, p. 337).

It is clear that in both Harré's and Averill's approaches, social construction is inextricably linked to language. This occurs in Harré's theory, where language plays the role of representing socio-cultural constructs, and in Averill's theory, where language manifests itself in the form of *concepts* that linguistically express emotions and the perception of social roles. In the words of Aranguren (2017, p. 10), "what is socially constructed are roles, and these need to be linguistically represented for their performance and recognition".

However, some aspects between Harré and Averill point in different directions: while for Harré the linguistic aspect is outlined by the emotional words, according to which they make it possible to group different emotional responses into the same unitary emotion, for Averill the focus is on the functional requirements of the social system, provided by the transitory social roles. The phenomena we call emotions are, in fact, a special class of social roles that serve specific systemic functions, including the linguistic functions of communication. For Averill, language is located in the domain of transitory social roles, which are in fact the protagonists of his theory of emotions.

In short, it was possible to see that for Harré and Averill there is a connection between cognitive elements and the influence of sociocultural patterns in the constitution of emotions, while placing a high value in its linguistic aspect. Although they use different terms, both authors emphasize the role that language plays in the sociocultural framework that underlies the configuration of emotional experiences. By emphasizing language, Harré and Averill expose one of the distinctive features of socioconstructivist approaches to emotions,

namely their contextual variability and the absence of biological aspects that are supposed to be necessarily indispensable in the constitution of an emotion, despite its multicultural character.

Applying Haslanger's scheme to this theory, we can say that, for Averill, emotions are transitory social roles and are socially constructed because, in attributing anger to someone (or to oneself), one must refer to social factors in order for the attribution to be apt - namely, the social function of the emotion within the culture in which the agent finds him/herself. In other words:

- (SCxF) A transitional social role *e* is socially constructed constitutively as 'anger' iff *e* is of a kind or sort 'anger' such that, in defining what it is to be angry, we must make reference to social factors (or: such that in order for *e* to be anger, *e* must exist within a social matrix that constitutes anger, i.e., the social function that anger plays within a culture).

Alternative paths: social factors without social construction?

In the previous section, we examined two influential socioconstructivist theories, Rom Harré's (1986) and James Averill's (1980), and clarified the sense in which emotions in these theories are constructed according to the schema (SCxF) proposed by Sally Haslanger; that is, what kinds of things emotions are and what kinds of social factors must be mentioned in order for these things (a transitory social role or a somatic-cognitive-behavioral hybrid) to be emotions.

Nevertheless, there is still an important question that needs to be examined: what theoretical role does the metaphor of "construction" play here? Is there any significant theoretical gain in using the term "social construction" that could not be achieved by simply saying (for example) that emotions are transitory social roles that perform a certain social function within a culture? Why, moreover, do we need to say that these social functions construct emotions? Is social construction the only or the best way to study the influence of social factors on the phenomena we call "emotions"? In a strong sense, the term "social construction" suggests a specific thesis and a specific path of investigation for emotions. Firstly, according to the (SCxF) scheme, we assume that social factors are constitutive elements of the definitions of particular emotions, and that the truth conditions of sentences attributing emotions must mention these social factors. Then, in a second step, we investigate what these factors might be and how they enter into the definition of particular emotions. If we can show that one cannot actually define what an emotion is without referring to these

social factors, we will have a case of constitutive social construction, and the construction metaphor will have a specific theoretical role: to indicate that social factors are part of the definition of emotions. This is what it means to say that emotions are social constructions.

But we can also interpret social constructionism in a weaker sense, more or less as Hacking does, that is, as a way of marking the fact that emotions are social phenomena, manifested in socio-material contexts and influenced by socio-cultural arrangements and norms, and not universal automatic responses studied with theoretical tools from evolutionary biology. In this case, constructionism would just be a kind of methodological prescription that emotions should be studied within the broader social context in which they occur. But this weaker version of constructionism is compatible with these elements of the wider social context not being part of the definition of emotions, but playing some other role in the theory.

As an example, consider the situated theory of emotions developed by Griffiths & Scarantino (2008). According to this theory, emotions are I) designed to function in a social context; II) forms of skillful engagement with the world (without involving conceptual thought); III) scaffolded by the environment; IV) dynamically coupled to the environment.

When we consider the active role of the environment in emotional processes, we can see the relevance of contexts, configured by organism-environment couplings, in the constitution and management of emotions. This outlines a reciprocal relationship between context and emotion, in which changes in one imply changes in the other. Based on this idea, Griffiths and Scarantino examine the effects of publicity on emotional experience. The authors highlight the existence of differences in emotional responses that are consistent with differences in the contexts in which the emotions occur. Depending on the interlocutors present in a given context, emotional responses may vary, outlining a communicative aspect of emotions. Duchene smiles[11], for example, may correspond to "affiliative gestures made by one person to another with respect to something good which has occurred. This fits the model of emotions as strategic moves in the context of a social transaction" (Griffiths & Scarantino, 2008, p. 439). Thus, we can see the active role of the presence of the "public" in the way emotions are configured - which leads us to glimpse the importance of social contexts, since these are the essential settings for most of our emotional experiences.

