

## Emotional Ambience in Classroom Interaction Rituals

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to elaborate on interaction ritual theory (IRT) by introducing the concept of Emotional Ambience as a complement to Randall Collins' concept of Emotional Energy. Participating in successful interaction rituals fills the partakers with emotional energy and induces group solidarity, while unsuccessful interaction rituals imply lack of emotional energy, which is associated with boredom, tiredness and depression.[2] Researchers have fruitfully explored classroom interactions and teacher-student relations using IRT. However, researchers recurrently misinterpret the concept of emotional energy, posing it to depict the emotional atmosphere of the situation, instead of the individual emotional result of the interaction ritual.[2] Since there obviously is a need for a concept for typifying the collective emotional state in a situation I elaborate on Emotional Ambience (EA) as such a concept. I propose a two-dimensional model that typifies collective emotions on scales of positive and negative valence respectively high and low affect. In an interaction ritual the EA is the output of the foremost intersubjective emotional manifestations in gestures, facial expressions, speech intonation and content etc. Hence EA is methodologically observable. The strength of the EA is recognized by evaluating to which degree the participants' actions are adapted and conjoined to each other. The use of the EA model is demonstrated by two short empirical examples of classroom interactions between a teacher and a student.

### Introduction - Interaction Ritual Theory

The aim of this paper is to elaborate on interaction ritual theory by introducing the concept of Emotional Ambience as a complement to Randall Collins' concept of Emotional Energy.

Interaction ritual theory (IRT) originates from Emile Durkheim's sociological studies of the elementary forms of religion, where he emphasizes the importance of the collective practice of the religious ritual for the unity of the tribe. When the tribe gathers for a religious ritual, a force is formed, which Durkheim associates to a kind of social electricity, an exalted mood develops and escalates. The gathering of human bodies in the same place is a basic prerequisite for a shared experience, attunement, and intensification of the common emotional state that Durkheim calls *collective effervescence*. [1]

Erving Goffman's contribution to IRT refers to two main aspects; firstly, he situates the concept of ritual in a distinct micro-sociological context and secondly, he focuses on the non-religious situations of everyday life. Goffman is interested in greeting phrases, courtesies, facial expressions, body language, the presentation of the self, etc. as interaction rituals with symbolic and micro-functional meanings. It is hence such stereotypical interactions as greeting rituals and other conventions that form the framework of social life in society. But the meanings of the interaction rituals are most clearly illustrated when the focus is on what happens when the social rules are violated. Goffman is thus interested in the micro-production of solidarity in everyday actions. [2]

With Interaction Ritual Chains, Randall Collins has developed a refined and thorough theory. According to IRT it is the exchange of cultural capital that constitutes the very content of social interaction. The better the exchange of cultural capital between the participants in an interaction situation works, the stronger group solidarity is created. In addition, individuals will carry with them a kind of force that can be called emotional energy (EE) as a result of the successful interaction ritual.

According to Collins, the form of an interaction ritual consists of the following four characteristics [2]:

- a) *Bodily copresence*: A group of individuals (at least two) in physical presence so that they can perceive each other's micro-signals; body language, facial expressions and tone of voice
- b) *A common focus* - intellectual, emotional, visual, audial, etc. By individuals focusing their attention on the same object and being aware of this among themselves, intersubjectivity is established.
- c) *An intersubjective emotional condition*, or a manifested collective state of mind that the participants both create and adapt to. The collective focus and emotional manifestations are regulated reciprocally so that a stronger common focus creates a greater coherence among the group participants' moods and vice versa.
- d) *Boundary against outsiders*: A demarcation between who is included and not included in the group.

Well-functioning interaction rituals also give rise to EE and trust between the individuals who participate in the group's rituals and respect their common symbols. EE is, in short, the constructive force that is the outcome of social interaction when the group dynamics with respect to the above aspects work well, and enthusiasm and feelings of belonging are generated and mutually incorporated by the participants. While successful interaction rituals strengthen the group solidarity and generate EE in participants, unsuccessful interaction rituals can lead to drained emotional energy. EE stimulates drive, self-confidence, enthusiasm and elation while lack of EE is associated with boredom, powerlessness and depression. [2]

In studies that use Collins' theory, however, there are often ambiguities regarding the concept of emotional energy. Studies of interaction rituals in the classroom not seldomly equate EE with the social atmosphere of the situation.[3] Collins, however, distinguishes between emotional energy and the collective emotional state of the situation. To denote situational collective emotional states and processes, he uses formulations such as "the social atmosphere", "shared emotion", "emotional entrainment", and "buildup of emotional coordination". But he has no concept, model or theory to capture and inquire this collective emotional energy in the situation.

In addition to the formulations mentioned above, Collins of course also uses Durkheim's concept of collective effervescence, which, however, is not a particularly elaborate concept either. Nor does Durkheim have any developed theory for capturing the collective mood in a situation. After all, collective effervescence is only a term for a specific condition under specific circumstances. If we move outside religious contexts and see interaction rituals as something that takes place in everyday situations, we immediately find that there are situations that are characterized by collective emotional states where effervescence is not the right term for the social atmosphere. The atmosphere at a yin yoga session, for example, would not be described as effervescent, but rather calm. Collective effervescence is thus only one of several designations of the emotional mood of a situation, where other designations could be collective serenity and joy depending on the degree of affectivity in the social atmosphere.

Previous research conducted in interaction ritual theory, where researchers inadequately use the concept of emotional energy, also shows the need for a further development of IRT to be able to capture and delineate the character of the collective emotions in a situation.

## **Emotional Ambience**

In this regard, I propose emotional ambience (EA) as a concept for the dominant collective emotions that characterize an interaction ritual situation. The concept is both connected to and delimited from other established concepts for collective emotions.



