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Reprise: The New Principles of Emotional Management

The articles, pamphlets, advice materials, and stories that articulated the emerging twentieth-century emotional culture redefined Victorian standards in virtually every area. Specific approaches varied with the emotion, and even individual emotions like grief or motherlove were approached differently at different times. Despite this complexity, however, the advocacy of a new emotionology did rest on several shared assumptions. Maddeningly, these assumptions were rarely spelled out in any general way. No one, certainly at the level of popularization, spoke systematically about problems of intensity. Even more limited innovations, like the new approach to fear or sibling jealousy, sometimes seemed almost unacknowledged, the innovators failing to recognize how much their advice differed from that of their Victorian predecessors. Eager embrace of science and modernism created some awareness of the process of change, as in the attacks on older standards of love or grief, but the most fundamental thrusts remained largely implicit.

Acknowledged or not, however, the emotion-by-emotion innovations were propelled by shared assumptions. This is clearly indicated by the timing of change. While suggestions of new directions began to emerge shortly before 1900, the larger emotionology began to be staked out during the 1920s, with a period of eager advocacy extending from that point into the 1950s. Shared timing does not prove shared purpose, but it suggests that the rethinking applied to specific emotions rested on
shifts in assumptions regarding emotions in general, which in turn did not gain full coherence until the second quarter of the century.

The new emotional culture called for new abilities in emotion management. Victorian standards had also urged management, as in controlling the use of fear and anger, but they had also recognized certain emotional areas in which regulation was not necessary, either because individuals were not considered to have certain emotions (as in the case of women and anger) or because restraint was not appropriate (as in spiritualized love). Twentieth-century culture, on the other hand, called for management across the board; no emotion should gain control over one's thought processes.

The culture also suggested a clear socialization pattern applicable to the acquisition of emotional maturity regardless of setting. Children, in the new view, were no longer innocent; rather, they were characterized by a frightening emotional vulnerability. They had all sorts of irrational passions that needed careful handling, and at the same time they could be exposed to parental excess not only in the form of misuse of anger or fear in discipline but also in the form of misguided love. Infancy, in this new culture, became a crucial developmental stage, with the later stages of childhood considered less open to revision and guidance (except perhaps through professional therapy). Through parental reassurance, techniques of ventilation, and appropriate doses of affection, children might begin to climb the ladder of emotional control. Whether they would lose certain dangerous impulses—as was sometimes suggested for jealousy—or merely learn how to keep the impulses in check, they would ideally move toward an adulthood that placed reason over emotion and moderated emotional expression in virtually every imaginable encounter. Parenthood itself became a test for managed emotion. Not only anger and fear but even love itself must now be carefully weighed, its expression never allowed to become excessive. Advocates of unbounded love for infants assumed that the parent could turn off the taps when, at age three or four, the child needed to gain greater emotional independence. Emotional control was now as uniform a principle within the family circle as it was in wider spheres, including the workplace, where Victorian emotionology had not carried over at all clearly.

As the demands of emotional maturity increased in many respects, the childish terrain came to seem rockier. Victorians had been able, in principle, to assume an early period of considerable innocence when the
main effort was simply to avoid unnecessary problems, followed by later stages in which children were open to appeal through a combination of guilt and character building. The new culture invited a great deal more manipulation precisely because infancy was at once so crucial and so difficult. To wean children away from emotional impulsiveness and to prepare the way for guidance through embarrassment, signs of childishness were now transformed into sources of personal shame. Even excessive love, because of its taint of infancy, might provoke embarrassment in a mature adult accustomed to managed restraint.

Emphasis on emotional management reduced the salience of the public-private divisions that had underwritten Victorian emotional culture. Family guidance was vital to the maturation of young children, to be sure, but the rules they were to learn applied to work settings and intimate settings alike. Anger was no longer of greater use in public than in private life; the result was that a bit more anger might be acceptable in the family, but much less anger was permissible on the job than in the Victorian heyday. Reductions in the acceptability of grief limited one kind of familial emotional bond, and the redefinitions of love, while preserving an emotional space near the hearth, limited the special quality of this domestic emotion. Parents, courting couples, coworkers, and spouses all needed to manage and control their emotional expressions, keeping reason in charge and pulling back in embarrassment when the bounds were overstepped. Home became less sacredly separate.

