

Emotions in social mobilization: the bulgarian protests of 2013

Las emociones en la movilización social: las protestas en Bulgaria del 2013

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Abstract

Emotions play a key role in the lifecycle of social movements. However, defining the term "emotion" is subject to heated scholarly debate because emotions vary greatly in their nature and manifestations. However, a review of scholarly empirical and theoretical literature seems to show that emotions can best be understood through two tools – Jon Elster's mechanisms and Deborah Gould's emotional habitus. It is the objective of this paper to lift these two tools and combine them with the paradigmatic theory on the role of emotions in social mobilization by James M. Jasper and Jeff Goodwin, in order to show what insights emotions can offer about understanding social movements. As a case study, it will review the Bulgarian protest wave from June 2013.

Key Words: Social mobilization; Emotions; Bulgarian protests; Rationalism; Emotional habitus.

Resumen

Las emociones juegan un papel principal en los ciclos de los movimientos sociales. Sin embargo, definir el término "emoción" es sujeto de calientes debates escolares porque las emociones varían mucho según su naturaleza y manifestación. Sin embargo, una reseña de la literatura empírica y teórica escolar parece demostrar que las emociones pueden ser entendidas de la mejor manera a través de dos instrumentos - los mecanismos de Jon Elster's y los habitus emocionales de Deborah Gould. El objetivo de este artículo es hablar de los dos instrumentos y combinarlos con la paradigmática teoría sobre el papel de las emociones en la movilización social de James M. Jasper y Jeff Goodwin, para marcar las conclusiones sobre lo que las emociones pueden ofrecer al entendimiento de los movimientos sociales. Como caso de estudio se van a revisar las olas de las protestas búlgaras del junio del 2013.

Palabras Clave: Movilización social; Emociones; Protestas búlgaras; Racionalismo; Habitus emocionales.

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“It just so happens that from a 5th degree hurricane the protest has subsided to a tropical storm and is threatened to end as ordinary rain. The governing political parties have patiently managed to turn the emotion of anger into an ordinary habit of attendance”
(Spahiiski, 2013: 341).

1. Does Reason-Based Social Mobilization Exist?

It is a widely held belief that citizens are usually rational, organized and able to effectively choose means according to set objectives. However, according to proponents of this view¹, when citizens are part of a large crowd they change. Their behavior becomes inflammable, irrational, not subject to control and easily manipulated by demagogues, which more often than not leads to bad decisions. The reason for this transformation is that in big groups, citizens' actions and behavior are in a large part the result of the emotions they experience. This is why scholars who subscribe to this view insist that the influence of emotions on decision-making, if not entirely excluded, should be greatly decreased. However, since the 1990s a variety of neuroscience studies have shown that understanding citizens as either entirely rational or emotional agents is simply wrong because every single act of decision-making and every single action combines elements from the two.² This is clearly

1 For instance, one of the paradigmatic accounts is by Buchanan, James M. and Gordon Tullock. *The Calculus of Consent: Logical Foundations of Democracy*. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1999 (1962).

2 See, for instance: Damasio, Anthony. *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. New York, NY: Penguin Books; Reprint edition, 2005 and Dennett, Daniel. *Consciousness Explained*. Back Bay Books, New York, NY: 1992. Most of these neuroscience studies rely on some type of imaging of the brain that shows brain activity in response to different stimuli.

revealed in social mobilization, in which emotions such as fear and disgust, happiness and love, anger and indignation are key for the emergence, dispersal and demise of social movements. Results from neuroscience research, however, do not yield clear answers as to the exact role of emotions in decision-making and as to the precise nature of the differences between reason and emotion. Also, a theoretical consensus on many of the important matters related to the nature and major types of the emotions is lacking. Despite this, an analysis of the emotions and their roles in a given situation invariably enriches its understanding. An example, which illustrates this statement, are the Bulgarian protests from June 2013 against the appointment of Delyan Peevski as head of the Bulgarian National Security Agency (DANS).³ Publications from the time of the protests reveal that from their start to end the protests were saturated with emotions both at the level of policy-makers and ordinary citizens. For instance, the words *feeling*, *emotion* and their cognates were used exactly 80 times in the more than 100 materials collected in *#The Protest* by Daniel Smilov and Lea Vaisova. *#The Protest* is the first of its kind and largest collection of different press articles and reports about the June protests and will be used as a basis for this paper. Distinct emotions underlying the protesters' behavior are named in almost all of its entries. *#The Protest* shows that citizens' emotions cannot be excluded from the public square because they are an inseparable part of actors' decision-making and actions. Ignoring them weakens the analytical frameworks applied to the studied phenomenon and results in incomplete explanations.

