The need for an emotional work survey

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The need for an emotional work survey

Abstract
Surveys of emotions offer great potential to understand micro-social dynamics and wellbeing not only within small groups, but within nations as a whole. The most commonly reported emotions in surveys – happiness, satisfaction, loneliness, etc - hint at the social experiences of people from different class, ethnic, marital backgrounds, etc. However, such questions are usually generalised to ‘whole of life’ or domain-specific (eg work, family, etc) assessments. They are unable to capture the micro-social dynamics of interaction, power, and status, and consequently lose much of the social interplay of emotions. Many ‘social’ emotions – guilt, shame, anger, envy – are consequently not captured, nor is the considerable work done in managing emotions in different social situations, and the gender context that surrounds this. This paper identifies several emotions commonly ‘missing’ from social surveys and often subject to considerable emotion work particularly amongst women, including anger (Kemper 1990; Holmes 2004), shame (Kemper 1990; Scheff 1991), and jealousy/envy (Clanton 1996). Building on the innovative work of Kahneman and Krueger's (2006), it also suggests that the most appropriate method for measuring the common emotions and emotion work undertaken in actual social settings is to run a time-use survey with open-ended questions about emotions. Such a survey would ask respondents to report which emotions they felt in their own words, and whether they felt the need to hide or alter these emotions, for a random selection of time-based episodes about any emotions. Such an ‘audit’ of emotions and emotion work in time-based context would provide valuable data to substantiate many of the theories promulgated by sociologists of emotion, and reveal important gender dimensions to emotions within households and families.

Keywords
need, survey, emotional, work

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Abstract

Surveys of emotions offer great potential to understand micro-social dynamics and wellbeing not only within small groups, but within nations as a whole. The most commonly reported emotions in surveys – happiness, satisfaction, loneliness, etc - hint at the social experiences of people from different class, ethnic, marital backgrounds, etc. However, such questions are usually generalised to ‘whole of life’ or domain-specific (e.g. work, family, etc) assessments. They are unable to capture the micro-social dynamics of interaction, power, and status, and consequently lose much of the social interplay of emotions. Many ‘social’ emotions – guilt, shame, anger, envy – are consequently not captured, nor is the considerable work done in managing emotions in different social situations, and the gender context that surrounds this. This paper identifies several emotions commonly ‘missing’ from social surveys and often subject to considerable emotion work particularly amongst women, including anger (Kemper 1990; Holmes 2004), shame (Kemper 1990; Scheff 1991), and jealousy/envy (Clanton 1996). Building on the innovative work of Kahneman and Krueger’s (2006), it also suggests that the most appropriate method for measuring the common emotions and emotion work undertaken in actual social settings is to run a time-use survey with open-ended questions about emotions. Such a survey would ask respondents to report which emotions they felt in their own words, and whether they felt the need to hide or alter these emotions, for a random selection of time-based episodes about any emotions. Such an ‘audit’ of emotions and emotion work in time-based context would provide valuable data to substantiate many of the theories promulgated by sociologists of emotion, and reveal important gender dimensions to emotions within households and families.

Key words - Emotions, Emotion work, Gender, Subjective Wellbeing, Time Use
Introduction

Surveys of emotion offer great potential to understand the social dynamics of emotions in society and the contribution emotions make to wellbeing. A wide body of literature from the sociology of emotions highlights the centrality of emotions to society. Emotions organise human action and culture as much as (or in conjunction with) rational thought (Barbalet 2006), take a central role in the dynamics of power and politics (Holmes 2004; Hoggett 2009), and lie behind the formation and maintenance of social structure (Kemper 1990), social movements (Flam and King 2005), and everyday social roles (Goffman 1961; Clarke, Hoggett and Thompson 2006).

Emotions such as happiness and satisfaction are also critical to studies of subjective wellbeing. Differences in the experience of happiness and satisfaction across generalised life domains such as work, family, leisure and even life as a whole are indicative of wellbeing in a manner that compliments, and even supersedes, conventional measures of progress, such as per capita income and human development (Layard 2005; Diener and Seligman 2004). Emotions are thus vital to understanding how – and how well – we are building good societies.

