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# Emotion as Personal Relatedness

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## Abstract

In this article, I consider the structure of interpersonal emotional relations. I argue that current cognitive-developmental theory has overestimated the role of conceptual thinking, and underestimated the role of intrinsic social-emotional organization, in the early development of such feelings as jealousy, shame, and concern. I suggest that human forms of social experience are shaped by a process through which one individual identifies with the bodily expressed attitudes of other people, and stress the diversity of self–other relational states. I draw on studies in developmental psychopathology, and specifically research in autism and borderline personality disorder, to illustrate some implications of this viewpoint.

## Keywords

autism, borderline personality disorder, emotion, identification

There is much to gain from studying typical and atypical states of mind in relation to one another. Through the study of emotions and feelings in psychiatric illness, we may learn things about emotions and feelings in human beings who are not ill. Through the approach of developmental psychopathology, the study of typical and atypical development in relation to one another, we can discover facts, or ways of interpreting those facts, that may change our views on very basic developmental processes and principles.

In this article I shall draw on studies in developmental psychopathology, and specifically research in autism and borderline personality disorder, in arguing that we need to reconsider the nature of interpersonal engagement and the feelings that such engagement entails. My concern is to analyze the structure of emotional relations towards others, and to suggest how human beings have a propensity to engage with other people in an other-person-centered way.

## The Primacy of Personal Relations

I begin with a brief account of what passes as conventional wisdom in contemporary cognitive-developmental psychology on social emotions. Here is one of the most influential writers on this topic, Michael Lewis:

In the case of jealousy, envy, empathy, embarrassment, shame, pride, and guilt ... the elicitation of this class of emotions involves elaborate cognitive processes, and these elaborate cognitive processes have, at their heart, the notion of self, agency, and conscious intentions. (Lewis, 2003, p. 286)

According to Lewis, it is only when a toddler acquires *concepts* of self and other, something that occurs around the middle of the second year of life, that he or she is in a position to experience the emotions in question. Therefore in important respects, Lewis' account is one in which cognitive development puts absolute constraints on the development of a wide range of feelings towards others.

From a conceptual rather than developmental perspective, many philosophers also seem to have a bias towards analyzing emotional states in cognitive terms, supposing that thoughts or beliefs structure feelings. For instance, Taylor (1985, pp. 1–2) writes: “The interest of the emotions of self-assessment, for the philosopher at least, lies primarily in the nature and complexity of the beliefs involved ... Over a wide range of emotions ... beliefs are constitutive of the emotional experience in question.”

There are several reasons to be skeptical about this position. From a developmental perspective, there is evidence that infants substantially younger than 18 months old show feelings that

are closely akin to social emotions (Draghi-Lorenz, Reddy, & Costall, 2001). An especially well-documented example is that of jealousy (e.g., Hart & Carrington, 2002). Indeed, there are grounds for believing that dogs and horses feel jealousy. Morris, Doe, and Godsell (2008) reported that adults who knew their animals well described jealousy in 81% of dogs and 79% of horses. Interviews with dog owners revealed that most instances of jealousy occurred when the carer gave attention to a person or another dog, and often they involved the dog pushing between the carer and the third party. At other times, dogs' attention-seeking behavior might involve barking, growling, or whining, and also aggressiveness towards the rival.

It seems that however complex our description of jealousy, this is an emotion that can be experienced and expressed in humans and animals who do *not* have concepts of self and others. From a complementary perspective, cognitive-developmental accounts seem inadequate to encompass the phenomenology of the emotional states it is supposed to explain. It is far from obvious how the passionate jealousy of Othello or the haunting shame of Primo Levi could derive from basic emotions such as anger or fear plus an ability to think about oneself and others.

So, too, from a philosophical perspective, Goldie (2000) criticizes "the over-intellectualization of emotion" (2000, p. 11) in philosophical writings. Goldie illustrates his objection thus: "What really comes first is the emotional response itself – the feeling of fear towards the snake – and not the thought that its bite is poisonous and the thought that poison would harm me" (2000, p. 45). Not only is intentionality intrinsic to emotion, but the intentionality of beliefs and related mental states may be derived from, rather than underpin, emotional relations (Hobson, 2010). It would seem plausible that in early development, the representational content of propositional attitudes—the human ability to think in terms of a "that" that is desired, believed, or whatever—arises by a process of differentiating out such "propositions" from the cognitive *aspect* of attitudes for which a "that" does not yet exist as a cognitively separable entity. As I shall describe, one basis for such distilling-out is a very young child's experience and assimilation of other people's different attitudes towards a shared world.

