University of Basel

ANTHROPOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

Video Transcript

What is an Emotion?

MICHAEL STASIK: What is an emotion? The answer changes – depending on when, and from where, you ask. This is also reflected in anthropological theories of emotion. These different perspectives shape how we think about loneliness today.

From the early 20th century through the mid-1960s, scholars largely believed that emotions were hardwired responses – the same across many cultures and times. This view, known as biological universalism, introduced the idea of so-called basic emotions. They often include six: anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness and surprise – though other classifications exist.

Biological universalism still shapes how we think about loneliness today. It also informs a medicalized understanding of it. So if loneliness is seen as a deviation from normal mental functioning, that view is rooted in the idea of universal neurobiological systems.

By the mid-1960s, anthropologists began to question whether emotions could really be reduced to biology alone. This critical rethinking was, in part, sparked by the rise of symbolic and interpretative anthropology. Scholars now began to emphasize how culture shapes both the meaning and expression of feelings. They rejected the idea that emotions exist independently of thought or environment.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the debate expanded further – driven by the rise of social constructivist approaches. One of their most powerful arguments concerned language. Constructivists pointed out that emotions are shaped and communicated through vocabulary and cultural practice. Different languages name and classify emotions differently – which challenges the idea of universal emotional categories.

Anthropologist Michelle Rosaldo offered a famous early example. In her research with the Illongot people in the Philippines, she identified an emotion called liget. It's similar to anger or passion – but doesn't translate easily into English. Some have described it as a kind of "high voltage" feeling, suggesting a level of intensity that Western vocabularies struggle to express. Rosaldo didn't deny that emotions have physiological aspects. But she emphasized that "what individuals *can* think and feel is overwhelmingly a product of socially organized modes of action and talk". Through their language and rituals, the Illongot shape how liget is experienced, expressed and understood. This shows that emotions are deeply embedded in cultural systems.

Anthropologist Jean Briggs made a similar observation in her book “Never in Anger”. While living with the Inuit in the Canadian Arctic, she found that anger – often seen as a basic human emotion – was actively discouraged. Through childrearing practices that emphasize harmony and restraint, Inuit communities teach children not to express anger. This suggests that even so-called basic emotions are shaped by culture – if they exist in any universal form at all.

Ethnographic studies like these show how emotions are classified, expressed and managed in very different ways across societies

Still, both the universalist and constructivist approaches have their limits. Universalists often overlook how emotions are shaped by social and cultural context. Constructivists, on the other hand, may underplay the biological basis that allows emotions to exist at all.

A more recent approach in anthropology tries to move beyond this divide. It sees emotions as dynamic and relational. Emotional experiences emerge from the interaction of biological, social and cultural factors – each shaping the others. In this view, emotions are not fixed by either biology or culture. Instead, people actively engage with their feelings – interpreting and expressing them in ways shaped by shared ideas and values, while still drawing on a universal human capacity to feel.

This complex, layered view of emotions is especially helpful when we think about loneliness. Loneliness is a vivid example of how nature and nurture combine in our emotional lives. It reminds us that what we feel is never just biology or society – but always both, in complex interactions.