Emotions &Micro Social Processes IV: Affect-Control Theory

* Today we will look at the affect-control theory Lynn Smith-Lovin, which claims to be a powerful, general model of how people understand and react emotionally to social situations.

The Affect-Control Model:

* Heise (1977-79) developed ACT from symbolic interactionist ideas and studies in the psychology of impression formation

* Assumption: people perceive and create events to maintain the meanings evoked by their definition of a situation.

* In interaction between identities, actions and physical props, actors may transform the relations between people

* People recognize social events within their definition of the situation. One's interpretation of behavior determines its emotional impact.

* The labels we use to characterize self, others and social actions carry important meanings - fundamental assumptions about how *good*, how *powerful* and how *lively* such people and behaviors are.

* ACT conceptualizes "meaning" in a specific, measurable way. These meanings correspond to the 3 dimensions of emotional meaning (*evaluation, potency and activity*).

* These 3 dimensions underlie reactions to many typical concepts in various

linguistic and national cultures, including ours. Each has an "*EPA Profile*."

* ACT focuses on the EPA dimensions of meaning for 4 reasons:

(1) They characterize many significant elements of social situations(e.g. identities, actions, emotions and settings);
(2) They are widely shared and represent important cultural information;
(3) They correspond to important social features of identities and behaviors like status, power and expressiveness; and
(4) We can measure people's reactions on these dimensions.

* Such measurements of affective meaning also permit us to link the qualitative features of situational definitions to the quantitative processes of impression-change and control.

* Social events may change impressions of people, making them seem better or worse, stronger or weaker, livelier or quieter than they were expected to be

* ACT uses impression-change equations, estimated from large numbers of such events, to predict this outcome on the 3 identity dimensions.

* When events create transient impressions differing from understandings of what people and behaviors are like, people are likely to generate new events that restore these fundamental sentiments in 3 dimensional space.

* ACT produces such predictions about impression change and behavioral reactions with a computer program called INTERACT. This contains:

    - The formal structure of the theory
    - Empirically derived estimates of its parameters.

* INTERACT:

    - Enables linking verbal descriptions of identity/behavior to numerical values in EPA terms

- Can model situations where original sentiments cannot be restored, and situation must be redefined

* ACT is mathematical, but both qualitative & quantitative in its predictions.

   - Works with natural language descriptions
   - Produces natural language outputs

The Affect-Control Model of Emotion:

* Early versions of ACT modeled only behavioral responses and labeling

* This was rectified as later work developed the empirical base necessary to describe emotions within an ACT framework.

* ACT assumes that emotions provide signals about how well events are maintaining social meanings:

   - Events may produce transient impressions that vary from our EPA notions of how we, or others, are, or ought to be
   - Emotions are the "code" for representing the degree and kind of confirmation/ disconfirmation of identities that is occurring
   - Emotion words describe combine one's original EPA profile and the transient profile produced by an event.

* The emotional reactions and predicted behaviors predicted are, in effect, hypotheses that hopefully correspond with real life.

Identity and Emotion:

* Emotions combine with identities to form impressions of emotion

* Emotion is a function of:

   (1) The transient impression created by an event, and

(2) The difference between transient impression & fundamental meaning.

* Nice events lead to positive transient impressions and positive emotions; nasty behaviors to negative emotions. Much depends on original identity.

* ACT: the character of emotions is sharply determined by identity.

* Maintenance of positive identities in one's usual roles creates positive emotions. Maintenance of a negative identity (e.g. a deviant role) normally fosters negative emotions.

*Occupying stigmatized identities requires people to feel negative emotions if they remain part of the dominant culture. Subcultures with competing ideologies may help.

Situations Leading to Disconfirmation and Emotional Response:

* ACT also alerts us to situations where events fail to confirm identities.

* Disconfirmation is experienced as an emotional response. Likely when:

  - People differ in their definition of a situation
  - People agree on the definition of the situation, but different cultural backgrounds entail different EPA profiles of meaning.
  - Situations require us to operate simultaneously in multiple identities of varying importance

Disconfirmation and Emotion:

* When disconfirming events do occur, emotions signal the character of the deflection for both parties (positive or negative).

Emotion and Labeling:

* ACT reveals that while victims may be blameless in principle, they suffer negative consequences of blaming.

* Caught between danger of expressing positive emotions (insincerity) or negative ones (powerlessness).

* Displays of appropriate emotion cues are used by actors to avoid labeling during self-disclosure of negative information.

* Others' emotional displays help us infer the character of actions or actors in ambiguous circumstances

* One can infer one's expected character from other's emotional reactions to the same behavior (e.g. when a man shortchanges a child, will others express disgust, cynical amusement, or relief?)

* One is later able to generate further expectations for the individual in other contexts.

Affect Control Theory and Other Research Traditions:

* ACT's "predictions" correspond to important insights by other researchers:

    - Denzin's focus on situational definitions;
    - Kemper's focus on power, status, and predictive outcomes
    - Goffman's focus on embarrassment and shame reflecting of identity
    - Clark's work on sympathy, including its tactical use as a
      micropolitical strategy

* ACT is seen as compatible with normative, ideological approaches:

    - Collins' ritual sequences can create powerful predictions
    - Hochschild's emphasis on ideological norms, emotional management,

its successes, failures, and consequent outcomes
      - Thoits' research on emotional deviance

The Research Agenda: Testing the Model:

* Smith-Lovin argues that the INTERACT simulations must be tested.

* There are 3 possible strategies:

1. Making use of *past*, naturally occurring experiences and trying to match them to predictions generated by using affect control dynamics (this can be difficult as it is often an interpretive process);

2. Presenting *hypothetical* scenarios and asking people what they expect emotional responses to be;

3. Comparing theoretical predictions to people's *present* behavior in real social situations (ethical problems come in here if done in an experimental fashion, since disconfirming identities may be harmful).

* Smith-Lovin says she doesn't want to limit testing to traditional survey or experimental work, but to engage creatively in evaluating this model.

* Already studies derived from ACT principles lend some empirical support:

(1) Robinson, Smith-Lovin and Tsoudis (1994) successfully predicted that displays of remorse after confession affected the severity of an offender's sentence.

(2) Robinson and Smith-Lovin (1992) found that both high and low self-esteem subjects felt good when praised and bad when criticized, but low self-esteem subjects felt the criticism was accurate and liked the critics more than did the high self-esteem subjects. Indeed each tended to select those who would support their view of themselves.

New Substantive Directions:

* If ACT is found to be a useful way of viewing emotional phenomena, it may provide insights into other issues of substantive concern:

> - Comparing cross-national data samples in terms of cultural practices, emotion norms, and labeling behaviors
> - Comparing subcultures with the broader society in terms of emotion norms, socialization, conflict between ideologies, and rituals
> - Concentrating on areas likely to cause strong emotions, such as role strain, differences in the definition of the situation & strong emotions

Theoretical Questions:

* Theoretical questions that need further work:

- Motivational features of emotions: do they realign behavior and identities?
- Do emotions produce and explain out of role behavior?
- The emotional responses of bystanders or observers not directly involved (vicarious emotional reactions)
- Whether ACT dynamics may be linked to models of rational action

Conclusion:

* ACT contains the impact of both cultural values (through the fundamental sentiments) and individual thought (through the definition of the situation and its maintenance).

* It is specific enough to be falsifiable (i.e. tested).

* That is why testing and research is so important:

> - It will tell us whether ACT is fundamentally correct
> - It will illustrate how this model needs to be elaborated to reflect the emotional complexities of social life.