3 To analyze the June protests in Bulgaria, this report draws on Smilov, Daniel and Lea Vaisova. (*#P*, thereafter). *#The Protest. Analyses and positions in the Bulgarian Press – June 2013*. Sofia, Bulgaria: East-West, 2013. *#The Protest* is a collection of key analyses issued by the adherents and opponents of the protests, published in different Bulgarian media in the summer of 2013.

2. The Protest Wave from June 2013

What took place during the June protests in Bulgaria in whose start, sustenance and dying out emotions played a key role? The “political firestorm” started with the parliament changing the law for hiring the Chairman of the national State Security Agency, “the country’s most formidable law-enforcement institution”, so as “to make it possible for the young, undereducated, and inexperienced” Delyan Peevsky to become its head (Ganev, 2014: 36). In response to the appointment – a decision reached after a 15-minute parliamentary debate – a massive online mobilization effort was started under the hashtag #DANSwithme and in the evening thousands of people walked out onto the central square of Sofia. They demanded the removal of Peevski and the resignation of the government, which appointed him. The reaction of the citizens was the result of their strong disapproval of Peevski. He is “the instantly recognizable face of brutal oligarchic power in Bulgaria” (Ganev, 2014: 36) as it is believed that he is intimately “connected to specific corporate circles” in the country (Smilov, 2013: 19). Allegedly, he is supported by “the biggest corporate organization in Bulgaria (Corporate Commercial Bank). ... [that] possesses major Bulgarian assets” (Smilov, 2013: 25). Many political pundits thought that “in view of the current weak government and unclear parliamentary majority”, the appointment of Peevsky as head of the State Security Agency was the same as giving a blank check to the largest oligarchic group in Bulgaria, total freedom to implement its wishes. In addition, Peevsky is a “media magnate” (Smilov, 2013: 25), owning a variety of information sources that have become “the symbol of all that is the most lowly and corrupt in Bulgarian journalism” (Filipov, 2013: 40). These media are often used as propaganda tools to service the interests of the group to which Peevsky belongs. Thirdly, Peevsky was spurned by the protestors because it is known that for most of his state jobs, he has lacked the necessary experience. He

began his career at age 21, when his influential mother, the former head of the national lottery, got him a job at the Ministry of Transportation. Four years later, when he was fresh out of the country’s lowest-ranked law school, he became deputy prime minister (Ganev, 2014: 36).

Dressed in expensive clothes with visible gold pendants, riding in big cars and followed by a

group of bodyguards Peevski has a career, which has been accompanied by “widely publicized incidents of extortion, blackmail, and backroom deals” (Ganev, 2014: 36-7).

Bulgarian citizens joined the protests in high numbers feeling moral shock, anger and fear that Bulgaria’s ruling elites were going to give Peevsky control over a major part of Bulgaria’s law-enforcement. Their response “can only be described as an explosion of civic anger” (Ganev, 2014: 37). For most protestors Peevsky’s appointment to a high state position was equivalent to a mockery of Bulgarian democracy. Peevsky’s figure became the hated symbol, a “metonymy” of all that is wrong in Bulgaria’s political and economic system, of the “totalization of corporate-political power” (Yakimova, 2013: 45). The emotionality of the protestors was also heightened because even though the basic facts of the protest were known, many things remained unclear. For instance, it remained murky what types of citizens protested and how many showed up every evening to the major square. The different media reported different accounts and numbers. Another fact, which remained unclear, is who exactly and why supported Peevsky’s appointment – after the start of the protests no one defended the choice publicly, which only increased “doubts about the direct corporate-media influence over key appointments for the country” (Smilov, 2013: 19). There were even rumors that Sergei Stanishev, the leader of Bulgarian Socialist Party, the biggest party in government had said: “We either vote for Peevsky or the cabinet falls” (Peevsky, 2013: 27). The creation and dissemination of different rumors and conspiracy theories increased the emotional charge of the protests. Heightening the tension, the president also issued “a no confidence vote to the cabinet” (Peevsky, 2013: 27). To this all Peevsky responded with very few words, a general explanation why he wanted to head the State Security agency “I have a duty to the country, and I am convinced that Bulgaria needs decisive actions in this moment. I think that my long-term knowledge of a lot of areas of governing will allow me to help my country” (Peevsky, 2013: 27). His words did not allay citizens’ fears, anger, disappointment, outrage. As this overview of what took place shows, rational elements were invariably intertwined with civic emotions related to the figure of Peevsky at the start of the protests and during their evolution.

