



Social regulation of emotion: A foray into the work of Catherine Lutz

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Abstract

From the starting point of the work of Catherine Lutz, done in the Ifaluk Islands, we intend, with this essay, to highlight the way in which the Ifaluk regulate their social order and are regulated through the expression of emotions, showing, complementary, that embodied expressions, which constitute emotions, gain meaning and develop themselves through the groups. Moreover, although in a way which is more implicit than explicit, we intend to show the importance of fieldwork research for the understanding of the function of emotions.

Keywords

Emotions, emotion regulation, social regulation, Ifaluk Islands.

Brief Article

Our goal is to put back into the academic debate, with a formative bent, Catherine Lutz's ethnographic work (1988) "*Everyday Sentiments on a Micronesian Atoll & Their Challenge to Western Theory*", as it constitutes an exemplary ethnography work on emotions, situated between its embodied and cultural realities. We created this essay motivated by two main ideas: the first idea aimed to highlight that culture is laden with affectivity, marked by the expression of emotions, and it also aimed to show how, through that expressivity, interpersonal relationships are ordered and developed; on the other hand, the second idea sought to show that emotional expressions are regulated by the meaning they gain within groups, i.e., in the cultural patterns that they help order, at the same time that they are regulated and structured by the same cultural patterns.

The research of Catherine Lutz, undertaken in the Caroline Islands, on the Ifaluk atoll, is exemplary for the achievement of stated goals, as it allows us to observe the way in which emotional expressions, based on the ethics of the collective, regulate social interaction and, in concomitance, allow to see the way in which the mentioned emotional expressions are socially regulated.

The form of the Ifaluk's sociability is based, especially, in four emotional expressions: we refer to emotional expressions *Fago* (a mix of compassion, love and sadness), *Song* (nuances of anger, rage), *Ker* (nuances of happiness/ecstasy, extreme joy) and *Rus/metagu* (mix of fear, in the modalities of panic, fright, surprise for the first, and fear/anxiety for the second). These four expressions are presented as specific and untranslatable, a point of view that poses big problems for the defence of the universality of emotions, a perspective that has been defended by the theory of basic emotions.

Analyzed in detail, from the data which were given to us, the forms of emotional experience among the Ifaluk reveal a close interconnectivity, almost cybernetic, because of their social-regulatory function, and express a remarkable orientation toward the collective that constitutes itself as a constant framework of reference.

Offering an important counterpoint to western cultures, *Song*, which Lutz (1980) takes to mean *justifiable anger*, but which Shweder and Haidt (2000) call, and in our opinion rightly so, *justifiable indignation*, has been one of the main chosen emotional expressions for the demonstration of intercultural distinction, whether because of its social regulation function, or for being socially approved. This emotional expression is widely highlighted by Lutz when he declares, "the idea of justifiable anger pervades everyday life on Ifaluk" (p. 155), and is intimately connected to the induction of *metagu/rus* (fear). Both expressions seem to have their corresponding matches in the cycle of insurgencies of the people of western democracies

and in their control. *Song* is assessed as an attribute of “*maturity*” and of *social power* and its manifestation occurs, as a rule, not by those who suffer an undesired action directly, but by a third person, singular or collective, with a regulatory intention and it is directed at those who infringe or upset rules and customs. Infractions that can go from forgetting a simple familial obligation by a father towards a son, provoking *song* in the other parental figure, to the disrespecting or violation of *tabus*, being this considered one of the more serious transgressions. Equally, someone who through their forms of manifestation shows that he is forgetting the communitarian participative sense through exuberant individual manifestations, such as those resulting from the expression of *Ker* (excessive happiness/excited), interpreted by excessive joy, can become the object of *song*.

This is a characteristic which is so valued by Ifaluk’s community, as attention to the other, modesty and sobriety, which greatly contrasts with the societies of optimism, ecstasy and easy laughter so valued by Euro-American cultures. On their part, when understood semiologically, the expression of the emotion *Ker* may be understood as being an act of indifference or superiority towards another, as well as a challenge to the processes of social regulation. So, to reveal *Ker* will be an indicator of arrogance and, in this regard, will be interpreted as a source of disturbance and, on the other hand, will generate *song*, in a cycle of constant retroactions.

Consequently, the script *song* will only be complete when *metagu* (fear/anxiety) emerges in the concerned person, as its function will be to produce negative retroaction, achieved by the induction of this (of fear, *metagu*), thus regulating the conservation of forms of interaction threatened by any deviation. This is why both manifestations, *song* and *metagu*, are considered to serve the common good.

The “emotion” *fago* will be based in the “nurturance” relational system, so often referred as subjacent to the attachment system that, in the words of Montagner (1999), presides to the *dawn of tenderness*. To be *fago* will mean, consequently, to be available for the other, especially if *that* other is in a situation of physical or psychological vulnerability, or if he is perceived by a peer or by the community as being lonely. *Fago* is a master expression for the intra-community union, solidary, which can be expressed in its “simple” or composite form, demonstrated by compassion with which the expression of a certain sadness is linked, which moves those who manifest them before someone who is a victim of misfortune and pleases those who receive it (see Figure 1).

