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The Politics of Feeling: Emotion Norms and the Making of Difference

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of emotion norms in constructing both emotions and social identities. Emotions are not biologically fixed or purely individual states; they are shaped by social expectations about what one should feel, how one should express it, and whose emotions count. These emotion norms do not merely constrain expression—they shape which emotions are intelligible, permissible, and punished, thereby contributing to the formation and maintenance of social categories such as gender, race, sexuality, and disability.

I argue that emotion norms are key mechanisms through which social identities are constructed, regulated, and enforced. They naturalize dominant gender roles by prescribing distinct emotional repertoires and by penalizing deviation. These norms also produce emotional double binds, particularly for marginalized individuals, by making all available emotional responses subject to sanction or misrecognition. However, emotion norms are not monolithic. In certain social contexts alternative emotional repertoires emerge—ones that refuse the constraints of dominant expectations and make space for previously illegible emotions and identities.

Understanding the mutual construction of emotion and identity clarifies how power operates through emotions no less than through institutions and discourse. A feminist philosophy of emotion must take seriously the political stakes of affective life, not only by exposing the workings of emotional injustice, but also by affirming the possibility of constructing new emotional norms that support freedom, recognition, and collective transformation.

Key words: social construction, emotion, emotion norms, gender, social identity

1. Introduction

What we feel, how we feel it, and whether our emotions are recognized as real or rational are never just personal matters. Emotions are deeply social phenomena, governed by implicit rules that shape what we are expected to feel, how those feelings are interpreted, and whose emotions count as intelligible, credible, or dangerous. Feminist theorists have long argued that emotions are entangled with structures of power: they are shaped by, and help shape, systems of gender, race, class, sexuality, and disability. Yet if emotions are socially constructed, and if social identities are themselves constituted through norms of recognition and regulation, then an important question arises: what role do emotion norms play in the construction and maintenance of social identities themselves?

This paper argues that emotion norms are not merely constraints on emotional expression or background features of social life. Rather, they function as *constructive* mechanisms through which social identities are formed, regulated, and enforced. Emotion norms shape which affective repertoires are intelligible and livable for differently positioned subjects, and in doing so they help constitute what it is to be gendered, racialized, or otherwise socially located. At the same time, identity categories structure emotional life by determining how particular emotions are perceived and evaluated depending on who expresses them. A woman's anger, for example, may be dismissed as irrational or excessive, while a man's anger is read as authoritative or justified. These are not merely differences in interpretation; they are part of a broader normative system through which emotions and identities are mutually constituted.

The central claim of this paper is that just as emotions are constructed through social norms that determine what counts as a particular emotion in a given context, social identity categories like gender are constructed through norms that determine who counts as a particular kind of person. Crucially, these two constructive processes are *mutually constitutive*. Emotion norms participate in the construction of identity categories by prescribing distinct emotional repertoires for different social positions (what women versus men "should" feel), and identity categories structure emotional life by making certain emotions intelligible or unintelligible depending on who expresses them (a woman's anger is "hysteria"; a man's is "righteous indignation"). Understanding this mutual construction clarifies how power operates through institutions, discourse, and the intimate terrain of affective life.

The contribution of this paper is to bring the two bodies of work—on the social construction of emotion and on the social construction of identity—into direct conversation. While there is substantial literature on how emotions are socially shaped and separate literature on how identity categories are constructed, less attention has been paid to the ways in which these processes are mutually reinforcing. By showing that emotion norms function as a key mechanism through which identity categories are constructed and contested, this paper clarifies how power operates not only through institutions, discourse, and material arrangements, but also through the intimate terrain of affective life. This analysis also highlights the political stakes of emotion norms: if they help constitute oppressive identities, then transforming emotion norms becomes central to projects of resistance and social change.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 defends a broadly constructionist framework for understanding emotions as normatively structured and context-sensitive experiences. Section 3 examines constructionist accounts of social identity, focusing primarily on gender, to show how identities are constituted through norms, practices, and relations of power. With both frameworks in view, Section 4 argues that emotion norms function as a crucial site where emotions and identity intersect, exploring how hegemonic emotion norms sustain oppression and how alternative affective worlds enable resistant forms of identity. The conclusion draws out the political implications of this account for feminist philosophy of emotion and social critique.

2. The Construction of Emotions

To understand how emotion norms shape social identity, we must first examine what emotions are and how they are constructed. The debate between basic emotion theorists and constructionists centers on the nature and origins of emotions: are they biologically innate and universal, or socially learned and culturally variable? Basic emotion theory maintains that certain emotions are hardwired, discrete, and expressed similarly across cultures, while constructionist theories emphasize that emotions are shaped by social norms, language, and cultural scripts.

Basic emotion theory (BET), developed most prominently by Paul Ekman (1982, 1999, 2003, 2017), holds that emotions such as anger, fear, sadness, happiness, disgust, and surprise are universal affect programs—innate, automatic responses to evolutionarily significant stimuli. These emotions are said to be associated with specific facial expressions, physiological changes, and action tendencies. Ekman's early cross-cultural studies, using recognition tasks, seemed to show that people from disparate cultures could identify the same facial expressions as indicative of particular emotions. He later expanded the list of basic emotions to fifteen, including shame, guilt, pride, and relief, though he acknowledged that not all emotions have unique facial expressions and proposed that they may instead be expressed via body posture or vocalizations (Ekman 2003). Theorists like Robert Plutchik (1980), Jaak Panksepp (1998), and Leda Cosmides and John Tooby (2000) have similarly argued that basic emotions are biologically determined and functionally adaptive, serving survival needs like threat detection and social coordination. These theorists often characterize emotions as modular systems: quick, domain-specific, cognitively impenetrable responses with distinctive neural profiles (Fodor 1983; Griffiths 1997).