So for the kinds of "social emotion" listed by Lewis, we can acknowledge that the acquisition of concepts of self and other may alter and augment a range of emotional experiences, but at the same time resist the conclusion that acquiring such concepts is a necessary precondition for having all the feelings in question. As Frijda (1993, p. 374) expresses the matter: "... even emotions like anger, guilt, and shame, that have cognitively complex definitions, can result from rather elementary stimulus constellations, and through rather elementary appraisal processes."

More than this, there are grounds for supposing that at least some social emotions structure self–other awareness and provide foundations for deriving concepts of self and other. Consider how Sartre (1956, p. 350) stresses that one discovers oneself *in* shame:

... *I am that Ego*; I do not reject it as a strange image, but it is present to me as a self which I *am* without *knowing* it; for I discover it in

shame and, in other instances, in pride. It is shame or pride which reveals to me the Other's look and myself at the end of that look. It is the shame or pride which makes me *live*, not *know* the situation of being looked at.

According to this perspective, self–other poles of experience are constitutive of certain emotional states, as givens inherent in the structure of the emotions rather than as components derived from cognitively elaborated understandings. It is not so much that self-concepts underlie shame (although they may alter the conditions of feeling shame), but rather, shame contributes to self-experience and the content of self-concepts. Part of what people conceptualize selves to *be* is determined by how they experience themselves in feeling shame, envy, jealousy, competitiveness, and so on. If we could not feel shame or other forms of self-implicating emotions, our concept of self would be impoverished to a corresponding degree.

Here I have been emphasizing particular forms of social emotion such as jealousy and shame, but the emotional and relational underpinnings for our concepts of mind, as well as for concepts of self and other people whose minds these are, are much broader than this. For example, as Hamlyn (1974; also Hobson, 1993) has argued, one could not acquire the concept of persons with minds unless one experienced appropriate forms of relation *with* persons, including relations with feeling. Indeed, there are grounds for supposing that the acquisition of concepts at all is dependent upon interpersonal engagement and the agreements in judgment that such relations afford (Hamlyn, 1978). This view is consonant with the notion that human beings need to take the role of the other in order to acquire self-reflective awareness and symbolic thinking (Mead, 1934)—where such role-taking is achieved *prior* to an understanding of what it means to adopt perspectives.

One is led to consider the primacy of emotional relations for perspective-taking and for acquiring the means to conceptual thought, including thinking about minds. As Malcolm (1962, p. 92) insists, concluding with a quotation from Wittgenstein (1958, p. 226), modes of relatedness are primary:

As philosophers we must not attempt to justify the forms of life, to give reasons for *them* – to argue, for example, that we pity the injured man because we believe, assume, presuppose, or know that in addition to the groans and writhing, there is pain. The fact is, we pity him! "What has to be accepted, the given is – so one could say – *forms of life*."

## The Structure of Emotional Relations

The question arises: What *is* the preconceptual structure of social emotions? In order to address this question, it may be worthwhile to consider what an adequate response would entail.

Firstly, as already indicated, the account would need to explain forms of noninferential role-taking that emerge in infancy and probably continue throughout life. Secondly, it would need to encompass not only feeling towards others, but also feeling *for* others. Thirdly, it should characterize how social emotions contribute to self–other awareness, and to the

formation and contents of self-concepts. Fourthly, if possible, it should account for patterns of atypicality among individuals with developmental psychopathology in social emotions.