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[11] The term *Duchenne smiles* was inspired by the work of French neurologist Guillaume Duchenne de Boulogne (1806-1875), a specialist in muscular and nervous disturbances. These smiles are characterized by an elevation in the corners of the lips and by an activation in the eye muscles that control the opening and closing of the eyelids, which are responsible for the "crow's feet" found on the corner of the eyes.

By emphasizing the role of social context, the situated perspective on emotion moves away from the defense of conceptual thought in emotion and instead values the skillful engagements of organisms in their environments. In this light, Griffiths and Scarantino articulate emotion and action as follows:

> Emotional content has a fundamentally pragmatic dimension, in the sense that the environment is represented in terms of what it affords to the emoter in the way of skillful engagement with it. To get a more vivid intuitive grip on this, imagine the world-as-perceived (ümwelt) of an antelope suddenly confronted by a lion. The dominant elements of the antelope's ümwelt are "escape-affordances" (Scarantino, 2004), as all of its cognitive, perceptual and motoric abilities are recruited to discover and execute an action sequence which evades the predator (2008, p. 441).

In this context, the situational dimension of emotional experience enables and is driven by planned action, outlining a dynamic flow in which context plays a crucial role. It is on the basis of the context that the person will perceive opportunities for action in the environment according to his or her emotional experience, thus modifying the environment and revitalizing the context. The pragmatism involved in the organism-environment relationship exposes the salient character of actions, rather than "[...] generating a multi-purpose representation of the environment" (*ibid.*). Such a conception makes it possible to consider non-conceptual emotional experiences even in beings without language (Bermudez, 2003). However, Griffiths and Scarantino (2008, p. 450) caution that "[...] emotional phenomena constitute a representational domain of their own, which embodies a yet-to-be-understood brand of non-conceptual content".

With regard to a possible socioconstructivist aspect of the situated perspective, the significant role that sociocultural patterns play in the constitution of emotions can be highlighted. Griffiths and Scarantino (2008, p. 443) point to an articulation between evolution and social context, according to which "[...] a feature of the emotional phenotype may be both a (phylogenetic) product of evolution and an (ontogenetic) product of a rich context of socialization". The link between evolution and social context involves an evolutionary nature seen in the interaction between environmental stimuli and the organism's responses, as well as in the formation of an organism that manifests patterns of emotional responses (dispositions) that were not necessarily chosen in earlier phases of human history. In this sense, evolutionary aspects are articulated with socio-cultural patterns, configuring dispositions that are actualized in certain contexts and involve *ideational* and *material* factors.

Ideational factors are characterized by Griffiths and Scarantino as normative standards for the occurrence and expression of emotions, or emotional *scripts*, internalized

and shared understandings of socially desirable patterns of emotional episodes. Ideational factors may also include ethnotheories, which are "culture-specific belief systems about the nature and value of emotions" (Griffiths & Scarantino, 2008, p. 444). Material factors include emotional resources associated with a particular social status, gender etc., or even "venues in which certain emotional performances are favored (a confessional, a stadium, a temple etc.), and a range of emotional technologies for the management of emotions, from prayer beads to Prozac" (*ibid.*).

Thus, although Griffiths and Scarantino's situated perspective strongly emphasizes the social and contextual aspect of emotions, it is not social constructionism in the strong sense. That is, according to this perspective, emotions are defined simply as "signals designed to influence the behavior of other organisms, or as strategic 'moves' in an ongoing transaction between organisms" (Griffiths & Scarantino, 2008, p. 438); social contextual factors (ideational and material) do not enter the theory as part of the *definition* of an emotion, but rather as elements that situate the emotion in a particular context, either synchronically (as affective scaffoldings that support a particular emotional transaction) or diachronically (as social arrangements, norms, and pressures that shape the acquisition, repetition, and transmission of emotional repertoires).

Still, if such an approach is only weakly constructionist, we agree with Hacking that the label "social construction" becomes superfluous and adds nothing to the approach in question. In fact, by labeling the theory as constructionist, there is a danger of confusing it with strong constructionism, which would invalidate Griffiths & Scarantino's observations (see above) that the situated perspective is compatible with an adaptationist approach. In other words, weak social constructionism is an unstable position that gets diluted in any kind of emotion theory that admits social and contextual factors, rendering the social construction label meaningless. Hacking is right about this.

But if this is true, what can we say about the theoretical viability of social constructionism in contemporary philosophy of emotion? Answering this question will be one of the main goals of our conclusion.