BET has come under sustained critique for its failure to establish that the so-called basic emotions are either biologically or psychologically primitive. Andrew Ortony and Terence Turner (1990) have argued that no discrete neural or physiological signature reliably maps onto any single emotion, and the identified neural circuits such as "rage" or "panic" underlie broad affective systems rather than specific emotions like "anger" or "fear" (Barrett 2006a, 30; Scarantino and Griffiths 2011: 448). This undermines the idea of the biological basicness of emotions. In the psychological sense, basic emotions are meant to be irreducible primitive states not composed of other emotions or mental processes. Yet emotions like anger can often be broken down into more basic affective elements, such as

distress or displeasure, making their status as psychological primitives questionable. Furthermore, facial expressions, often cited as evidence of emotional universality, also fail to provide support: the same expression (e.g., weeping) can occur across multiple emotional states, and cross-cultural recognition rates vary widely, undermining claims of universality (Ortony and Turner 1990, 321; Mesquita et al. 2015; Elfenbein and Ambady 2002). For these reasons we might deny that emotions are natural kinds.

Constructionists offer a different approach to emotions.[1] *Psychological constructionists* such as James Russell and Lisa Feldman Barrett argue that emotions are not biologically hardwired modules but are constructed from more basic psychological components. James Russell developed a foundational version of this view in his Core Affect Theory, which posits that all emotional experiences are located in a space defined by two continuous dimensions: valence (pleasure–displeasure) and arousal (activation–deactivation) (Russell 2003). Building on Russell's framework, Barrett defends the Conceptual Act Theory, which holds that the brain constructs emotions in real time by interpreting core affect through culturally learned emotion concepts (Barrett, 2006b; 2014; see also de Sousa 1987). On this view, emotional experiences are shaped by individual histories, linguistic resources, and social norms. Emotions are real, but not as biological universals. They are *social* kinds, constituted through conceptual and contextual processes.

Social constructionism emphasizes the role of social norms, roles, and institutions in shaping emotional life. James Averill argues that emotions are not internal, private experiences but transitory social roles enacted according to cultural rules and expectations (Averill 1980; 1997). To be "angry," for instance, is to occupy a socially recognized role that carries expectations about how one should behave (e.g., confronting someone, raising one's voice) and what that behavior signifies. Emotion terms, Averill insists, are *prescriptive* rather than merely descriptive: they guide and regulate behavior by setting boundaries on what is appropriate to feel and express in particular situations (Averill 1997, 531). For example, "anger" is not a single internal state but a social script enacted through socially recognizable behaviors such as shouting, withdrawing, or demanding redress.[2] Emotions, on this view, are not universal programs but social performances embedded in roles, norms, and institutions.

Cultural constructionism focuses on the ways that emotions are shaped by cultural models of the self, values, and social organization. Batja Mesquita's cross-cultural work shows that emotions are culturally contingent relational practices (Mesquita and Frijda 1992; Mesquita 2001; 2022). Mesquita contrasts the Western "MINE" (Mental, Inside the person, and Essentialist) model of emotion, focused on internal, individual feelings, with the

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[1] I do not mean to suggest that the three kinds of constructionism I discuss here—"psychological constructionism," "social constructionism," and "cultural constructionism"—as separate theoretical camps. Instead, it is more accurate to understand these as different emphases and methodological approaches within a shared constructionist framework. All emphasize that emotions are shaped by social norms, cultural practices, and learned concepts rather than being fixed biological programs. They differ primarily in their research methods (experimental psychology, ethnography, cultural analysis) and in which aspects of emotional construction they foreground. Thanks to Anonymous Reviewer 1 for suggesting this clarification.

[2] For a more recent account of emotions as scripts see Eickers, G. (2024).

globally more common "OURS" (emotions as Outside the person, Relational, and Situated) model, where emotions are understood as socially embedded, context-dependent, and oriented toward relational goals (Mesquita 2022, 9–13).[3] Emotions like pride, shame, or anger do not have the same structure, meaning, or function across cultures (Mesquita 2001). Emotional experience and expression are shaped by culturally specific role expectations and moral values, making emotion both a product and reinforcement of cultural life.

Critics of emotion constructionism caution against wholesale rejection of the basic emotion framework, and raise concerns about the explanatory limitations of strong social constructionism. To be sure, these critiques identify legitimate questions about how to characterize emotion categories for scientific purposes, even if they do not undermine the core constructionist insight that emotions are culturally variable and normatively structured. For instance, Andrea Scarantino and Paul Griffiths (2011) argue that while discrete emotion categories may lack rigid biological signatures, this does not mean they cannot be treated as *natural kinds* in a looser, more pragmatically useful sense. Drawing on Boyd's (1999) theory of homeostatic property clusters, Scarantino and Griffiths propose that emotions like fear or anger may form scientifically valuable categories characterized by a cluster of features that tend to co-occur, even if they admit variation. They also emphasize that constructionist models often conflate folk emotion concepts with scientific emotion kinds, neglecting the possibility that scientific emotion categories can be refined while still preserving evolutionary and functional continuity.