In fact, this latter perspective, and specifically research in autism, has been instrumental in giving shape to a particular view of the processes responsible for the developmental phenomena under consideration. Children with autism show atypicalities in the features of development just outlined: marked limitations in relational and communicative role-taking, ill-organized feeling towards and for others, and restrictions in self-awareness. These and other aspects of autism become more intelligible if one posits that the children lack (or relatively lack) something critical for typical early development, namely a capacity to structure self–other relations through the propensity to *identify with* the attitudes of other people. Here the claim is that in order to make sense of autism and typical development in relation to one another, it is necessary to posit that from early in life, the propensity to identify with others is a natural organizing principle of social experience. This propensity has biological underpinnings that may be missing among children who come to manifest the syndrome of autism.

What, then, does it mean to identify with someone else? The notion is one rooted in psychoanalytic theory (e.g., Freud, 1921/1955), according to which (in its contemporary, “object relations” form) social experience has a self–other structure from the beginning of life. The paradigmatic case of social experience entails a representation of self, a representation of someone else (or in the case of infants, some part or function of someone else), and an interaction between the two. I shall not dwell on whether “representation” is quite right here (I suspect it is not), but the importance of the idea of identification is that one’s experience encompasses what one takes to be an other-person-centered psychological stance. Moreover, this other’s-stance-as-experienced can become a stance one can make one’s own. Through identification, one *both* perceives and responds to another person’s bodily expressed attitudes as belonging to that person, *and* one can come to incorporate the attitude-as-perceived into one’s own emotional repertoire. Importantly, identifying-with has cognitive, motivational, and affective aspects (not components; Hobson, 2008). So we can appreciate the force of the following definition of identification from Laplanche and Pontalis (1973, p. 205):

Psychological process whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property or attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides. It is by means of a series of identifications that the personality is constituted and specified.

The picture becomes more complicated once one appreciates that the process of identifying-with not only structures emotional life and self-development, but also develops new variants such as identifying with another person’s values or personality. Yet it is with relatively simple (albeit not the simplest, very early) forms of identification, apparent towards the end of the first year of a typically developing infant’s life, that we are most concerned here.

Consider, for example, social referencing as an expression of early, preconceptual role-taking in which another person’s attitudes are identified-with and “made one’s own.” The paradigmatic instance occurs when, in the presence of an adult, an infant is confronted with an emotionally ambiguous object or event. In one well-known early study (Sorce, Emde, Campos, & Klinnert, 1985), what seemed like a cliff prevented very young children from reaching a goal. Typically, infants looked towards and then responded to the affective expression of a parent, as this had directedness to the visual cliff. Fourteen out of 19 12-month-olds who perceived that their mothers were looking to the cliff with smiles tentatively proceeded towards their goal, whereas none of those who witnessed their mothers showing fear in relation to the cliff did so. The fact that the objects at the focus of the adult’s attitudes change in meaning for the infant has been demonstrated through modifying the procedures (Hornik, Risenhoover, & Gunnar, 1987; Walden & Ogan, 1988). Here we see how the infant is able to identify with the attitudes of the other as “other,” such that the world comes to have meaning according to oneself as identified with the other, and therefore (potentially at least) a new meaning for oneself.

Such movements in affective stance establish a framework within which a child can come to conceptualize—that is, think about—how different persons have different takes on the same shared world, somewhere around the middle of the second year. Social co-orientation in relation to given objects or events is such as to establish the possibility of the infant coming to differentiate how two person-anchored attitudes can be brought to bear on the same object or event in the environment. In addition, from around the end of the first year the infant begins to adopt the stance of the other towards his or her own attitudes, which as Mead (1934) described, is important for at least some forms of reflective self-awareness. The reversibility of communication—that what X means when you use it to communicate something to me is what X means when I use it to communicate to you—and the emancipation of meanings from the objects in which those meanings inhere pave the way for symbolic thought (Hobson, 2002).

I stress how the developmental implications of social referencing depend not only on the infant’s adjustments in attitude through responsiveness to another person’s bodily expressed attitudes as these are directed to a shared world, but also upon the infant experiencing this shift as occurring through another source of attitudes, that is, another person. It is critical for developments in social understanding that the infant should register the shift *as* a shift across perspectives, not merely as a change in the meaning of objects at the focus of referencing, if the infant is to come to understand what it means to hold a perspective. The idea of “registering” here may be illustrated with reference to those forms of joint attention that involve children showing things to others, and having interest in the other person’s reactions. If the children were unable to register those responses as other-person-centered—and this need not imply that they understand people to have minds, except in a special sense—then such behavior is difficult to explain. I am

suggesting that a child's ability to maintain a distinction between what is experienced directly and what is experienced through others is critical for that child to acquire conceptual understanding of people's subjective orientations towards the world.

