# Conceptualizing Contextual Emotion
# The Grounds for "Supra-Rationality"

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> [Anne:] "I can't, I'm in the depths of despair. Can you eat when you are in the depths of despair?"
>
> "I've never been in the depths of despair, so I can't say," said Marilla.
>
> "Weren't you? Well did you ever try to imagine you were in the depths of despair?"
>
> " No, I didn't."
>
> "Then I don't think you can understand what it's like. It's a very uncomfortable feeling indeed. When you try to eat a lump comes right up in your throat and you can't swallow anything, not even if it was a chocolate caramel."
>
> —L.M. Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables*.

Emotion, as a "suprarational" property, transcends rationality in that it can be thought of as a group, contextual rather than as a solely individual trait, and thus is a higher order property, as the above quote suggests. This proposal arises from a metatheoretical analysis of models available to broach questions of emotion. I use metatheoretical in the sense of both the context of theory production and the theory of theory. From the first arose the idea that emotion, through the use of irrationality, has surfaced as a working equivalent to inexplicability or rational relativity, and can be modelled more adequately as suprarational, with a unique nature in its own right. The latter led me to propose that the concept of emotion as contextual, a higher order group level property, is possible and tentatively profitable.

A great deal of attention has been directed toward social factors that shape emotion (Radley 1988, Harre 1986) and towards how talk about emotion is constructed (Scheff 1990), but there has been less interest in conceptualizing emotion itself. Important as these efforts are, they are not enough, because emotion needs to be mod-

elled directly. Is talking about emotion equivalent to the experience of feeling? I suggest it is not. To wit, the Japanese emotion of *amai* (Katsumata 1954), which reflects feelings of filial responsibility and has no equivalent term in English. Does this then mean that English-speaking people do not experience this feeling? Even though the social influences on how people talk about emotion are modelled, this does not capture how people experience emotion. I provide here a model of emotion as a "suprarational" property to capture the contextual and higher order nature of its human experience.

## The Heritage of Models of Emotion as Irrationality

Where models do exists, emotion seems to have been modelled best on what it isn't rather than on what it is. Emotion has surfaced as a kind of "other" category that captures all behaviors that cannot be explained within a cognitive rational model. I argue that this is a limitation of the cognitive rational overlay rather than a valid representation of the property of human emotion. Limitations can be demarcated on two fronts – inexplicability and relativity.

### *Inexplicability*

Emotion as inexplicability can be traced back as far as Aristotle, who saw "cognition as an essential part of emotional response" and "that emotions can be reasonable" (Erickson 1974: 205). That which is not rational is by definition inexplicable, hence irrational, and thus, only justifiable in terms of external forces, such as diseases. The idea that actions are reasonable, measured, sensible, runs through various forms of sociological theory, from classics like Weber and Durkheim to more recent efforts like labelling of symbolic interaction. Conventional theories in sociology, however, offer at best a rational/irrational model of the human being (Rule 1989). Thus, emotional behavior is often grouped arbitrarily with irrational behavior because it cannot be explained within the confines of the model.

I argue that this is not because emotion is irrelevant, but rather because conventional sociological models have regarded it as epiphenomenal. It falls outside the categories of human behavior we are prepared to see. This is a basic epistemological stance toward what is, or is not, considered relevant to the phenomenon

of interest which leads to grouping all inexplicable behavior as irrational, emotion included. Thus, emotion has been modelled more effectively outside, than within, sociology. This means that models of emotion that look for social factors in emotions either in or outside sociology strike an impass.

This tendency shows up in the social context of sociological theory when it justifies grouping emotions with notions of disease or hormones. This leads to both explanation and intervention within the purveyance of a medical model in disciplines outside sociology. The implicit assumption of a medical model focuses attention on the individual as the unit of analysis, neglecting emergent group-level dynamics that may be of concern to sociologists. Inattention to emotion in sociology and its relegation to disciplines such as medicine, psychology, psychiatry, social work, or family therapy (see Kemper 1978 for detailed discussion) may derive from more fundamental problems of conventional sociological models. These models lack constructs that are able to capture the unique nature of human emotion, and thus must regard it as epiphenomenal, someone else's business.

### *Relativity*

Emotion as rational relativity is a derivative of inexplicability, and can be paralleled to the concept of sexual relativity. Historically, emotion has been conceptualized relative to a rational model of human behavior. That which is not rational is therefore irrational, making emotion a property relative to irrationality. This does not capture the possibility that emotion has a life and nature of its own.