The disagreements between constructionists and basic emotion theorists reflect fundamentally incompatible scientific paradigms (Barrett and Theriault 2025). BET assumes emotions are discrete, hardwired modules with unique neural signatures, while constructionists argue emotions are constructed in real-time from more basic psychological components and cultural resources. BET seeks universal patterns that transcend culture; constructionists emphasize cultural variability and context-sensitivity. These are not merely different emphases: each view reflects different metaphysical commitments about what emotions are.

That said, the empirical picture is complex. As Mesquita, Frijda, and Scherer (1997, 266) observe, the degree to which emotional phenomena vary across cultures depends in part on the level of abstraction at which they are analyzed: general descriptions reveal broad similarities, while more concrete, feature-specific descriptions highlight meaningful cultural differences. Both approaches acknowledge some role for biological mechanisms and some role for social shaping, even if they weight these differently.

For the purposes of investigating how emotions help construct and enforce social identities, a constructionist framework is better suited than BET. While useful for understanding evolutionary affective mechanisms, BET is less well equipped to account for

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[3] We should not be misled by the MINE model into thinking that emotions in the West are fundamentally private possessions, as this obscures the deeply social, normative, and, as we will see, political processes through which emotions become intelligible. Emotions do not originate solely within individuals but emerge through interaction, recognition, and culturally available scripts. Treating them as purely "mine" ignores how power, identity, and history shape what can be felt, named, and understood as emotion at all (Scheman 1980; Munch-Jurisic 2023).

how emotions are shaped by norms, made intelligible through culture, and deployed in systems of power. Constructionist models, by contrast, illuminate how emotions are socially patterned and politically significant. This theoretical foundation is crucial for my central argument because it establishes that emotions are constituted through the same normative mechanisms—social norms, practices of recognition, and structures of power—that construct identity categories such as gender.

Having established this constructionist understanding of emotion, I now examine how identity categories themselves are socially constructed, before showing in Section 4 how these two constructive processes are mutually constitutive.

3. The Social Construction of Identity Categories

This section examines constructionist accounts of identity categories, focusing primarily on gender. Understanding how gender is constructed is essential for my overall argument for two reasons. First, it shows that identity categories, like emotions, are constituted through social norms, institutional practices, and relations of power. Second, and more importantly for my purposes, it reveals the mechanisms through which identity categories are constructed—mechanisms that, as I will argue in Section 4, operate in part through emotion norms. Just as different theorists disagree about *how* gender is constructed, so too they disagree about what kind of entity gender is. These debates matter because they illuminate different aspects of how norms function in constituting both gender and emotions. By surveying this landscape, I prepare the ground for showing how emotion norms specifically participate in these constructive processes.

Contemporary debates about gender, as well as race, and disability, take place against the backdrop of a now well-established rejection of essentialism. While few serious theorists today defend the idea that identity categories like "woman," "Black," or "disabled" reflect fixed, natural essences, essentialist frameworks still persist in commonsense discourse and institutional practices. On such views, gender is presumed to follow from gamete size, reproductive anatomy or chromosomes; race from biological ancestry or visible phenotype; disability from objective bodily or cognitive difference. These accounts render identity inherent and immutable, and often obscure the social and political mechanisms through which such classifications gain their force.[4]

In response, feminist, queer, critical race, and disability theorists have developed diverse accounts of social construction, shifting the focus from what these categories are

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[4] For foundational critiques of essentialist conceptions of gender and identity within feminist theory, see Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of *intersectionality*, which highlights how race, gender, and class intersect to shape the experiences of women of color in ways that are obscured by single-axis frameworks of oppression (1989). See also Elizabeth Spelman's critique of the "generic woman" in feminist theory. Spelman challenges the assumption that all women share the same interests or experiences regardless of race, class, or culture (1988). For a very different kind of essentialist account of gender, see Charlotte Witt (2011), which develops an essentialist but non-biological account of gender as a *unifying role*—the role that integrates and organizes an individual's other social roles, thereby shaping the person's overall social position. For criticism of race essentialism see Naomi Zack (2018); on disability, see Shelley Tremain (2001). For a critique of emotion and gender essentialism see de Sousa (forthcoming).

"by nature" to how they are produced, sustained, and contested through norms, institutions, and power. Yet, within constructionist frameworks, deep disagreements remain about how identities are constructed, what kind of entities they are, and what political work they should do. Focusing on gender, this section sketches several influential responses to three central questions: (1) What kind of construct is gender? (2) How is gender constructed, and by whom? (3) Should we retain, redefine, or reject the category of "woman" in feminist theory and politics? Feminist theorists have offered a range of responses to these questions, shaped by different metaphysical, epistemological, and political commitments. I survey some of them.

One of the most influential responses comes from Sally Haslanger, whose ameliorative account has become a central reference point in metaphysical debates about gender (2000). For Haslanger, gender is a politically significant *social kind*. To be a woman is to be socially positioned as systematically subordinated due to perceived sexed features. Her definition is strategic: rather than capturing how people ordinarily use the term "woman," it offers a revision meant to illuminate and contest structural gender oppression. Since gender (like race) is characterized by structural inequality, Haslanger ultimately argues that justice requires its abolition not by ignoring or denying its effects in the present, but by working toward a future in which such oppressive classifications no longer exist (Haslanger 2000; 2012).

This abolitionist stance has been subjected to numerous critiques. One of them comes from Mari Mikkola, who argues that defining gender entirely in terms of oppression risks erasing the identities many people continue to value (2011). In contrast, Mikkola proposes a trait/norm covariance model, in which gender is a pattern of traits, such as bodily features, behaviors, or social roles, evaluated through context-specific social norms. Gender, on this view, is constructed not by rigid structures of domination alone, but through the normative practices that give different traits gendered meaning. While she shares Haslanger's anti-essentialist commitments, Mikkola insists on preserving gender categories in ways that acknowledge their personal and political significance beyond systems of subordination.