However, common survey measures that ask about happiness or satisfaction with life in general do not reveal much about the dynamics of emotions that play out in particular social situations. Many of these take place in private settings such as the household, and incorporate subtle forms of social interaction. Recent time-diary surveys have extended the generalised approach to measuring wellbeing by examining emotions in the context of various activities, and this has added considerable richness to our understanding of wellbeing (Kahneman and Krueger 2006). These studies
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nonetheless have their faults. They do not address the critical question of which emotions are most relevant to everyday wellbeing. The more volatile and stigmatised social emotions such as anger, shame and envy are likely to be under-reported and under-represented using conventional survey methods, and are thus more likely to be ignored as irrelevant by conventional wellbeing researchers.

Nor do any national surveys engage with the sociological concept of emotion work. This concept, popularised by Arlie Hochschild (1978, 1983), refers to the ways in which people ‘work at’ and adjust their emotions according to the normative expectations of the people around them in specific social contexts. It is interesting to realise that the most likely candidates for emotion work are the under-reported volatile social emotions noted above, and that the alignment of the two has likely undermined the perceived usefulness of investigating either. Put another way, the work done in hiding emotions disguises both the emotions themselves and the work done in hiding them, and it is difficult to convince researchers of the importance of investigating things which do not appear to be there!

This paper advances understandings and research directions for these issues in a number of ways. First, it identifies the pros and cons associated with different time and emotion studies, and highlights the capacity for each to pick up on the more obscure social emotions commonly ‘missing’ from social surveys. The paper briefly reviews some of these emotions, including anger (Kemper 1990; Holmes 2004), shame (Kemper 1990; Scheff 1991), and jealousy/envy (Clanton 1996). The paper also argues that the exclusion of many social emotions in most surveys is indicative of a larger failure to investigate how people manage or ‘work at’ difficult emotions (Hochschild 1983, Bolton and Boyd 2003). Second, the paper suggests several methods for running a national survey of emotions and emotion work in society.
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Time and affect surveys, ‘missing’ social emotions, and emotion work

An impressive body of new evidence on emotional wellbeing is emerging from studies of emotions and time-use, which inquire into how people feel about what they do with their time and who they spend it with. Such research comes from a tradition of time-diary analysis, going back many years (Michelson 1977, Csikszentmihalyi 1990). The more sophisticated of these investigations have inquired into the enjoyment associated with types of activities in general (Juster 1985), and during particular episodes (Gershuny and Halpin 1996; Robinson and Godbey 1997).

Such approaches build on the Experience Sampling Method (ESM) developed by European time use researchers (Csikszentmihalyi1990, Zuzanek2012) and recently tested in Australia (Soupermas et al 2005). This method involves respondents wearing pagers – or more recently having apps attached to mobile smart-phones – that ‘beep’ at random times, whereupon respondents record what they are doing and how they feel. This method has the advantage of instantaneous transmission of feeling, but the disadvantage of ‘emotional selection bias’ creeping into the responses. If someone is feeling sad, or angry or busy – or experiencing a taboo or stigmatised emotion that they don’t feel comfortable sharing at that moment in time – they may feel disinclined to report such emotions.

An promising alternative to the ESM is the Day Reconstruction Method (DRM) employed by Kahneman and Krueger (2006) in the conduct of their US national time and affect surveys. In this approach, respondents are asked to complete a diary of all activities undertaken in the previous day on an episode by episode basis, and record whether other people were present during those episodes. Three of these episodes are then selected at random, and respondents are asked about the
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presence and intensity of any of the following six types of affect during the three episodes: happiness, sadness, pain, stress, tiredness and interest. The DRM contextualises emotions within activities and social interactions, examines a greater range of emotions (or affect-types) than just happiness and satisfaction, and presents a more sophisticated micro-picture of the feelings associated with social interactions and social activities.

The DRM used by Kahneman and Krueger also has its drawbacks. Participants are forced to recall emotions a day after they have taken place, and may reinterpret or misremember the experience. However, the comprehensive nature of the contextual data gathered through the time diary approach suggests that biases associated with misremembering are not as severe as they might otherwise be. The diary provides several prompts – activity, location, co-presence of others – that can help with the accurate recall of the experience and its associated feelings.

Another problem is the bias of respondents engaging in emotion work to make responses more normatively acceptable. The socially unacceptable ‘anger’ of yesterday may be toned down, remembered and reported as the more acceptable ‘minor irritation’ of today. Such biases will probably worsen when experiencing more taboo emotions (guilt, shame, envy, etc). However, the distance created by the delay in experiencing and reporting emotions allows for expression as much as repression – or emotional reflection as much as emotion work. A person may be more willing to admit to having been angry when they have calmed down and distanced themselves from the ‘upsetting’ (and often socially unacceptable) emotions than while they are experiencing the emotion.