I should add that identifying-with is not simulating. In this process, one does not "use" someone else as a model for one's own actions or attitudes, nor, a fortiori, does one imaginatively put oneself in the shoes of someone else. On the contrary, the account of identifying-with is supposed to provide the starting point for a developmental account to explain how such imaginative role-taking abilities arise. The idea is that paradigmatically (and special considerations enter into the account of infant experience), interpersonal relations are structured in such a way that *as part of his/her emotional state*, a person (A) experiences someone else (B) as having his or her own attitudes. However A experiences B's emotional state—a complex matter, because this is a part of A's experience, not B's—this B-derived part of A's emotional state may shape A's subsequent actions and attitudes through identification. Whether identifying-with always has to be emotional is a moot point, and one that may become clarified through the study of autism.

## The Case of Autism

Autism is a syndrome, which means a constellation of clinical features that happen to co-occur. Central among the features of autism are impairments in social relations, deficits in creative flexible thinking and language, and the presence of unusual mannerisms and/or preoccupations. The classic description by Kanner (1943) conveys something of the children's relatedness towards others. For example, Kanner wrote the following about 5-year-old Paul (1943, Case 4, p. 228): "He never looked up at people's faces. When he had any dealings with persons at all, he treated them, or rather parts of them, as if they were objects."

Additional details concerning the children's lack of engagement with the attitudes of others can be gathered from parent reports. Wimpory, Hobson, Williams, and Nash (2000) interviewed parents of children with and without autism under 4 years old, prior to diagnosis, about the children's behavior in the first 2 years of life. The parents' reports indicated that as infants, none of those who turned out to have autism had shown frequent or intense eye contact, engaged in turn-taking with adults, or used noises communicatively, whereas half of the matched children without autism were reported to show each of these kinds of behavior. There were also fewer infants with autism who greeted or waved to their parents, or who directed feelings of anger and distress towards people. In addition, not one of the infants with autism, but at least half the infants in the control group, were reported to offer or give objects to others in the first 2 years of life. The children seemed to be less connected with other people for their own sake, but also less connected with or able to share others' affective attitudes to a shared world (Charman et al., 1997; Sigman, Kasari, Kwon, & Yirmiya, 1992).

Hobson, Chidambi, Lee, and Meyer (2006) interviewed parents of older children with and without autism, aged between

approximately 6 and 13 years. Parents felt they could recognize in their children with autism not only emotions such as anger and fear, but also emotional responsiveness to other people's mood states, as well as shyness and non-person-directed pride. Yet seldom could they cite clear instances of other-person-centered emotions such as guilt, shame, pity, empathic concern, or embarrassment.

This latter investigation also involved a set of quasiexperimental studies which yielded compatible findings. For example, when children with autism felt responsible for the leg falling off a doll, they were less likely than nonautistic participants to show a "guilty looks" pattern of orientation towards the tester that included expressions of relief when the tester reassured them that the doll was already broken; and when they received the attentions of a cuddly toy wielded by a playful tester, they rarely showed "reengagement looks" that give coyness a specially intimate quality. This was despite the fact that the participants with autism showed many signs of being aware when they were the focus of attention. It seemed that there was a dissociation between these participants' self-consciousness in being observed, and their ability to be affected by and engaged with the attitudes of a particular embodied other person.

A final illustration comes from a study on anticipatory concern (Hobson, Harris, García-Pérez, & Hobson, 2009). Here children witnessed one adult tearing another (non-responsive) adult's drawing. In contrast to children without autism, who expressed dismay, questioned the perpetrator, and showed concern towards the victim, most children with autism showed very little indication of *feeling for* the person whose drawing it was. For example, few responded to the sight of the adult tearing the drawing by giving an immediate look to the victim, a reaction that was not only very common among those without autism, but also seemed to reflect how swiftly they identified with and anticipated the hurt the person would feel. The victim had shown no overt expression, yet the children without autism immediately orientated towards, and showed concern for, this person.