The parallel to sexuality lies in the observations of Freud (1965 [1933]) and De Beauvoir (1974), both of whom, starting from different stances, pointed out that woman is judged relatively to man, and therefore found wanting. As with emotion, the possibility of womanness as a property with its own unique, special, and legitimate nature is not seen. I propose that emotion is a property in its own right, one that is separable from rationality.

At this point inexplicability and relativity can be woven together. Perhaps the inexplicability and relativity of emotion are not just paralleled in questions of sexuality, but are also related. In the social context of social theory the association of woman as both relative and inexplicable is linked to the association of emotion with

woman. By treating emotion as epiphenomenal behavior, both men and women may have been oversimplified to the detriment of explanation.

To illustrate, in criminology the cognitive rational overlay effectively would portray a scene where a potential offender sits waiting for a victim, weighing the odds: If I rape a woman I'll get x years, but if I murder a man I'll get x+ years. The way the phenomena are conceived and treated models criminality as a rational process of weighing odds. Crimes of passion or emotion miss the nets because there is not an adequate model of emotion, just irrationality.

If a behavior can't be explained by a cognitive/rational model, it is considered external to the phenomena. This spawns medicalization and individuation. By seeing rationality only as an individual trait, the process of individuation is begun. Looking to the individual and seeing no rational cause suggests external medical or psychological grounds. Intervention is thus directed at this mode of cause and "treated." The use of a "treatment" mode itself focuses on individuals to the neglect of context. Transcending rationality means going forward from the limitations of a cognitive rational overlay by allowing emotion to be modelled as a contextual rather than as a solely individual trait.

Emotion as a human property may be different order and nature than properties like cognition and reason, and as such it demands a model that recognizes its unique nature. If emotion is different in nature than cognition, but we are using the same models to capture it, we are in effect trying to capture water in a sieve because it holds pasta well. If it is the water we are after, we must devise models that recognize its nature and thus help us capture it.

## The Grounds for "Suprarationality"

Capturing emotion is aided by a model of "suprarationality," the transcendence of rationality on two grounds. First, emotion goes *beyond* rationality because it can be conceived of as a group rather than as a solely individual property. Second, emotion goes *above* rationality in that it is more central, a higher order property of human nature.

Emotion can be conceived of as an emergent group-level property. Fear, sexual arousal, insecurity, and love are commonly used to explain individual behavior. These feeling states can also be con-

ceived of as emergent properties of relationships. The grounds for this stance are found in sociological, psychological, and psychiatric models, but are most firmly rooted in a general systems theory approach.

Recent work has advanced conceptions of emotions greatly by recognizing that it is related to context (Harre 1986). Typically, these models view emotion as an individual trait that is controlled, shaped, determined, or influenced by social context (Radley 1988 or Coutler 1986). I propose an extension of this line of thought by modeling emotion as an emergent property of context, an inseparable part of context; in so doing I integrate more fully the concepts of emotion and context.

Society and emotion are coemergent in my conception. Emotion is part and parcel of context. Prevailing conceptions are prone to examine the coercive, controlling, and/or determining role of society. However, this type of conception does not allow for the interactive process, whereby meaning is established. A general systems theory approach provides the flexibility to analyze the constraint. This provides the potential to explain behavior outcomes on the case level and removes the implicit "independent variable" status of social context. Further, because essential properties of context emerge in any group of two or more parts, it is possible to bridge the gap between the level of the small group and the level of social context.

Existing models in sociology, psychology, and psychiatry have recognized context and emotion, but have yet to explore the potential of conceiving of emotion as context. A general systems theory approach provides the jumping board to fuse these currently disparate ideas.

## *Context and Emotion*

Context surfaces as a key issue in each of the three broadly defined schools of sociological theory: conflict theory, structural functionalism, and symbolic interactionism. Conflict sociology has built upon the original writings of Marx, but retains its emphasis on the context specificity of phenomena. Structural functionalism uses concepts such as organismic analogy, equilibrium, evolution, and function. All recognize the integrated nature of phenomena, the necessity to consider social phenomena as parts of a larger whole. Symbolic interaction was founded on the notion of the subjective

nature of human phenomena and the meaning interaction holds for the actors involved. Concepts such as symbols, group level meaning, team productions, and prevailing definition (Goffman 1959), have surfaced within this line of thinking. All point to the importance of specific collective meaning in the immediate group, the interpersonal context.