3. What is an Emotion?

In order to study the role of emotions in social mobilization it is necessary to define the notion itself. To the present moment, however, there is no agreement among the different theoretical schools regarding the nature of the emotions in terms of their cognitive and physiological characteristics and regarding their major types. Despite the large number of propositions available, a few observations about the makeup of the emotions serve as valuable guides for their comprehension.

Firstly, as Charles Darwin has postulated, experiencing emotions eases human survival because it signals notable features in one's surrounding environment. In other words, emotions are tools, which help citizens distinguish what is significant for them from that which is not (Darwin, 1998). For example, the sudden overtaking of one by fear heightens her senses and caution, so that she may spot danger easily and protect herself. Experiencing an emotion is an evolutionary reaction aimed at increasing human chances of survival.

In the second place, emotions are composed of cognitive and somatic elements. The somatic components, or how emotions are embodied, are what distinguishes them from a purely rational approach to a given situation (Sajo, 2011). Currently, there is no agreement on how the cognitive and somatic elements of one's actions and decisions interact, i.e. do the former precede the later or vice versa, are the former in control of the latter, what are the precise physiological markers for each emotion. However, undeniably, even simple observation attests that experiencing emotions is accompanied by somatic components.

A third characteristic of the emotions is that they motivate people to act. This is the other major difference between emotions and cognition. David Hume illustrates this claim with the example of determining the verdict for Y's guilt in killing X:

(...) when every detailed fact and every relation is known, there's nothing left for the understanding to do, no question for it to work on. The approval or blame that ensues can't be the intellectual work of the faculty of judgment, but the work of the heart; it's not a speculative proposition or assertion, but an active feeling or sentiment (Hume, 1998).

In other words emotions are what drive people to distinguish what is acceptable from what is not, what is morally good from what is morally bad.

Fourthly, because there is a great variation among different individuals, groups, societies, describing with certainty in any given situation what undergoing an emotion is like is impossible. However, Jon Elster's *mechanisms* introduced in his *Alchemies of the Mind* are a valuable tool for determining general patterns about emotions occurrence and manifestations (Elster, 1998). *Mechanisms* are "frequently occurring and easily recognizable causal patterns that are triggered under generally unknown conditions or with indeterminate consequences" (Elster, 1998: 1). In other words, if one's mother passes away suddenly, she will most likely experience grief. However, she may also feel undertones of relief or anger, if they had a strained relationship. It is impossible to precisely determine what emotions the death of a parent will evoke, but it may be claimed that most often they will be emotions of grief. Secondly, to exemplify how mechanisms are applied to actions: if a certain individual is afraid from a barking dog that confronts him on a street in the dark, he can attack the dog, try to run away or remain in position. It is unclear which of the three actions will be the one chosen, but most likely one of the three will ensue. Given the great intra- and inter- individual variability of experiencing an emotion, *mechanisms* prove to be valuable tools for understanding what is taking place.

In the fifth place, Deborah Gould's *emotional habitus* proves invaluable for understanding the existence and manifestation of collective emotions (Gould, 2009). Similarly to the nature and major types of individual emotions, it is impossible to characterize collective emotions with absolute certainty. Introducing an *emotional habitus* proves a useful tool for this endeavor as it describes the conscious and unconscious emotional dispositions of a specific group of people during a specific period of time. According to Gould, the *emotional habitus* equips people "with a sense of what and how to feel, with labels for their emotions, with schemas about what emotions are and what they mean, with ways of figuring out and understanding what they are feeling" (Thompson, 2012: 103). The emotional habitus also contains an emotional pedagogy, or a template for the admissible or inadmissible emotions. Still, even though the *emotional habitus* shapes the emotions experienced by small or large groups of people, it does not determine them uniquely for every member

of the group in the same way – an *emotional habitus* works like a *mechanism*.