These studies capture how certain forms of role-taking are less apparent among individuals with autism. But do such limitations in role-taking reflect a diminished capacity to identify with the attitudes of other people? The case for this suggestion has been bolstered by research on nonverbal and verbal communication, as well as imitation, among children with autism (e.g., García-Pérez, Lee, & Hobson, 2007; Hobson, García-Pérez, & Lee, 2009; Hobson & Lee, 1999; Hobson, Lee, & Hobson, 2007). For instance, in the Sticker Test of Hobson and Meyer (2005), children without autism would often employ a point-to-themselves to communicate that a tester should place a sticker on *herself*. They appeared to identify with the tester, and presume she in turn would identify with them pointing-to-themselves and place the sticker on her own (i.e., the tester's) body. Participants with autism seldom adjusted their communication in this mutually co-ordinated, person-anchored way. Instead, most pointed directly to the tester's body.

In summary, a cluster of abilities that depend upon other-person-centered experience, and that usually appear early in

life, appear to be notable for their relative absence among children with autism. Importantly, these abilities extend across a range of communicative and emotionally configured social relations—so much so, that one might surmise there is an intimate connection between “feeling for” and “communicating for” someone else. What is missing among children with autism highlights what is present among children without autism, namely forms of emotional engagement through which a child is moved in psychological attitude by the bodily expressed attitudes of someone else.

### The Case of Borderline Personality Disorder

A second, very different perspective comes from research on borderline personality disorder. Individuals are said to have this syndrome when they meet five out of nine diagnostic criteria: a pattern of intense, unstable relationships; impulsiveness in at least two areas that are potentially self-damaging; affective instability; inappropriate, intense anger or lack of control of anger; recurrent suicidal threats or self-mutilating behavior; marked and persistent identity disturbance; chronic feelings of emptiness or boredom; frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment; and transient paranoid or dissociative symptoms. It is far from self-evident that defined in this way, the syndrome of borderline personality disorder should be associated with any particular forms of self–other experience and mental representation.

In this case, the evidence (to date) bears not so much the organization of emotion early in life, although it may well be relevant for this, as upon disturbed patterns of self–other relations that characterize the syndrome and illustrate the interpersonal structure of at least some emotional states.

One study evaluated hostile–helpless states of mind in women with borderline personality disorder, as these states were manifest in transcripts from an interview concerned with significant early relationships (Lyons-Ruth, Melnick, Patrick, & Hobson, 2007). Raters assessed the extent to which participants mentally represented attachment figures in contradictory and malevolent ways, and whether they appeared to assume (identify with) the characteristics of these figures. The results were that all the women with borderline personality disorder, compared with half the group with chronic depression, displayed hostile–helpless states of mind. The former group manifested a higher frequency of globally devaluing representations, and there was a strong trend for more of this group to show identification with a hostile or devalued caregiver (58% borderline vs. 18% with chronic depression).

One statement reflecting identification with a devalued caregiver was:

... and I used to shout at them in the same way that people I felt threatened by people who used to tell me off like school teachers and things, and my mother. I use the same tone and say the same sort of things.

Here one sees how the patient feels caught up in enacting towards others just “the same sort of [threatening] things” that she felt her mother displayed towards herself.

At the time of being threatened, of course, this person’s state would not match that of her mother. Being threatened is not the same as being threatening. Yet perhaps the correct way to characterize the person’s reported experience was something like “being threatened by a shouting mother,” where the “by a shouting mother” part of the description is essential to the original emotional state. The mother’s contribution to the state is registered *within* that state in such a way as to be available for identifying-with at a subsequent time. Children’s play provides abundant manifestations of just this kind of interpersonally grounded process.