However, while each of the three schools seem to address issues of context, they seem to be locked into a debate about the precise nature of context. Assumptions of economic determinism in conflict, externality of social phenomena in structural functionalism, and subjectivity of social phenomena in symbolic interactionism prevent an integration of the schools on the common issue of context. Further, preoccupation with the so-called macro/micro or structure/subjective meaning debate forces conventional sociological theory into a kind of either/or proposition, even though the basic issue of context is common.

Sociological models have difficulty dealing with phenomena such as suicide, domestic homicide, infanticide, abuse or unwed pregnancy. While average tendencies in populations can be addressed, the dynamics of choice and outcome on the case level remain inexplicable. Sociological theory has difficulty explaining why, under apparently similar conditions, John Doe beats his wife, while Jim Doe does not. Emotion appears to "slip through the crack" between macro/micro and structural/subjective conceptualizations. I argue this crack can be filled by a contextual model of emotion.

In the field of psychology, three key contributions to the issue of context can be noted: field theory, gestalt psychology, and communication theory. The message in field theory is that perception is relative. Lewin, a field theorist, points out that "[a]ny behavior or any other change in psychological field depends only upon the psychological field at the time" (1951). According to this perspective it is necessary to understand an object relative to its surrounding field or context in order to understand the way humans organize their perceptions of that object. Gestalt psychology focuses attention on the emergent wholes that humans create (Kast, Rosenzweig, and Checkland 1983). Ash (1981) advanced this line of thinking by exploring the relative nature of perception (discussed by Zajonc 1968). Communication theory (Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson 1967) makes a direct recognition of context and provides concepts that capture the connections between communication pat-

terns and the ongoing nature of relationships among individuals. The concepts of report and command provide a way of linking discrete verbal information to its meaning in context. These models in psychology recognize context, but none recognize directly how emotion relates to context; hence none provides the conceptual equipment to conceive of feelings as relational.

In the area of psychiatry, David Reiss has made an important contribution to the study of context with the development of a model of "family paradigm" (1981). This model was designed to capture shared constructs in families, group level properties in "which all members believe" (Reiss 1981:67). This conception provides an important advance to existing models in that it moves to a consideration of how information is processed in families. It begins mapping out the dynamics of information processing. This can be viewed as an important extension of communication theory, in that it provides a means of modeling the specifics of communication process in individual cases. However, while information processing is captured by the model, emotion is not recognized directly, despite the fact that the author admits that it may be important. Reiss notes that it may have been advantageous to record "some systematic relationships between the feeling states of the families and their performance on the procedures" (1981:59).

Perhaps the most effective recognition of emotion in human behavior has been in the area of psychiatry, beginning with the pioneering work of Freud (1933). The central line of the psychoanalytic argument, which ties behavior to underlying primary motivations and emotional triggers, has been a tremendously stirring and influential concept. More recently, work on the role of emotion in psychiatric disorder and family process (Doane, Fallon, Goldstein, and Mintz 1985) has underlined the need to bring emotion into models of human group behavior. Unfortunately, although emotion has been recognized, it has not been conceptualized directly as a feature of the group. Models of behavior, even where they recognize the importance of emotion as context, run aground on the constraints of conventional medical model methods, which treat individuals as the unit of analysis.

In all three fields, context surfaces as an issue crucial to the understanding of human behavior, as does emotion, but the possibility that emotion may be a property of context is not recognized. These models, while recognizing the importance of context in the study of human behavior have not developed a conceptual frame-

work capable of exploring emotion as a contextual property. This leaves a key question for the development of new models to study emotion.

Can we conceptualize emotion as a property of context? I suggest that this dilemma cannot be addressed by an integration of theoretical ideas. The assumptive bases of the theories that I have mentioned are too diverse and contradictory to be combined into a "common ground" theory of emotional context. Rather, what I propose is a shift in thinking to a new type of model: a general systems theory approach. This presents a means of addressing the issues highlighted by conventional approaches without having to tamper with the assumptive bases to which they are anchored.

## *Emotion as Context: Non-Summativity*

Emotion may have been missed in conventional models by using both too wide and too narrow a focus. The unit of society or of individual neglects the possibility of contextual gradations, beginning with the dyad and expanding upward in number. Seeing these gradations is aided by general systems theory approach.