While it is unclear which effect predominates – the normative propensity towards obscuring and ‘working’ over our emotions, or the reflective capacity to
recognise and reveal them in hindsight – the diary method has one further clear advantage. It is unlikely that a person experiencing and attempting to report on their emotions in real-time will be able to convey the complexity of how they experience and work at their emotions in that moment, without the experience of reflecting on and recording those emotions becoming a kind of emotion work in itself. The distance created by the delay in reporting allows for greater reflection on how the person managed their own emotions, particularly their taboo social emotions.

This capacity for the DRM to pick up on emotion work is an opportunity missed by Kahneman and Krueger. So too is the potential to inquire about a range of different taboo emotions, instead of the rather generic six types of affect that are actually included in their surveys. In framing their work through psychological and economic perspectives, researchers such as Kahneman and Krueger do not engage with sociological reflections on stigmatised social emotions. Anger, shame and jealousy/envy are more likely to be hidden from conventional reports or wellbeing and emotional life, and are amongst the most likely candidates for emotion management (Hochschild 1983). These emotions are now discussed briefly in turn.

*Emotions ‘Missing’ from Surveys - Anger, Shame and Jealousy*

Anger is a common emotion in studies of power and social interaction. The rise in emotional energy and anger in interactions following the ascription of blame to the other is noted in the works of sociologists of emotion (Kemper 1990; Ost 2004). Anger is also gendered and ‘worked at’ in public spaces, with Holmes (2004) describing the tricky path trod by feminist political actors reconciling the social convention that women remain calm with the reality that getting angry in key political circumstances engenders greater respect.
Shame is an emotion with a rich sociological history associated with (and often indicative of) social stigma in micro-social interactions (Goffman 1963). The ideas of Thomas Scheff (1998) on rage and shame suggests that shame and anger are often conjoined. Scheff suggests that the perception or experience of being powerless or deviant results in heightened feelings of shame. This in turn leads to feelings of fear or despair if the blame for such powerlessness is ascribed to oneself, or anger and rage if ascribed to another (1988, p395-402). Shame requires emotion work in a number of gendered contexts, such as in overcoming the stigma associated with infertility and involuntary childlessness (Miall 2010) and single motherhood (Lauster and Easterbrook 2011).

Another common set of obscure and repressed social emotions are the related ‘possessive’ feelings of jealousy and envy. Clanton (2007) notes that jealousy is an important emotion for securing social and familial solidarity by signalling intentions for and commitments to marital contracts. Clanton (2007) describes envy as probably the most highly stigmatised emotion in that it involves admitting one’s inferiority to another. As such, it is one of the most likely targets for emotion work.

Of these emotions, only anger is currently measured in population surveys; the Gallup World Poll and US-specific Gallup Healthways Wellbeing Index. However, the questions in these surveys are quite general, and pertain to whether the respondent felt angry in the last week or so, with no details about simultaneous social interactions etc.

The need for an ‘audit’ of emotions and emotion work

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This section outlines three methods for measuring social emotions and emotional work on a national level. These methods include 1) surveying the population using a list of emotions compiled by experts from literature; 2) surveying a population to choose the most relevant emotions for their daily lives from a large list; and 3) conducting an open-ended DRM ‘audit’ of the emotions and emotion work most common to people’s daily lives.

1) Surveying the population using a list of emotions compiled by experts from the literature

A traditional way to establish the importance of one emotion or another would be for experts to compile a list derived from the literature on controlled experiment or small-world studies of emotions, and inquire into their frequency and intensity in a national survey. This is the approach adopted, for example, by the European Social Survey (Hupert et al 2009), and includes emotions such as happiness, sadness, loneliness, anger, and tiredness. The survey provides a useful snapshot of some common emotions experienced by populations in their weekly lives.