In another study (Hobson, Patrick, & Valentine, 1998), we had psychotherapy trainees watch 30-minute videotapes of interviews with patients, and judge patterns of relatedness according to a scale that included ratings of the degree to which the person showed such features as “clear or subtle indications of locked-in hostility, abuse, victimization, and/or controlled/controlling relations (including sadomasochism),” or experienced the interviewer as “narcissistic, self-preoccupied, unattuned, using others for self-gratification” or “emotionally available and caring, with recognition of the needs and wishes of others.” The patients with borderline personality disorder were almost completely distinguishable from those with chronic depression, in virtue of their manifesting the more disturbed (“paranoid–schizoid”) forms of relatedness.

Once again, self–other-structured emotional relations characterized a syndrome with a broad range of clinical features. These patients’ emotional difficulties, although sometimes portrayed by psychiatrists as disorders of mood, comprised emotionally charged *personal relations* of relatively specific kinds. What psychiatrists abstract as “affective instability” or “intense anger” in the criteria for borderline personality disorder are just that—abstracted from the interpersonal dynamics of which these emotional features are an aspect. When abstracted in this way, the emotions lose the specific qualities of personal relatedness that make them the particular emotions, for instance the emotional state of locked-in hostility toward someone else, that they are.

It might be argued that this is all very well, and perhaps it is a mistake for psychiatrists to analyze such relations into simpler feelings or character traits, but it does not tell us much about the structure of emotions per se, and certainly not much about what is “basic” in the developmental story. True, studies such as these cannot establish the developmental primacy or otherwise of this or that characteristic of emotional life. Yet the research may do more than illustrate patterns of social-emotional relatedness and the operation of identifying-with. It may also prompt us to question whether it is anything but prejudice that leads us to suppose that such seemingly complex relational states are built up out of simpler building blocks. There is an alternative possibility: there are biologically configured propensities to experience highly structured personal relations, out of which we might choose to abstract (or onto which we might seek to impose) notions of simple emotions. As Goldie (2000, p. 19) argues, “Any suggestion that our emotional feelings towards things can be

understood as, or analyzed into, simple terms ... should be strongly resisted. Surely we all know that emotional feelings are not that simple.”

On the face of it, the phenomenology of relational states manifest in borderline psychopathology does not lend itself to analysis in terms of familiar basic or not-so-basic emotions. Here the person's experiences of others are the stuff of nightmares, for example, in feeling threats of intrusion or victimization. The possibility arises that such states tap into something that exists from early in development and is “basic” to human nature—after all, persecutory states are more or less ubiquitous as a *potential* for human beings—and moreover something that may be organized and detoxified into “simpler” and more integrated emotional-relational states through early relationships. In this case, if a child's early social relations are troubled, then such development may be compromised. This is what many psychoanalysts claim to be the case.

## Conclusions

Often we think of emotions in a way that is disembedded from the relations between an embodied organism and its relations with the world. We talk about “anger,” “fear,” and so on, abstracting feeling states from the objects towards which the feelings are felt. This may be a mistake. In the realm of social engagement, it may be more appropriate to consider emotions as relational states that implicate self–other poles of experience. For example, it may be more accurate to characterize one's fear towards someone as fear towards a threatening other or fear towards an abandoning other, and so on.

In this article, I have dwelt on the propensity of human beings to identify with the attitudes of other people—a process for which we have evidence in 9-month-old typically developing children, but one that appears to be compromised or fragile among children with autism—and stressed its importance for experiencing and being moved by other people as centers of subjectivity. This enables one person to feel *for as well as towards* another, and enriches (or sometimes poisons) one's attitudes towards the world and oneself *through* engaging with others. After all, it is a commonplace to observe how children who are threatened can become children who make threats, and how children who are abandoned can become adults who abandon. Such processes, at a deep and primitive level, may hold the key to the genesis as well as nature of borderline personality disorder.

Although development in the process of identifying-with may occur in part through cognitive advances, early expressions of this emotionally configured process appear to be partly independent of cognitive (or at least conceptual) components. To identify with someone else has cognitive, affective, and motivational *aspects*, so, for example, one is “moved” in feeling and in proneness to certain forms of action by becoming engaged with the plight of other people, but this does not mean that the process has separable cognitive, affective, and motivational prerequisites.

If all this is correct, then there are profound implications for our view of emotional life and for our understanding of psychiatric disorder. Autism and borderline personality disorder illustrate this in two very different ways.

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