In general, defining the emotions and their manifestation is an *approximation*, which does not yield an exact and definite prediction of civic decisions and actions. Still, analyzing the approximation via *mechanisms* and an *emotional habitus* gives invaluable information for the political process.

4. Functions of Emotions in Social Mobilization

Keeping in mind the definition and functioning of emotions as an *approximation*, the next part of this paper will review their role in social mobilization. According to the famous scholars – James M. Jasper and Jeff Goodwin, there are two types of emotions in social mobilization (Goodwin, 2001).⁴ The first are *the reciprocal ones* – these are the emotions, which the participants feel towards one another. Most often, these are the intimate, warm ties of friendship, understanding, and such others based on shared goals. Together they create the so-called “libidinal economy”, related to the pleasure of participating in different social movements, of being together with, close to like-minded people. This for Jasper and Goodwin constitutes one of the main motivations for protesting. In the June protests in Bulgaria in 2013 such libidinal emotions proliferated: citizens felt pleasure that they belonged to a large group of similarly minded and similarly looking people (Gardev, 2013: 113). The other type of emotions are the *shared ones* – the mobilized group of people feels the same emotions at the same time, but they are not directed to the other members of the group, but towards external phenomena. For instance, shared emotions of anger in the June protests were exemplified when the government appointed Peevsky. Even though the reciprocal and shared emotions, part of the emotional habitus of a given social movement, are clearly distinguished, they constantly interact and reinforce each other during its beginning and development.

In particular, *shared emotions* play a key role in the three phases of evolution of a given social movement – beginning, development and phasing out. Moral shock, anger, indignation and fear are often the motivating emotions for joining social movements. Similarly, Bulgaria’s June protests were inflamed by such “strong bodily feeling, equivalent to dizziness and nausea” (Gardev, 2013:16). The June protests

were the result of immediate and violent emotions that were generated by the appointment of Peevsky – “a sense that a change in social order is necessary” (Okov, 2013: 139), “moral indignation” and disgust (Kiosev, 2013: 155), “an impulse, which maintains the necessary exaltation” (Gardev, 2013: 115) were the emotion-colored forces, which drove people onto the streets en masse. Secondly, emotions play a role not only when citizens join social movements, but also in their maintenance. As part of the protest wave, the activists quickly create a package of emotional states on the basis of common rituals, songs, positive and negative stories, common heroes and others. The richer the culture of the movement is, the stronger the *reciprocal emotions*, which the participants feel towards each other. Similarly, during the June protests a rich emotional habitus was created through the use of common slogans, ideology, stories, rituals and others. For instance, one of the wide-spread myths among the protestors was related to the morality of protesting: in other words, the protestors, who were governed by a sense of justice, kindness, personal dignity were keeping their citizen duties. Even though there was no agreement on the precise definition of those moral notions, the protestors were unanimous that the qualities which they named and wanted in the ruling elites were not exhibited by them. These moral notions cannot be characterized only as emotions because their definitions contain cognitive elements as well, in line with the findings of recent neuroscientists. And lastly, the emotions explain the disintegration of a social movement. Most often citizens withdraw from activism because they become tired or disappointed from thwarted attempts to achieve their aims. Also, emotions such as jealousy, envy, disgust and anger can split up a mobilized group. The dying out of the June protests in Bulgaria, meaning that less and less people walked out onto *Nezavisimost* square, can also be explained through these two factors: on one side, citizens were tired of spending their evenings on the square, and on the other there was a split in opinions, personal attacks, disappointment, and other events, supported by rising negative feelings among the protestors. As one of the political analyzers maintains: “in such a paranoid environment politics becomes impossible and it is easily replaced by clear populism, cynicism and conspirative theories” (Smilov, 2013: 23). As a whole, maintaining a social movements is difficult because it demands a lot of efforts and resources to upkeep the emotional intensity needed for participation. This is

⁴ The following part of this paper follows the main arguments espoused in Goodwin, Jeff, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta, Eds. (2001) *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, on pp.16- 22 of the book

why social movements usually reach their culmination only for a few days and then recede, even though their peak can cyclically be repeated.