Variously misunderstood, a general systems theory approach has only one requisite, use of the principle of non-summativity – the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Attention to properties of organization of these emergent wholes is its core concern (Rapoport 1968, von Bertalanffy 1968). The approach emerged in response to growing dissatisfaction with mechanical models of biological and social phenomena. It resists the "scientific" (Sutherland 1973) tendency to take systems apart and analyze them in parts.

By derivation, as detected in the writings of Weiner (1948), von Bertalanffy (1968), and Rapoport (1989), this provides a means of humanizing science. Science, defined as the process of refining theory, may have been confused historically with logical positivism. The cognitive rational model of humans, both as research subjects and researchers, may derive from the logical positivist overlay rather than science itself. The pioneers of a general systems theory approach appeared to recognize this and call for models in science that depart epistemologically from the concepts of mechanistic units and linear cause that are core to logical positivism. Doing science of humans by humans can be guided by a non-summative model that recognizes the emergence of human traits such as meaning and feeling.

The concept of non-summativity – the whole is greater than the sum of its parts – which is the point of departure for a general systems theory approach, sets the stage for a shift in thinking about emotion. It focuses attention on emergent properties of groups of two or more parts. These emergent wholes are contexts. Looking at the level of context means seeing the relationship as a whole, rather than just the individuals separately. Within this stance, it is possible to look for feedback patterns that may drive an abusive, anorexic, or alcoholic relationship. These patterns may not appear when one member of the group is examined out of the group's emotional context. The question is shifted from, what underlying internal psychodynamics prompt the anorexic to throw up? to, what type of emotional patterns in the family can explain why the anorexic throws up?

The focus is on redundant patterns in emergent wholes, on the context of a given phenomena. One of the most stirring offshoots of this approach has been game theory as applied to peace and conflict studies. Arms escalation and thermonuclear conflict can't be seen as individual phenomena. All parts are inextricably linked in the process, making any action or inaction causal in the process as a whole. After recognizing this feedback causal chain the task becomes demarcating and analyzing emergent properties of groups. It is necessary to abandon sole focus on any single part in order to devise ways to change the pattern as a whole.

Work within a general systems theory approach in the areas of psychiatry (Laing 1969), psychology (Watzlawick et al. 1967), and anthropology (Bateson 1956) has pointed to patterns in behavior that, while not rational, are redundant. Patterns that explicate the heretofore inexplicable are detectable when individual behavior is examined as part of a context, such as the family unit. The approaches cited above focus on the dynamics of communication that lead to aberrations in behavior. Recent work has modeled the emotional quality of these patterns (Hanson 1989).

A general systems theory approach points out that considering a human being as a discrete individual leads to the same kind of problems that were created when DDT was introduced to the discrete phenomena of insects. The epistemological shift suggests seeing and modeling any phenomena as a context. When we act on an individual part – abortion law, insect, drug cartel, schizophrenic – it impacts all other parts of the systems, owing to the interconnected nature of phenomena. Furthermore, because of the emergent

properties of systems, the final effect cannot be predicted based on knowledge of the initial act alone. Before accurate prediction is possible the nature of the system must be understood. Thus, the task of the general systems theorist is to understand the nature of the system as a unit. To this end, general systems theory develops conceptual tools that capture observed patterns in systems and can be used to accomplish a variety of goals. By way of analogy, a knife can be used for heart surgery or for murder, but the knife itself does not determine how it is used. Neither does it give full justification for grouping Christiann Barnard and Jack the Ripper together.

I propose to add to the study of group-level phenomena the important and heretofore absent property of emotion. Emotional impetus for behavior can be found on the level of groups. The cyclic patterns of family abuse are but one type of phenomena that demonstrate the need to study the emotional dynamics of the relationship of husband and wife, without dividing this phenomenon into roles of victim and perpetrator. The failure of the strategy of separating spouses should make obvious the fallacy of using individual units in the analysis of this phenomenon. Why does physical separation generally fail? I suggest that emotional bonds remain even though physical interaction has stopped. These relational emotional bonds must be studied as a crucial part of the phenomenon before means of stopping abuse can be found.