The emergence of a new emotional culture in the 1920s coincided with growing efforts to homogenize national culture as a whole. The cessation of immigration combined with various kinds of Americanization programs, in companies as well as the public schools, to give a wider portion of the population access to essentially middle-class standards. During the decades in which the new emotionology was being forged, growing agreement emerged among Americans, at least in principle, about the goals of childhood socialization. A recent literacy study emphasizes the standard-setting homogenization of the leading American media precisely in the 1920–1950s period, when the emotional redefinitions were debated and presented. In the emotions area, then, a dual process was occurring in which middle-class Americans revised previous norms while maintaining their confident assumptions of cultural leadership, while other groups gained new access to these same changing norms. The middle class was itself changing, with new divi-
sions being created between the service-sector population and older entrepreneurial and professional groups, as well as between suburban and urban styles. It was the service-sector and suburban contingents that, as we will see, proved most open to change, using new emotional standards to help shore up their self-identity as modern and up to date. Homogenization thus warred with important new divisions in American society, but the uniformity of the mainstream emotional culture, as now redefined, remained striking.  

Social class and ethnicity remained important variables in emotional culture. It was revealing that efforts to curtail anger at work, initially directed at blue-collar workers on the factory floor, shifted focus toward the middle and lower-middle class, which was expected not simply to respond to anger-control strategies but also to internalize the necessary restraints. Here was implicit recognition of some continued social gaps in emotional standards. Nevertheless, the middle class itself was growing rapidly in size with the expansion of the service and management sectors and of exposure to secondary and college education. Popularizations like Dr. Spock’s childrearing manuals reached all strata of the middle class. A sense of social cohesion with respect to basic emotional values probably increased, and with it the expectations applied to social and ethnic groups outside the middle class itself.

Regional differences persisted. We will see that the South, for example, retained traces of earlier distinctions concerning jealousy and grief, preserving a greater interest in intensity than was publicly acknowledged in the North. Here too, however, the region seems to have integrated its standards with those of the rest of the country. Southern laws that gave special consideration to jealousy changed, though belatedly by national standards, moving closer to the general assumption that jealousy could and should be suppressed. As with class, regional distinctions must be treated, but particularly with respect to the impact of emotional culture, no fully alternative regional culture was sketched.

Traditional Protestantism, increasingly visible in the 1920s because of its contrast to mainstream religious trends, did provide a haven for several older cultural impulses—a fact that warns against any overly facile assumption of growing uniformity in emotionology. Fundamentalists and other articulate Christians tried to go against the general grain in their view of grief, and they could also harbor older, sometimes even pre-Victorian standards concerning emotions such as anger or fear.
Gender counted for far less than it had in the nineteenth century, at least on the cultural surface. This was one of the clear themes of the new emotionology. Almost all the advice literature downplayed gender as a major factor in emotional standards—or even, indeed, in etiquette. This shift emerged in the new emphasis on self-conscious management. The Victorian assumption that women’s special nature provided them with spontaneous emotional guidelines faded, and women became subjected to even more stringent formal management requirements than men, given their need to monitor motherlove. Men’s special rights or requirements with respect to anger were swept aside; both men and women had to keep their tempers at work. Experiments on jealousy reflected the Victorian assumption that women were more susceptible to it than men, but the standards were more insistently the same for both genders than in the nineteenth century. Fathers had an easier time than mothers when it came to managing love, and their more easygoing style might win praise (though some advisers also cautioned about men’s tendency to distance themselves unduly from familial emotional involvement). Again, however, the standards of undemanding, carefully controlled affection were identical for fathers and mothers alike. The decline of a special status for motherlove, in fact, was revealed in advice writers’ tendency to talk of parental, rather than specifically maternal, affection. This trend appeared well before the 1980s, when paternal emotional competence was more actively called forth. Marriage advice literature, for its part, addressed men and women similarly, urging rational assessment of compatibility for both sexes. And, of course, placing bedroom adjustment at the marital center reduced the Victorian gap between men and women in the area of sexuality. Again, men might be cautioned against too little affection, and women’s initiatives in sexuality were downplayed in favor of men’s, but by nineteenth-century standards the differentiation had shrunk dramatically. Finally, the decline of a special male calling to courage matched the attacks on motherlove in eroding key Victorian symbols of gendered emotionality.