5. Aesthetization of the Protests

Additional proof for the role of emotions in the protests is given by what a few authors in the compilation characterize as the *aesthetization of the protests*. Even though none of the authors define it, *aesthetization* emerges as a process that allots symbolic meaning to the protests, that turns them into a piece of art. This takes place because the participants in the protests perform numerous symbolic actions that aim at evoking different implied meanings for the protestors and the government, which in their turn strengthen emotionality. As Yavor Gardev exclaimed: "I am happy that the political rebellion was all of a sudden seen also as aesthetic, that life in Bulgaria did all of a sudden acquire aesthetic significance" (Gardev, 2013: 113). This was due partly to the fact that the faces of the protestors were of "of respected people – or writers, of artists, of spiritual people" (Fotev, 2013, 135). The strongest proof for the *aesthetization* of the protests was that the protests, the protestors and the government were often described through the use of literary categories: the beautiful, the sublime, the comic and their polar opposites: the ugly, the low, the tragic and others. These categories include an implicit assessment of the morality of the participants' actions, invariably intertwined in which is an emotional valence. An example of the use of the category beautiful are the descriptions, issued by the famous Bulgarian writer Georgi Gospodinov: "the beginning of the protests, the first three-four days are the most beautiful, unexpected" and "the one who is protesting is really beautiful. And full of meaning" (Gospodinov, 2013: 160-1). Another commentator maintains that "even their anger [of the protestors], even their fury are in a particular way bright and creative" (Boyadjiev, 2013: 125). Evoking these aesthetic feelings was strengthened by the use of collective nouns such as "sorosoids", "lumpens"; Delyan Peevsky was described as a "creature from the underworld", "thief" (Dainov, 2013: 43-50); while the ruling coalition were "the disgusting ones" (Yanakiev, 2013: 59-63), "mafia", "red trash". These singular and collective nouns strengthened the emotionality of the protests because they decreased the humanity of the participants and reduced them to the things, with which they were being compared. The *aesthetization* of the protests was also enhanced

by the creation and deepening of a feeling of belonging to one of the two warring groups: the protesters and the government. Firstly, different groups of adjectives were used to describe the two groups: the protesters were beautiful, young, educated, from the city, while the group, which was supporting the government, was uglier, older, provincial, etc. (Smilov, 2013: 209). Secondly, the two groups created narratives about the mythic fight between good and evil, with which they strengthened the sense of belonging of their participants. The protests were also *aesthetized* by the creation of many photos, which aimed to show the divisions among the different groups, to solidify the ways, in which they were portrayed and to mobilize citizens (Boyadjiev, 2013: 130). And lastly the *aesthetization* of the protests was enhanced by the performance of different symbolic actions such as the "releasing of soap bubbles around the parliament; a ballerina from „Urban Butterflies“ in front of the Council of Ministers; a white piano on blvd. Tsar Osvoboditel" (Nikolov, 2013: 336-9). Among the many voices approving of these peaceful and creative means for protesting, some political analysts stepped forward to assess the *aesthetization* of the protests as too emotional, as a "a symbol of the unhealthy pathos and an originality as an end in itself ... only cheap theatrization and imitation" (Nikolov, 2013: 336). However, *aesthetization* was an effective in maintaining the protests in different forms in the long-term, until their ultimate success: the government's declaration to resign on July 14th, 2014.

6. The role of emotions in the short-term and long-term

As is shown by the discussion above, the Bulgarian June protests were characterized not only by sporadic emotional outbursts, as those which caused and fired them, but also by constant emotions and emotional dispositions, which maintained them in the long-term. Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman theorize the role of emotions in these two perspectives in an excellent way (Kahneman, 2012). The two authors insist that the assessment of every situation is divided into two parts: System 1 and System 2. System 1 includes the immediate, unreflective, intuitive, involuntary comprehensions of the world, and is the main way, in which citizens connect with their environment. Emotions play a major role here because immediate apprehensions of one's surrounding are irrevocably connected with different *biases and heuristics*. These *biases and heuristics*, or

rules of thumb as Kahneman and Tversky call them, often lead to the wrong conclusions regarding the proper way of action because they apply general rules of decision-making to a given situation without fully accounting for the specifics. This is where System 2 comes into play. According to Kahneman and Tversky, System 2 is responsible for longer and harder decision-making and this is why it relies on the cognitive abilities of the citizens. The delayed assessments of a given situation provides the opportunity for introspection and correction, so that the right decision is reached. But, Kahneman and Tversky are mistaken when they exclude the emotions from System 2 as they can also be subject to reassessment in the long-term and lead to improved decision-making.