Underlying this debate is a more general metaphysical question: *What kind of thing is gender?* Here, the distinction between realism and nominalism about social kinds becomes important. Realists, like Haslanger and Mikkola, argue that gender is a *real* social kind—it has explanatory power, figures in causal explanations, and structures social reality in robust ways. Even if socially constructed, gender is "real" because of its role in shaping people's lives and organizing social relations.

By contrast, Natalie Stoljar defends a form of *gender nominalism*. According to Stoljar, categories like "woman" do not name a unified kind with shared properties or causal powers. Drawing on intersectional feminist critiques, she argues that such categories are internally heterogeneous: attempts to define "woman" as a unified kind risk erasing crucial differences among women shaped by race, class, sexuality, and disability. For this reason, she endorses the view that "woman" functions more like a *series* than a group: a loosely connected collective formed through overlapping social positioning rather than shared

essence or experience (Stoljar 2011).[5] For her positive account, Stoljar draws on the idea of *resemblance nominalism*, according to which a category is constituted by overlapping similarities between individual instances. For nominalists like Stoljar, the point of grouping individuals under terms like "woman" is not to identify a metaphysical kind, but to support feminist political goals by recognizing contingent, overlapping social similarities that allow for collective action without erasing difference.

This shift from realist to nominalist conceptions affects how we think about feminist goals. For realists, successful critique and resistance often depend on analyzing and transforming the social kind itself. For nominalists, by contrast, it may be more fruitful to attend to the multiple, shifting ways people are grouped in different contexts, without assuming that "woman" must refer to a singular or stable entity. The stakes of this debate between realism and nominalism are not merely theoretical: they concern who gets recognized, how solidarity is forged, and what kinds of political interventions are possible.

Talia Mae Bettcher brings this concern into sharper focus by critiquing both the externalist emphasis of realist accounts like Haslanger's, which define gender in terms of how individuals are classified according to dominant social norms, and resemblance-based nominalist approaches such as Stoljar's. The externalist model, she argues, risks misrecognizing trans individuals, particularly when their self-identified gender diverges from institutional or culturally dominant definitions. Likewise, she contends that family resemblance accounts of gender marginalize trans women by casting them as only borderline members of the category "woman," given that they often lack the biologically weighted features privileged in prevailing gender concepts (Bettcher 2017).

Drawing on both philosophical argument and trans community practices, Bettcher emphasizes that gender terms like "woman" carry different meanings in different social and epistemic contexts, and that these meanings are often in conflict. Central to her view is the principle of ethical first-person authority (ethical FPA)—the claim that individuals, particularly trans people, ought to be recognized as the primary knowers and legitimate definers of their own gender identities, especially when their lives are structured around those identities in socially meaningful ways (Bettcher 2009, 2024).[6] In *Beyond Personhood*, she further develops the idea of existential identity, arguing that gender self-identification is a normatively significant act of avowal, rather than a mere description, embedded in communal practices of recognition and resistance. On this basis, Bettcher defends a form of *ontological pluralism*: gender is not a singular structural kind, but a contested, relational, and community-specific construct, whose meaning is shaped by the lived practices and norms of both dominant and resistant social worlds.

Ásta develops a *conferralist account* of social kinds, according to which gender is a context-sensitive, socially conferred property: one is gendered through interactions shaped by norms about which features matter in a given setting (2018, pp. 58–59). Her approach is

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[5] Stoljar adopts this view from Iris Marion Young (1997). Young distinguishes a *series* from a *group*: while groups involve shared goals or identities, a series is unified passively through members' actions being organized around common social objects or structures. Young uses this concept to avoid essentialism and make the category "women" intelligible without presuming shared traits.

[6] To be clear, Bettcher's account is not internalist because her endorsement of FPA is political and ethical, not metaphysical. For yet another account of gender identity see Katherine Jenkins (2016, 2018).

descriptive, not ameliorative, aiming to reflect how gender functions across varied social contexts rather than prescribing a politically unified definition (p. 94). Ásta is also a *realist* about gender as a social kind: although socially constructed, gender is real because it plays a concrete role in shaping people's lives and social positions (p. 9). Her account is thus compatible with Bettcher's ontological pluralism: "woman" can name different social kinds in different communities. But she places more weight on external ascription and contextual normativity than on lived self-definition and resistant community practices.

In the background of these debates is the question of the relationship between sex and gender. While Haslanger embraced the slogan that "gender is the social meaning of sex," Judith Butler challenges the very usefulness of the sex/gender distinction. Because Butler argues that both sex and gender are socially constructed, the idea that sex is a biological foundation upon which gender is built becomes untenable. On their view, sex is not a pre-discursive, natural fact, but is itself constituted through discursive and institutional practices (1999). Treating sex as biologically given, Butler argues, obscures the power structures that produce and enforce normative categories of identity.[7]

Rather than conceiving of gender as something one is or has, Butler offers a *performative account*: gender is something one does repeatedly through socially regulated acts. These acts produce the *illusion* of stable identity, even though gender is always in the process of being constituted through repetition. What appears as a coherent gender identity is, in fact, the sedimentation of these acts over time, made intelligible within a normative cultural framework (1999; 2011). On this view, there is no "true" gender behind the performance—only a socially intelligible set of behaviors that are cited and reiterated.