However, this approach suffers from two problems. First, there are likely to be ‘value-judgements’ inherent in the ‘expert’ choice of emotions selected for the survey. The need to limit survey categories to a few choice emotions tends to push researchers to focus on those emotions generally perceived to be universal and important, such as Ekman’s basic emotions (1999). This approach does not establish how common these emotions are relative to other emotions, or the degree to which the more stigmatised emotions appear and are managed through emotion work. A second problem is that the emotions recorded in surveys such as the ESS are generalised across the previous
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week. They are non-contextual in terms of activities, and do not measure the dynamic processes captured by time and affect diaries.

2) Allow people to choose most relevant emotions a list, akin to ‘deprivation research’ approach

This approach has gained momentum in a similarly vexing field of research; studies of poverty and deprivation (Mack and Langsley 1985). Such studies have historically been plagued by problems of experts using surveys to measure the absence of ‘essential’ resources in people’s lives (such as the ability to pay a bill, or raise money in an emergency). To get around the issue of experts deciding on what items are ‘essential’, recent researchers (Bradshaw and Finch 2003; Saunders 2011) have turned to asking people to choose from an extensive list of items which ones they regard to be essential to maintaining a ‘normal’ standard of living, and use this list as a baseline for establishing levels of deprivation within the population.

Such a method could be applied to the study of emotions, by compiling a similarly extensive list of emotions, and surveying people about which ones are the most relevant to their daily lives. However, it is more difficult to develop to a baseline list of emotions than of deprivation indicators, as most deprivation indicators have clearly understood contexts (heating, transport, bills etc). There is little confusion over what it means to pay a bill or raise money, but there may be much greater confusion over what people feel and what feelings mean without activity-contexts to link them to.

3) Conduct an open-ended DRM-Audit of emotions and emotion work
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The final method is similar to the DRM, but with two important differences. The first is that respondents be allowed to report whatever emotions they experienced during an activity *in their own words*. This would enable a first stage ‘audit’ of the most common emotions experienced by the population to be recorded in their own, unfiltered, words. With sufficient resources, this approach could be piloted in conjunction with an open-ended ESM study using mobile-phone apps. Given sufficient randomised sampling, the degree to which either the DRM or ESM reveals more unusual or taboo emotions would demonstrate the extent to which normative reporting biases are overcome by ‘putting people on the spot’ (ESM) or giving them ‘time to reflect’ (DRM).

The second difference is to inquire about whether any emotion work was undertaken. In addition to their reported emotional experiences, respondents would be prompted to report whether they felt the need to either hide or change what they felt. This would serve to provide a socially contextualised baseline estimate of the degree of emotion work that goes on in the national population as a whole. The degree of emotion work would also serve as a useful tool for modifying the baseline ‘audit’ of emotions, and produce a more accurate, or adjusted baseline. This in turn would be invaluable in understanding more commonly investigated emotions, such as happiness, and concepts such as personal wellbeing.

This approach has obvious limitations, in that responses are not pre-coded into explicit categories for easy analysis after the survey is completed. However, it is possible to subject such responses to textual/quantitative or qualitative analyses to see which responses cohere, and create quantifiable categories for analysis. It is also possible to use such a method to inquire into the more taboo emotions, by “*watch[ing] for the disguises in which [envy] often appears*” (Clanton 2007, p426). Measures of
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activities such as gossip, or emotions such as ‘frustration’ might well be indicative of envy when contextualised (such as when one partner is engaged in work and care while another is engaged in leisure), and asking additional probing questions such as what the source or target of the emotion might be may help elicit more open responses.

Conclusion and Discussion

After discounting a number of alternatives, this paper concludes that the most appropriate method for establishing a ‘minimum’ (or possibly even ‘basic’) set of emotions and the degree of emotion work that goes on in society is to conduct a national/international open-ended DRM survey ‘audit’ of emotions and emotion work in the context of daily activities. Such an approach is population focussed, does not rely on experts to choose the most relevant emotions, and is socially contextual.

Some additional benefits of this approach is that even if it arrives at the same set of emotions used by Kahneman and Kruger or Hupert et al, it confirms that these emotions are indeed actually the most relevant ones for population surveys. It will also identify any surprising additional emotions such as ‘boredom’, ‘anger’, and ‘guilt’ that might appear more regularly in contextual situations than they do in the more generic domains captured in existing surveys. A further step towards capturing taboo emotions could be to include an additional question about what the respondent perceives the other person is feeling at the same time, as attempts to infer envy or greed onto others, or engage in excessive admiration/emulation of others, are often signs of envy within oneself (Clanton 2007).
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References


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