

Solomon's "Getting Angry: The Jamesian Theory of Emotion in Anthropology" - analysis

1) Read the subsequent quotes and discuss the questions posed below.

What is the main message, what does Solomon want us to understand, what is his main thesis? What does he think we should study in order to better understand emotions?

p.199

"My main thesis is that emotions are to be construed [explained] as cultural acquisitions, determined by the circumstances and concepts of a particular culture as well as, or rather much more than, by the functions of biology and, more specifically, neurology."

p.201

"[...] the beliefs people have about emotions vary considerably, and it remains to be seen just how this reflects – or doesn't reflect – the crosscultural (and intracultural) variability of the emotions themselves."

2) Here's a little test – chose the most fitting proposition.

In short, Solomon believes that:

- a) It is only by studying nervous impulses, hormones and other biological aspects of the feeling body that we can understand emotions.
- b) By studying language, people's belief systems and action, we can get a better understanding of the way emotions vary crossculturally and what it says about their nature as such.
- a) Culture determines not just how we talk about emotions but also how we perceive them individually. It is possible that not only language differs but also the ways we feel varies with cultures.
- b) Although the words by which we refer to emotions vary, emotions remain constant across various cultures.
- c) There is no relation between how people talk about emotions and what they actually feel.

3) According to Solomon, people – in casual speech, science or poetry – think of anger as a kind of liquid filling the body and finally exploding and spilling over. We recognize this process through such expressions as a 'rising tension', 'explosion of anger', 'accumulation of anger' etc. He states:

"The metaphor is so pervasive, it so dominates our thinking about our feelings, that we find ourselves unable to experience our emotions without it. [...] Consequently, we believe what the metaphor tells us instead of recognizing it as a metaphor, a cultural artifact that systematically misleads us in our understanding of other people. [...] Rendered science, the same metaphor is made respectable in physiological garb. The medieval physicians theorized... [read the excerpt to the end of the paragraph, p.197, 2nd paragraph]."

What is Solomon saying? What is the problem that he identified?

Test – correct or incorrect? Why?

- a) Anger is actually a bodily fluid (like blood or lymph) which was discovered by medieval

physicians. When it augments and rises, one gets angry.

b) The way we speak about anger in metaphors shapes how we actually experience it. Various cultures locate anger in various organs and have different imageries to describe it. therefore, we cannot trust metaphors to give as an accurate picture of what anger is and how it functions.

c) People from Tahiti to Paris think about anger in a similar way. Therefore, we can be sure that this emotion is universal. Just like we all have two hands and feet, we feel anger in the same way. It is a purely biological phenomenon.

d) Although people in Western tradition tend to use a set of metaphors that liken anger to a rising liquid, we should not project this image on other cultures and expect its universality.

4) See the 2nd and 3rd paragraph of the same page and paraphrase the Jamesian theory of emotions that Solomon wishes to criticize.

5) See the examples "of traumatic perception" James gives: 'seeing a bear leap', 'coming across a bucket filled with blood'. Add some more examples which would demonstrate his way of thinking about emotions as almost an instinctive response to the stimuli.

6) Do you remember the example Evans proposed? An American and a Japanese guy are observed and taped when watching clips on TV. Search out this example and compare it with James's theory of emotions.

7) Can this theory encompass other emotions than just fear and loathing? Try to think of various situations which demonstrate the impulse-response schema presented by James. Did you identify any examples that cannot be covered by this theory?

8) Solomon suggests we look at what he calls the 'calm emotions' (p.201, towards the middle of the paragraph). For him, these emotions cannot be explained by Jamesian theory. As opposed to these 'calm emotions', he puts the 'violent passions'.

It would be useful to bring Dixon's text into the discussion. He warns us that at some point in history, people replaced various terms such as *affects* or *passions* (which referred to different states) by a single term emotions. As a result, the differences and nuances got confused and lost. Do you remember how and why this happened? See the introductory subsection to Dixon's text!

By extension, we can question the use of the term 'emotions' for a reaction to 'seeing a bucket of blood' as well as 'an appreciation of lifelong friendship'. How similar are these states? Why should they fall into a singular category under the label 'emotions'?

9) Here's why Solomon disagrees with James on how emotions should be understood:

p.198 "The theory – that emotions, as feelings based upon physiological disturbances, can be understood in strictly biological terms – results in this familiar but fallacious consequences: Emotions can therefore be taken to be more or less universal human phenomens, the same in everyone, making allowances for certain minimal differences [...]."

And further: "The effects of epinephrine [a hormone, a neurotransmitter] may be identical in angry people from Borough Hall in Brooklyn to the beaches of Bora Bora, but there are, nevertheless, differences in the emotional lives of various peoples, and this is where anthropology enters the picture."

10) On p.199 Solomon proposes that "the names of emotions clearly vary from culture to culture [...]; how do we know whether it is only the names [...] that vary, rather than their reference?" What is he implying? What does the term 'radical intranslatability' means in this context?

- 11) See the p.200, where Solomon discusses Eckman's experiment (Do you remember? We had it introduced in Evans's text.) How can we understand this test through Solomon's critique? Does the fact that people from New Guinea recognize 'basic emotions' on the pictures means that these emotions are universal? Or does it rather mean that they recognize the expressions, attribute names to them but we don't learn much about what feelings and meanings they attach to these expressions?
- 12) Finally, "the variability of emotion metaphors and theories can be counted among the various dimensions of variability of emotion, if, that is, it is true that beliefs about emotions influence or determine the nature of the emotions themselves." In what way do the subsequent two examples illustrate Solomon's point? (the Tahitian's and the Utkan's approach to anger)
- 13) Can you reduce Rosaldo's article into a paragraph-long story? Describe the situation that she studied! How does the previous text help us understand the main point of Rosaldo's article?