### Emotional affect and valence

Collective emotions can be of different degrees of affectivity in different situations, e.g. calm as in group meditation or ecstatic as in the supporters' stand when the supported football team scores. The emotions can also have different character or so-called valence.

Valence denotes which degree on a scale between positive and negative an emotion can be placed. Emotions that people usually consider unpleasant are defined as negative while emotions that people experience as pleasant are labelled positive. The negative spectrum thus includes emotions such as sadness, shame and fear and the positive spectrum includes emotions such as joy, pride and serenity.

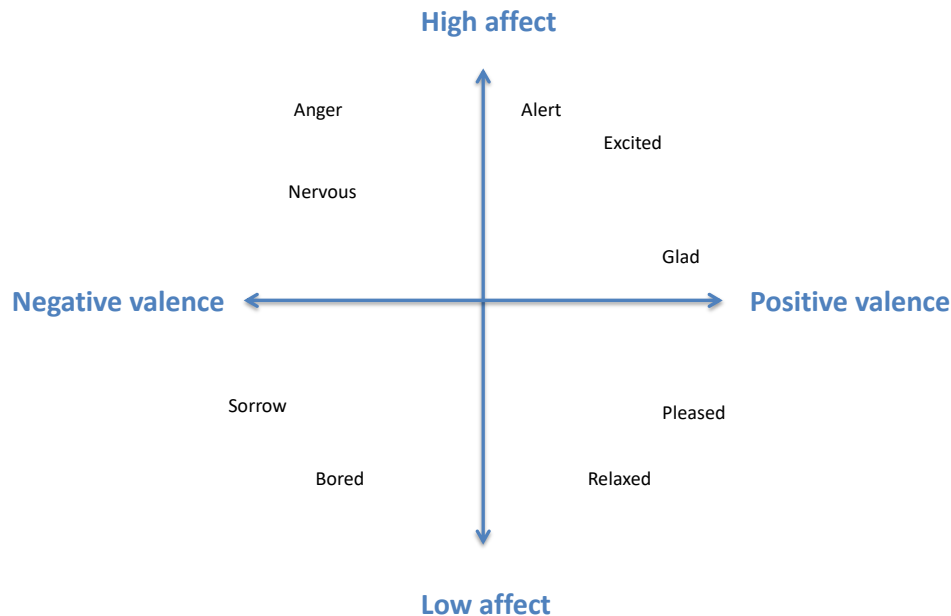


Figure 1. Level of affect and positive and negative valence of emotional ambience

We thus have two axes that we can place emotional ambience along, ie on a scale between low and high affect and on a scale between positive and negative valence.

Of course, the emotional ambience is not always unambiguous or clear. The emotional impact between actors varies in strength from situation to situation. This dimension can be conceptualized in terms of the strength of the emotional ambience. In other words, the emotional ambience can be e.g. slightly joyful, which means that the tendency is not clear-cut but that there is a certain emotional coordination that can be described as joyful. It is also interesting if no such tendency can be observed. The incident that no emotional coordination takes place implies a failed interaction ritual and the question can be explored whether a *mutual focus of attention*, *borders against outsiders* or any other of Collins' criteria for an interaction ritual characterized the situation.

### Operationalizing Emotional Ambience

Emotional ambience is an empirical phenomenon that can be studied with methodological tools. Both body language, voice, gaze, and facial expressions communicates emotions, and it is the coordination between participants' expressions that the analysis of the EA is focused on. It is often a question of combining several different aspects, such as the rhythm and tone of speech, gestures and facial

expressions, how these harmonize and interplay. The content of the speech also gives indications of the EA.

In the sociology of emotions, microanalyses have focused on facial expressions [4], body language and proxemics, ie. interpersonal and spatial distances [5], prosody, ie. speech rhythm, intonation and dynamics [6] and physiological variables such as pulse rate [7] and thermography [8]. Different types of self-reports are commonplace for examining emotions. For example, the classroom climate has been studied using clickers, which students must press every three minutes to indicate their emotional experiences on a five-point scale from "very positive" to "very negative".[9]

In summary, there are a variety of methodological tools for examining emotional expressions and it is, as mentioned, the coordination of these in interaction rituals that is of interest for the exploration of the EA.

### Teacher-student interaction rituals

Two short examples from an empirical material can illustrate the use of EA in IRT.

In the first case, a teacher and a student have a dialogue about the student Elin's text where she writes about her sisters. A common focus is established around the text and a boundary against outsiders is manifested through their dyadic communication. The teacher gives some praise and expresses sympathy with the content of the text; "Ah, nice," she says. Both the teacher and the student speak in a soft voice and follow each other's speech rhythm. They also mirror each other's facial expressions that alternate between smiling and a not smiling but friendly expression. The situation is a typical example of an emotionally coordinated interaction ritual where the EA is characterized by calm kindness (positive valence and low affect). The interaction ritual thus indicates the development of emotional energy and strengthened social bonds.

The second example contrasts with the first. The student Johan has asked for help because he cannot get started with his text. The teacher initially tries to follow Johan's fast speech rhythm but fails and stumbles, which creates a micro-brake that the student use to interrupt her. Johan sometimes turns during the dialogue to the friends next to and in front of him and says something humorous. The teacher and the student reflect each other's tone of voice, in this context a somewhat harsh tone, but otherwise they are not attuned in facial expressions and body language. No common focus is established and the boundary against outsiders of the dialogue is broken. It is not possible to describe a unified EA, the situation indicates an exhausted emotional energy and weak social bonds. The interaction ends with the student shouting "I do not know what to do", while the teacher leaves to help the next student.

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