Final Considerations

In this paper we raised two important questions about social constructionism as a research program on emotions:

1. Why has this program lost almost all of its power and popularity in contemporary

philosophy of emotions since it was first developed in the 1980s?

2. Can social constructionism still be an interesting theoretical avenue for exploring how social contextual factors influence and shape our emotions?

One possible answer, following Hacking's suggestions, is that social constructionism about emotions is the result of a categorical mistake. Only ideas can be socially constructed, but since the constructionist thesis says that emotions themselves are products of construction, the label "constructionism" should be understood here only as a marker that the theory sees emotions as socially and culturally variable phenomena, not as universal automatic responses selected by evolution as adaptive solutions to recurring problems faced by our ancestors.

However, we have also seen that this diagnosis stems from a limited view of the nature of emotions and that, in a broader understanding, there is nothing to prevent emotions, like ideas, from being socially constructed. To capture what is at stake in the constructionist thesis, we drew on the work of Sally Haslanger (2012), who argues that an emotion is socially constructed constitutively when it is not possible to define the emotion without making reference to contextual social factors. We called this position strong social constructionism.

We then looked at two influential constructionist theories, by Rom Harré (1986) and James Averill (1980), and explained the sense in which emotions in these theories are social constructions according to Haslanger's (SCxF) scheme. We also raised the possibility of a weak form of social constructionism, more or less along the lines of Hacking, in which the label serves only to mark a recognition of the social and contextual variability of emotions, but without assuming that the relevant social factors are part of the definition of an emotion. We presented Griffiths & Scarantino's (2008) situated perspective as such a theory. But if this is the only function of the label "social constructionism", then it is superfluous and adds nothing to the theory in question. In other words, the only theoretically stable kind of constructionism is strong constructionism.

Now, after all our discursive path, we are finally in a position to answer questions (1) and (2) above. Regarding question (1), if we remember Hacking's remarks that the constructionist thesis functions as a kind of denouncement, and Haslanger's idea that social constructionism is a kind of "debunking project", it is not difficult to understand why constructionist theories became popular in the 1980s, just after the heyday of the adaptationist program and basic emotion theory in the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, it was important to undertake a kind of "debunking project" that could show the enormous cultural

and contextual variation of emotions beyond the pan-cultural universalism of Ekman, Plutchik, and others. In a way, this was the role played by psychologist James Russell (although he didn't use the term himself), one of Ekman's main critics, who, at least since the 1970s and 1980s, has been raising methodological and conceptual problems to Ekman's experiments and producing lots of new evidence in favor of contextual and social variation of emotions.[12]

Today, though, the social character and contextual and cultural variability of emotions are widely accepted, even by researchers within the basic emotion paradigm (Keltner et al., 2019), and thus there is little need for a "debunking project" like the one undertaken in the 1980s by James Russell and constructionists like Harré and Averill. This may help explain the loss of strength and popularity of the constructionist program in contemporary philosophy of emotion. Without its normative element, the constructionist thesis is transformed into what we called "strong constructionism", according to which social factors are part of the definition of emotions. This brings us directly to question (2) – can there be a place for strong constructionism in the philosophy of emotions?

We believe that it is more productive to examine the social factors that influence emotions from a broader perspective, one that does not assume that such factors are part of the definition of an emotion, but still allows us to examine the ways in which the cultural and sociomaterial context influences our emotions; whether as social strategies (Griffiths & Scarantino, 2008), affective scaffoldings (Colombetti & Krueger, 2015), heterogeneous arrangements of agents, places, and material objects (Slaby, Mühlhoff & Wüschner, 2019), mental invasion (Slaby, 2016), affective artifacts (Piredda, 2020), affective *milieus* composed of agents, situations, social norms, institutions etc. (Schuetze, 2021), affective habits (Candiotto & Dreon, 2021), and so on. None of these theories presupposes strong constructionism, but they nevertheless present rich concepts and theoretical frameworks that allow us to understand and theoretically address the most diverse kinds of social and contextual effects on emotions.

Sally Haslanger says that "the – perhaps by now obvious – point is that ideas and objects interact in complex ways and transform each other over time. Broadly speaking, *social construction is about this complex interaction*" (2012, p. 129). Fortunately, our understanding of emotions no longer needs a "debunking project", and contemporary philosophy of emotions already lives well with the idea that social practices and arrangements affect emotions, which in turn affect those same practices and arrangements, and so on. To better understand this

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[12] See, for example, Russell & Fehr, 1987; Russell, 1994; Russell & Carroll, 1996.

complex interaction, as Haslanger suggests, is a laudable theoretical endeavor, but if social constructionism is only a marker for this kind of theoretical focus, then it is a weak constructionism, and therefore such a label is unnecessary.

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