Butler is especially critical of state-backed gender essentialism and anti-trans legislation, arguing that trans and nonbinary identities are not threats to feminism but vital sites of resistance to gender authoritarianism (2024).[8] For Butler, categories like "woman" should neither be rigidly defined nor abandoned, but rather held open as contested and evolving political sites—continuously reworked through critique, solidarity, and inclusive coalition.

Across these thinkers, we see a shared rejection of essentialist accounts of identity and a recognition that gender categories are produced through social norms, institutional practices, and contested forms of recognition. Yet they differ in how they conceive the nature of these constructs, the mechanisms by which they are conferred or claimed, and the political strategies they recommend, ranging from strategic redefinition to pluralization and abolition. These debates underscore that social identities are not merely classifications imposed from above or passively inhabited; they are shaped and reshaped through lived experience, normative expectations, and power-laden practices of recognition and

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[7] While Butler's point about the social construction of both sex and gender is now somewhat of an orthodoxy in feminist philosophy (for instance, Ásta, along with many other, embrace it), others have claimed that even if both are socially constructed, they are constructed differently such that the sex/gender distinction is still a theoretically useful one (see Dembroff 2016).

[8] In that spirit, Robin Dembroff introduces *critical gender kinds*: categories such as "nonbinary" or "agender" that resist binary norms and expose the ideological limits of "man" and "woman." Rather than remodeling traditional categories, Dembroff advocates for recognizing new ones that reflect the structural exclusion of nonbinary people and challenge the binary system itself (Dembroff 2018; 2020).

resistance. In what follows, I build on this analysis by turning to emotion norms as active forces in the construction of social identities. Just as gender, race, disability, and sexuality are shaped by norms of intelligibility, so too are emotions structured by cultural expectations that govern how we feel, what we express, and which emotional lives are rendered livable.

4. Emotion Norms as a Constructive Force

To understand how emotion norms participate in the construction of identity, we must first say more about what social norms are and how they function. At their core, social norms are informal but widely shared expectations about behavior, beliefs, attitudes, and affect that are reinforced through social sanction and reward. They are maintained through mutual (often implicit) recognition and compliance: people typically conform to them because they believe others do, expect others to do so, and anticipate approval for conformity or disapproval for deviation (Bicchieri 2005; Bicchieri et al. 2023).

Social norms both describe what people typically do and prescribe what they ought to do. They guide everything from mundane habits (like not sitting too close to a stranger in a nearly empty bus) to deeply entrenched expectations of the very intimate aspects of our lives (such as the expectation of sexual and emotional exclusivity in romantic relationships).

Social norms are maintained through a complex web of expectations and preferences, structured by mutual beliefs about what is done and what is required. Norms are situational: they are often activated only in particular contexts and can coexist with conflicting norms in other domains of life (Bicchieri 2005). Importantly, people often follow norms not because they believe them to be morally right or rationally optimal, but because of a desire for social coordination, approval, fear of sanction.

Social norms are *constitutive*: they regulate behavior while simultaneously shaping what actions are thinkable, appropriate, or intelligible within a given social field. They do this not by coercion, but by structuring expectations and perceptions. In this way, norms help to construct both situations and selves. To inhabit a social role, whether as a teacher, friend, woman, man, is to participate in a norm-governed system of expectations about how one ought to feel, act, and respond.

This conceptual framework is crucial for understanding how *emotion norms* contribute to the construction of identity categories. Like other social norms, emotion norms function by creating shared expectations about appropriate behavior; but their power lies in their capacity to regulate what we do, what we feel, express, and understand as emotionally appropriate. In what follows, I build on this model to argue that social identities are constructed in part through these affective expectations, and that emotional legibility plays a central role in subject formation.

4.1. The Normative Co-Construction of Emotion and Gender

Recall that on the constructionist view, emotions are not biologically fixed responses but socially patterned experiences shaped by norms, scripts, and cultural practices. As Barrett argues, emotions emerge when core affective states are interpreted using culturally

acquired emotion concepts—concepts that vary across time, place, and identity. Averill similarly describes emotions as transitory social roles governed by collective expectations about how one ought to feel and act in specific situations.

As I have argued, norms operate through shared expectations of conformity and conditional preferences to conform. Arlie Hochschild's concept of *feeling rules* aligns closely with this framework: emotion norms function as shared expectations about what we ought to *feel* in particular contexts (Hochschild 1983). These norms are learned through observation, reinforced by social approval or sanction, and sustained through what Hochschild calls *emotion work*—the active effort to manage one's internal affective states to meet normative demands. In this way, emotions are shaped by cultural narratives, personal history, and the ongoing, situational feedback loops that govern social life. Emotion norms, like other social norms, do not merely constrain expression—they help construct the very shape, meaning, and felt texture of emotional experience. To feel a particular emotion is, in many cases, to occupy a socially meaningful position within a normative framework that defines what kinds of feeling are appropriate, intelligible, or even possible.

Emotion norms play a central role in the construction of gender by shaping the emotional repertoires that are expected, cultivated, and are intelligible in a social context. These norms do more than reflect 'natural' gender differences; they actively *produce* them. In particular, they sustain and naturalize[9] hegemonic femininity and hegemonic masculinity, the culturally dominant forms of gender that are positioned as normative and ideal. Women are expected to be kind, nurturing, empathetic, emotionally expressive, and attuned to the feelings of others. They are praised for being caring, cooperative, and emotionally available, and often penalized when they display anger, assertiveness, or emotional withdrawal. This emotional profile is not incidental to femininity; it is part of what it *means* to be a woman in the dominant social context. Conversely, men are expected to be emotionally restrained, stoic, independent, and in control. Emotional expressiveness, especially in the form of vulnerability, sadness, or fear, is often discouraged or even stigmatized in men, while anger and pride may be perceived as acceptable or even affirming of masculinity. These affective expectations are deeply woven into broader gender norms, reinforcing a binary in which emotional expressiveness is feminized and emotional containment masculinized. Through repeated enactment and reinforcement, these emotion norms help *constitute* gendered subject positions, making certain emotional styles seem natural for men or women, and shaping the possible ways in which gender can be lived, recognized, and understood.