The Bulgarian protests exemplify the work of System 1 and System 2. The immediate mass reaction towards Peevsky's appointment illustrates the work of System 1. When they learned about his assignment, angered, disgusted, disappointed, citizens quickly amassed in the square. There was not much time for the checking of facts, debate or justification of action – citizens followed their intuition: something awful had happened and this state of affairs was unbearable. Yavor Gardev describes the initial reaction in the following way:

(...) because I think that for the first time in this lack of knowledge about what exactly it is that people want to actually achieve a very strong intuition is hidden about what exactly their precise objectives are It is really great that the everyday concerns for this protest do not exist and we have to ask ourselves what the real cause is. The real cause I think is connected to common sense and the breaking with a practice, to which we have gotten used to during the years: the practice to live against your sense of justice (Gardev, 2013: 111).

However, not only the initial reaction coincided with the explanation put forward for System 1, but also the existence of many biases and heuristics, connected to it. For instance, often during the protests *generalizations* were used: the main way for the protesters to describe the people involved in the protests was to lump them together and label them. According to the protestors, all, connected in any way to the government were corrupt and immoral, while they – the protestors – were the opposite. Another

example of a bias and heuristic is the so called *framing* – the content of all types of messages emitted by the government was questionable because the government had already committed a big mistake – Peevsky's appointment. A third example for a bias and heuristic was the high degree of *optimism* and *self-confidence*, characteristic of the protestors, or the conviction, that they - the protestors - were moral exemplars and were more capable of making the right decisions for the government. In fact, all 48 biases and heuristics, which Kahneman and Tversky isolate in their work, can be illustrated through the decisions and actions of the protestors and the supporters of the government.

But, unlike System 1, the development of the protests did not exactly coincide with the work of System 2. One of the clearest examples for correction was the restraining of the initial emotions of anger, shock, disgust, so that violence was evaded. Citizens did not want to compromise their positions by applying brute force for attaining their objectives and this is why exaltation and excess were deliberately avoided. What actually took place was a "calming rebellion ... a rebellion of a conscious normalcy, which does not need exaltation" (Gardev, 2013: 115). Also, this restraining of the emotions was attained to a certain degree by avoiding the demonization of all policemen. Although policemen sided with the government by virtue of their position, the protestors did not adhere to their immediate emotional apprehension of them as necessary immoral and evil, but realized that the situation is more nuanced: some of the policemen just kept to their duties, but in fact supported the protestors. This reassessment of their initial emotions was achieved in many other actions of the protestors. This is why, Kahneman and Tversky's claims that emotions act only in System 1, in one's immediate apprehension of the environment, are untrue – the protests showed emotional reactions that were changed and improved in the long-term.

7. A Vital Component for Social Mobilization

In their successful form social movements are sickle-shaped transient phenomena. They are spurred by strong emotions related to some form of injustice, maintained by emotions connected to the pleasure of protesting and the defense of different moral ideas and weakened due to the exhaustion of the participants and emerging conflicts. As was shown by the June protests in Bulgaria, the exact definition of the emotions and their collective functions remains

an *approximation*, but analyzing the *approximation* gives invaluable information for what is happening as it contributes to understanding the motives, demands and actions of the citizens and the ruling elites in the presence of a social movement. As mentioned, many scholars continue to insist that the emotions should be excluded from decision-making because of their destructive power for behavior, but as shown in the case of the Bulgarian protests, emotions, if harnessed properly, can be a force for positive change. It is true that acting on the guidance of the emotions is often subject to the many biases and heuristics that accompany decision-making, but once recognized, these biases and heuristics can be consciously avoided in System 2 decision-making. In the last five years, a major protest wave has spread through the world and even though the various national protests are different in their content and means of execution, focusing on the types of roles that emotions play in them, can greatly enhance understanding of what is going on.

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