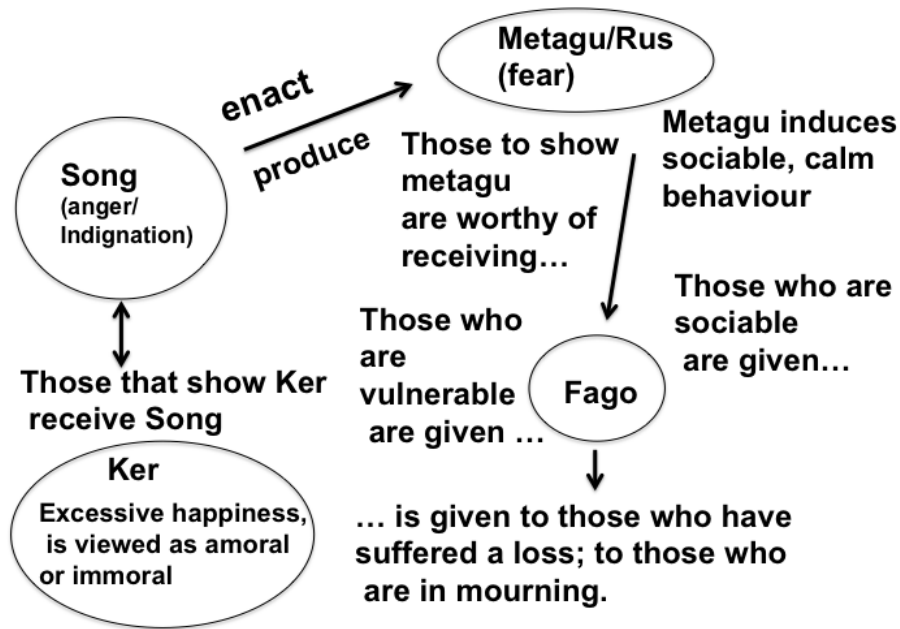


Figure 1. Social regulation of emotional expressions. The figure seeks to represent the way in which the Ifaluk’s sociability is emotionally regulated. Drawn up from C. Lutz (1988).

In sum, it was in this web of interactions that we moved for its election of exemplarity, to highlight that only within a social context may emotions be understood and stated as culturally specific, colouring and discolouring life, marking sociability, whether in the east or in the west, under different forms.

After presenting, in *filigree*, a synopsis of the configurations of the Ifaluk’s sociability, whose matrix of interactions is based on the emotions *song*, *ker*, *rus*, and *fago*, which we could root in the ethological axes of *defence*, *reorganization of self* and of *openness to the other* it matters to us to highlight, briefly, the form in which these social regulations are embodied.

Let us regard, therefore, what Lutz (1980, p.187) could report in the voice of the Ifaluk people: One informant described the following, “people who are *rus* run around (...) and their eyes aren’t the same; they hold themselves [wrapping their arms around themselves as if cold] and sometimes their voices shake... we shake inside; our legs tremble as we walk, and we think we’ll fall”. Another informant would say, “something is moving up inside the gut, like something inside alive and is crawling up”.

In this respect, Lutz commented, “people describe *rus* as having distinct internal feelings associated with it, particularly shaking in the region just under the breastbone” (p.187). Explanations that seem not to be distant from those obtained by Sarbin (1989, cit. by Hermans

& Kempen, 1993, p.18) when questioning a group of adults, of Anglophone culture and trained in psychology, as can be exemplarily observed in the following definition given by one of the subjects, (Emotion) “it is something that I feel inside of me; I know when I’m having an emotion because I feel it”.

To conclude, the foray into the work of Catherine Lutz undertaken in the Caroline Islands allowed us to analyze the social regulation of emotions, among the Ifaluk, and allowed us to highlight the form in which the dynamics of the group of belonging regulates the expression of emotions, promotes its development and is, on the other hand, regulated, and also allowed us to see the process in which embodied emotional expressions are prolonged and gain meaning, spreading themselves in a semantic dance between the cultural and the corporeal/emotional, and between the latter and the cultural, both in the east and in the west.

Finally, this essay, in an implicit and complementary way, allowed us to highlight the importance of fieldwork to the knowledge of the function of emotions in the regulation and development of the human social web, perhaps a methodology that has a large advantage when compared with the simpler or at least more comfortable methodology, such as research through questionnaire.

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Regulação social das emoções: Uma incursão às investigações de Catherine Lutz

Resumo

Partindo das investigações de Catherine Lutz, realizada nas ilhas Ifaluk, pretendemos, com o presente ensaio, evidenciar a forma como os Ifaluk regulam a sua organização social e são regulados pela via da expressão das emoções, evidenciando-se, em complemento, que é nos grupos e pelos grupos que as expressões corporizadas, que constituem as emoções, ganham significado e se desenvolvem. Suplementarmente, embora de forma mais implícita do que explícita, pretendemos evidenciar a importância da investigação de trabalho de campo para a compreensão da função das emoções.

Palavras-chave

Emoções, regulação das emoções, regulação social, ilhas Ifaluk.

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