Two mechanisms play a key role in the shaping of gender by emotion norms.

First, emotion norms make affective experiences intelligible or unintelligible for different social positions. Being recognized as a woman requires conformity to affective expectations: expressiveness, empathy, care. Consistent violation—being stoic, aggressive, emotionally unavailable—leads to questioned gender identity or "defective"

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[9] Some evolutionary psychologists have argued that the stereotypical emotion profiles of men and women are biologically determined, thus affirming BET (e.g. Buss 2000). Such an approach might commit one to gender essentialism because it treats emotional dispositions as innate, sex-linked traits rooted in reproductive biology, thereby reinforcing the view that men and women have fixed, natural emotional profiles.

femininity. Gender isn't prior to emotion norms: conformity with emotion norms partially determines who counts as properly gendered.

Second, emotion norms shape how emotions are perceived. The same anger reads as righteous indignation in men, hysteria in women, threatening violence in Black men[10], "angry Black woman" stereotype in Black women. These differential interpretations don't reflect pre-existing categories—they actively constitute them by producing different social realities and consequences. When women's anger is systematically dismissed as irrational, this enforces femininity as emotionally unstable while limiting political action.

These mechanisms operate through repetition and sedimentation over time. As Butler argues, gender is continuously produced through repeated acts made intelligible within normative frameworks, and emotion norms are central to this process. Learning to be a woman involves learning to feel empathy, suppress anger, perform emotional labor—not as additions to an already-gendered self, but as constitutive of becoming gendered. Through this iterative process, gendered emotional patterns come to feel natural, automatic, and inevitable, obscuring their constructed character. What begins as conformity to external expectations becomes incorporated into one's habitual affective responses and sense of self.

In sum, emotion norms and gender identities are mutually constitutive: emotions are made intelligible through gendered frameworks, while gender itself is partly constituted through conformity to or deviation from affective expectations. Through repetition, these patterns become naturalized, creating the illusion that gendered emotional repertoires are innate rather than socially produced. Yet this mutual construction is not politically neutral. As the next section shows, emotion norms function as instruments of oppression, creating double binds that penalize marginalized individuals regardless of which emotions they express, and distributing emotional legitimacy unevenly across intersecting identity categories.

4.2 Gender, Emotion, and Oppression

Having established that emotion norms and gender are mutually constitutive, I now examine how this mutual construction functions as a mechanism of oppression. Emotion norms operate as tools of gender-based control through at least two pathways: by creating affective double binds that penalize all available emotional responses, and by differentially distributing emotional legitimacy based on intersecting identity categories.

Note first that gender itself functions as a system of social constraint. Iris Marion Young defines oppression not as a matter of individual acts of cruelty or exclusion but as a structural phenomenon—a network of forces and barriers which immobilize and reduce the agency of certain social groups, particularly women, people of color, and disabled people (1990; 2011). Oppression, on this view, is reproduced through everyday habits, norms, and

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[10] Tommy Curry argues that Black masculinity is constructed through what he terms "misandric anti-Black racism," in which Black men's emotions—particularly anger—are systematically read as violent threat. See Curry (2017).

institutional arrangements that are so deeply embedded they often appear natural or inevitable.

We have already discussed Sally Haslanger's political construction of gender according to which, "S is a woman iff$_{df}$ S is systematically subordinated along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and S is "marked" as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction" (2000, 39). The core criticism of this ameliorative definition is that it makes oppression a necessary condition for being a woman (Mikkola 2011). Yet, it cannot be denied that gender has been the site of oppression for women, trans, and gender-nonconforming individuals. While oppression may not be a necessary consequence of gender categories, these are in fact often constructed within dominant social contexts in ways that are themselves oppressive.

This is especially evident when we examine the affective dimensions of gender: the ways in which norms around feeling, expression, and emotional comportment function as mechanisms of control. Marilyn Frye's concept of double binds, in which all available options result in penalty, exposure, or diminished agency, is particularly illuminating here. Women are often caught in *affective double binds*: if they express anger, they are dismissed as irrational or dangerous via the 'women are emotional' stereotype; if they remain calm, they are accused of complicity or passivity (Frye 1983). This is problematic as anger is fitting when it picks out a wrong or an injustice. Delegitimizing women's anger deprives them of a means of recognizing injustice and undermines its motivational power to confront wrongdoing and signal to others that harm is occurring, thereby obstructing the possibility of support or intervention. On the other hand, men's anger is typically treated as righteous indignation, an emotion men are entitled to express, and one that enhances rather than diminishes their credibility and agency.[11]

Sexuality, dress, and speech are also governed by contradictory norms for women— 'too sexual' and one is shamed as loose; not sexual enough and one is dismissed as prudish. These binds are not accidental but *constitutive* of the structure of female gender under patriarchy.