### *Emotion as a Higher Order Property: Equifinality/Multifinality*

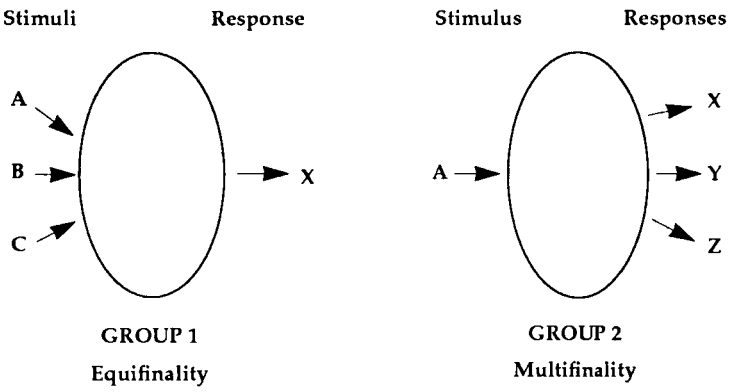
If the principle of non-summability is accepted as means of modeling emotion as context, a concept from a general systems theory approach can be drawn upon.

Equifinality/multifinality is the differential reactivity of systems to stimuli. The specific linkage of this general concept to emotion draws on the work of Tomkins (1970, 1965, 1962). This consideration points out the primacy of emotion and the need to regard emotion as a feature of context.

Equifinality/multifinality points out that by virtue of the interrelatedness of parts in systemic wholes, the result of a given stimulus on that system may not be predictable a priori. It is possible to get the same result from a variety of stimuli (equifinality) and to get a variety of results from a single stimulus (multifinality) (Kast, Rosenzweig, and Checkland 1983; Rapoport 1968; or Watzlawick,

Beavin, and Jackson 1967). This can be illustrated graphically, as in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**




Emotional reactivity in human groups

Emergent properties of systems mean that final outcomes cannot be predicted solely on the basis of information about initial inputs. Unanticipated consequences may arise, given that systems exhibit non-summative properties. Models of linear causality are therefore not very useful for studying systems. What is more important is attending to the nature of emergent patterns in the system. This is where emotions become relevant.

Emotions can be conceived of as the differential response to stimuli across systems. It relates to Tomkins's conception of emotion as an amplifier, a property of human beings that may serve either to increase or decrease reaction to messages (1962). Tomkins conceived of emotion as an individual trait. I suggest that his notion of emotion as amplifier can be linked appropriately to the concept of equifinality/multifinality. Emotion is a property of organization that leads to variation in reactions to stimuli. As such, Tomkins's concept can be made relevant to a general systems theory approach. By allowing that emotion can be modelled as a property of the group rather than the individual, an element of non-summative context. Systems amplify stimuli. This is a general pattern that is relevant to any type of system.

Through equifinality/multifinality, emotion can be seen as both amplifying and dampening. Emotion, as such, is a higher order



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property that acts like an interrupter switch that turns on or off and transmits differential reactivity to stimuli on other levels, such as cognition and communication. Emotions can short-circuit reason, sense, and psychological response, making them properties of a higher order.

## Discussion: Contextual Emotion Forward

Conceiving of emotion as suprarational, a unique higher-order property of human groups, open up the investigation of a variety of systems. The idea of emotion, the amplification or dampening leading to equifinal/multifinal results, can be applied to many phenomena on a variety of levels. Once a concept that can help organize observed phenomena is defined, the process of rendering these phenomena explicable begins. A model of emotion as context can contribute by providing the means of mapping out emergent and therefore often unpredictable outcomes. Possibly this will make so-called inexplicable, irrational, or "crazy" behavior modelable, and therefore explicable.

Could Einstein have predicted that $E=mc^2$ ultimately would result in the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Was the phenomenal success of "Hoola Hoops," "Pet Rocks," "Cabbage Patch Kids," or "Trivial Pursuit" predictable using conventional models and methods? I suggest not. Each of these examples illustrates the essential dynamics of the pattern of non-summative emotion, equifinal/multifinal properties of context. Somehow these individual stimuli, when introduced into a system, were amplified to the point that their ultimate effect could not have been predicted. Recognizing the ability of systems to amplify is the first step in charting the specific characteristics that determine different outcomes. This may lead to greater accuracy of prediction and hence inform actions that are taken on systems. Using a general model of emotional properties may lend a hand in predicting what is now considered inexplicable, and may have far-reaching implications in the exploration of such topics as the arms race, marketing, or serial family violence.



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