Different emotional double binds are observed when examining the intersection of gender and race. Black women, in particular, are often positioned in ways that deviate from the expectations of hegemonic femininity, which idealizes emotional delicacy, vulnerability, and deference.[12] Instead, they are subjected to the "Strong Black Woman" (SBW) stereotype, which constructs Black women as emotionally resilient, self-sacrificing, and perpetually caregiving—demanding emotional stoicism and the suppression of vulnerability (Collins 2000, 159).[13] This positioning not only denies them access to the emotional

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[11] See Srinivasan (2018); Manne (2017).

[12] For discussion of the unique oppression faced by Black women see Kimberlé W. Crenshaw (1989; 1991), and Moya Bailey (2021).

[13] While the "Strong Black Woman" stereotype often functions as a controlling image that demands emotional stoicism and self-sacrifice, it is also an emotional ideal that emerged from African American resistance and survival. For many, it represents strength, endurance, and care within a legacy of collective struggle. The challenge lies in recognizing the empowering dimensions of this figure without allowing it to justify the denial

repertoire prescribed by hegemonic white, middle-class femininity but also imposes conflicting emotional demands. Failure to conform to the SBW ideal risks being read as weak, irrational, or "angry"—itself a racist and gendered stereotype. Here, emotional expression is policed through gender norms that are simultaneously racialized, reshaping what kinds of emotional life are deemed acceptable, legible, or threatening.[14] The result is a compounded double bind, where Black women are expected to be both invulnerable and accommodating, invisible and overexposed, emotionally restrained and always available to others.[15] Because hegemonic femininity is racialized, these norms do not merely constrain Black women, they also marginalize them from full inclusion in the category of "woman" itself.[16]

Similarly, Asian women may find themselves in an affective double bind due to the so called "Yellow Fever" preference—a racialized sexual fetishization of East and Southeast Asian women (and sometimes men) by non-Asian often white people, particularly in the context of romantic or sexual attraction (Zheng 2016). Under this normative schema, Asian women are often hypersexualized through 'Orientalist' stereotypes that cast them as sexually available, exotic, and submissive. If they express sexual desire, they risk confirming this stereotype and are viewed as lacking agency or self-respect. If they withhold or reject sexual advances, they are seen as cold, repressed, or ungrateful for the attention. Asian women subjected to "Yellow Fever" fetishization fail the standard of hegemonic femininity not by being insufficiently feminine, but by being hyper-feminized in racialized and dehumanizing ways that mark them as erotic objects rather than full subjects.

In sum, the intersection of race and gender constructs women of color differently from white cis middle class heterosexual women. It generates distinct emotional expectations, affective constraints, and modes of misrecognition. Furthermore, while Frye's concept of the double bind is one powerful way to illuminate the affective dimensions of gender oppression, it is not the only framework through which such oppression can be understood. Not all mechanisms of gender-based constraint take the form of paradoxical or no-win choices. Some operate through systematic exclusion, misrecognition, disciplinary regulation, or material disadvantage without necessarily placing individuals in situations where every option is penalized. Indeed, various accounts of emotional and affective injustice and oppression have been emerging in the literature, examining the many ways in which affective expectations can function as tools of injustice and oppression, rendering some emotions unintelligible, others compulsory, and still others punishable.[17]

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of vulnerability, support, or full emotional expression. For an in-depth discussion of double-binds that arise with coping mechanisms under oppression see Silva et al. (forthcoming).

[14] For discussion of adverse psychological effects of SBW see Burnett-Zeigler (2021).

[15] The *Mammy* and *Jezebel* stereotypes also form a racialized double bind for Black women: the *Mammy* demands emotional selflessness and desexualization, while the *Jezebel* portrays them as hypersexual and morally deviant. Resisting one risks being cast as the other, constraining Black women's affective and embodied expression.

[16] Similar points can be made about other intersections, such as when gender intersects with sexuality, disability, class, or neurodivergence. In each case, dominant norms of femininity operate to exclude those who do not conform to white, cis, heterosexual, abled, and neurotypical ideals.

[17] See, for instance, Whitney (2018), Srinivasan (2018), Archer and Mills (2019), Gallegos (2021), Pismenny et al. (2024), Stockdale (2024).

4.3 Multiplicity, Resistance, and Contextual Emotion Norms

While much of this discussion has focused on how emotion norms constrain and oppress, it is important to resist the temptation to see normativity as inherently disciplinary or unidirectional. Emotion norms can also be plural, context-sensitive, and enabling. Drawing on María Lugones's concept of "world traveling" and Talia Mae Bettcher's critique of "reality enforcement," we can begin to see how emotional life may be shaped by hegemonic norms or, depending on the social world in which one moves, by norms of resistance.

Lugones (1987) develops the concept of "world traveling" to capture the experience of moving between distinct normative worlds, each with its own logic, affective expectations, and modes of recognition. These "worlds" are more than mere metaphors: they are real social and cultural formations with their own standards of intelligibility, including emotion norms. Lugones emphasizes that for women of color, queer people, and others who live at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities, traveling between worlds is often necessary for survival. But it can also be a source of joy, playfulness, and resistance, especially when one enters a world where one is not reduced, misunderstood, or constrained.

For example, a queer Latina might feel out of place in a white-dominated academic institution, where her emotional expressions are misread or othered, but at ease among chosen family or in activist spaces where forms of affect like rage, grief, or exuberance are recognized, welcomed, and shared. The emotional fluency required to navigate multiple worlds is itself a form of knowledge, but it is often undervalued or rendered invisible. Lugones insists that "world traveling" is not just about code-switching; it's about engaging different worlds with *loving perception* (a mode of attention that seeks to understand others on their own terms, without distortion, superiority, or assimilation), and finding in them new possibilities for affective selfhood and mutual recognition.[18]

Bettcher extends this framework by offering a metaphysical account of plural realities (2024). For Bettcher, different social groups may operate within different sets of metaphysical and normative assumptions about what exists and what matters. These social realities are not illusions or mere perspectives; they are ontologically real for those who live within them. This is especially salient in the case of gender: for many trans people, different communities hold radically incompatible views about what gender is, how it should be recognized, and what emotional expressions are deemed legitimate. In one world, a trans person's gender and emotional life may be affirmed; in another, they may be erased, mocked, or medicalized. Such plural realities invite us to consider how entire affective social worlds—different ways of feeling, expressing, and being moved—can be sustained within communities that resist dominant norms.

A wide range of queer, feminist, and radical subcultures cultivate emotional social worlds that depart from hegemonic norms. Some are forged intentionally by marginalized communities as spaces of resistance, healing, and affective possibility. In drag culture, for instance, gendered emotion norms are often inverted, parodied, subverted, and creatively

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[18] See also von Maur (2021).

expanded. Drag performance makes room for joy, flamboyance, rage, pride, and grief in ways that would be unintelligible or stigmatized in dominant gendered settings. Similarly, mutual aid networks often operate as emotionally supportive worlds grounded in solidarity rather than charity, where emotions like dependency, care, fear, and hope are not only expressed but met with reciprocal concern rather than judgment. In queer joy rituals such as Pride celebrations, dance parties, or communal mourning spaces feelings of exuberance, desire, and grief become intelligible and politically powerful in ways that challenge both heteronormative affective expectations and respectability politics.

However, these alternative emotional worlds often come into conflict with dominant institutions that attempt to enforce a singular, authorized account of reality. This is what Bettcher terms *reality enforcement*: the imposition of one metaphysical and normative framework as the only legitimate one, typically through medical, legal, or bureaucratic institutions (2024, 17-18). Reality enforcement does not merely misrecognize; it invalidates entire affective worlds. For instance, a trans woman whose identity and emotional experience are affirmed within her queer community may find those same experiences denied or pathologized in a clinical or legal setting where she is treated as "really a man."

This enforcement extends beyond pronouns or paperwork; it structures what emotional expressions are deemed rational, authentic, or permissible. A trans person's grief over being misgendered, their euphoria at gender affirmation, or their rage at institutional gatekeeping may all be rendered unintelligible or dismissed under dominant emotion norms. In this way, reality enforcement operates as a form of emotional injustice, erasing not only identities but entire affective social worlds.

Thus, emotional life is shaped by hegemonic norms and co-constructed within alternative social worlds that cultivate resistant forms of affective expression and recognition. Emotion norms are not inherently oppressive; they are sites of political struggle, capable of both constraining and enabling emotional agency. By attending to the multiplicity of emotional social worlds and to the violence of reality enforcement that seeks to erase them, we gain a deeper understanding of how emotions are entangled with identity, power, and the ongoing project of social transformation.

In this section I have argued that emotion norms are active forces in the construction of identity, shaping how people are expected to feel and what kinds of selves can be recognized, affirmed, or marginalized. By examining how emotion norms co-construct gender, intersect with race and sexuality, and operate across multiple social worlds, we have seen how emotions are implicated in both the reproduction of oppression and the possibilities for resistance. While dominant norms often regulate emotional life in ways that uphold existing power structures, counter-normative affective worlds—whether found in queer kinship, drag culture, or mutual aid networks—reveal the potential for alternative emotional vocabularies and creative modes of being.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that emotions are socially constructed experiences shaped by norms, scripts, and cultural expectations, rather than simply internal, biologically fixed states. I have aimed to show how emotion norms participate in the formation and intersection of social identities

such as gender, race, sexuality, and disability by determining which emotions are intelligible, livable, and actionable.[19] Emotion norms do not merely regulate expression; they constitute the emotional texture of subjectivity and help sustain systems of power.

While much of the discussion has emphasized the ways in which emotion norms constrain and oppress, I have also highlighted how communities generate multiple affective worlds—some of which cultivate resistant emotional repertoires. Emotions like rage, grief, joy, and care take on different meanings and political potentials depending on the normative world in which they are situated.

In these alternate affective worlds, gender constructs can be more or less liberating. Under the neoliberal logic of "girl power feminism," "woman" is framed as empowered primarily through confidence, consumption, and individual success, while systemic injustice and collective struggle are left unaddressed (Hay 2022). In stark contrast, Myisha Cherry's account of Lordean rage offers a vision of womanhood grounded in collective resistance and moral clarity. It reclaims anger as a site of agency, knowledge, and transformation, rooted in the lived experiences of Black women, and rejects the emotional docility demanded by dominant gender norms, opening space for subversive emotion, radical solidarity, and a feminist identity capable of confronting structural oppression (Cherry 2021).

Although our identities and emotional repertoires are shaped by emotion norms, they are not determined by them. Individuals and communities actively interpret, negotiate, and resist these norms, creating possibilities for emotional lives and identities that challenge and transform the very structures that seek to contain them. Recognizing this is both politically urgent and philosophically generative: it invites us to reimagine emotion and identity as sites of struggle and possibility. A feminist philosophy of emotion must continue the work of uncovering oppressive affective regimes, and of building new ones that are emancipatory, plural, and just.

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[19] Although this paper has focused on the ontological and ethical-political dimensions of emotion norms, these issues are also deeply entangled with epistemic concerns. See, for instance Alison Jaggar (1989) and Laura Silva (2021).

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