Beneath the surface another cultural reality took shape. Even as official declarations of differences between male and female emotional nature declined, both in science and in popularizations, new gaps emerged. The early efforts of Esquire to attack pushy, careerist women suggest that new distinctions advanced almost because the old ones were disappearing. Esquire, as we have seen, urged men to free themselves from
women's manipulation of Victorian love while also arguing that women were irrationally emotional in any event. Here, growing insistence on emotional management provided a framework for accusations that one gender was not living up to the norms. Whether simply traditional or newly enhanced as a response to women's gains in public life, male belief in women's greater emotionality took on greater significance in a culture that officially insisted on uniform restraint and allowed for no recognition of distinctively feminine emotional qualities. Women, ultimately, would learn to return the favor in arguing that men remained disproportionately (and unacceptably) aggressive. Again, this was not an entirely new charge, except for the terms employed, but it was newly significant given the lack of official sanction for male use of angry impulses. In sum, men and women may well have reacted to the new emotional culture differently, at least on average. They may have used it to create a new set of mutual accusations. Gender relations were by no means magically smoothed by the new culture, and it was no accident that popular features on the "Battle between the Sexes" emerged in precisely the same decades when twentieth-century emotionology was being defined and disseminated.

The fact remains, however, that both genders were exposed to cultural change and that the new culture erased, at least officially, most of the classic gender definitions that had been central to Victorian emotionology. Men and women might forge gender-specific variants, in part through selective retention of Victorian ideals, but neither personnel experts nor family advice experts acknowledged significant differentiation in emotional requirements. Indeed, after some transitional confusion in the 1920s, when mothers were singled out for attack, most experts also retreated from the notion that males and females were emotionally different by nature. Thus, in the childrearing literature, children—not boys or girls—became the problem category, with the same emotional management techniques required for both genders. Likewise, in the personnel literature, after some initial discussions of women's unfavorable reactions to an emotionally harsh male work environment (or of a uniquely female backbiting jealousy on the job), emotional control advice and manipulation were targeted at workers, not one gender or the other. Here we see that the efforts to achieve uniformity, across gender, region, and to an extent social class, developed partly from the new emotional norms themselves. Men were asked to
tone down the anger—to become good salesmen, for example. Women were asked to reduce claims based on motherlove—to become effective professionals as well as really adequate mothers. In terms of desired results, the genders grew closer. Everyone could learn to be nice.

While twentieth-century emotionology reduced some traditional differentiations, including not only those of region or gender but also those between home and work, it inevitably generated important internal strains. Victorian tensions were in principle alleviated, as in the decline of separate emotional standards for men in the family and on the job, but the general public’s actual reception of the new standards is not certain. Moreover, the new emotionology itself established at least three largely novel tensions.

The first, already discussed, involved the increasing distinction between negative and positive emotions. This clear differentiation was one of the major shifts away from Victorian standards, according to which emotions perceived as dangerous could nevertheless, in appropriate circumstances, serve as vital motivators. Twentieth-century redefinitions, in contrast, treated negative emotions very differently from their positive counterparts. To the negative emotions were applied the fear that they would fester and the anxiety that they would veer out of control. Correspondingly, the most careful strategies of ventilation and avoidance were applied to the negative emotions, for any expression beyond the purely verbal risked getting out of hand.

Yet, as we have seen, the negative/positive distinction, though vivid, was also incomplete. Several emotions, most notably grief, in fact hovered between the two categories, though there was a pronounced effort to judge them as effectively negative and therefore to apply the standard suppression and avoidance techniques. More important, the concern about excess applied to positive as well as negative impulses. Love, while good, could also get out of hand.

The emphasis on distinctions between bad and good emotions led to important differences between the American emotionology and that of other cultures. Americans in general were less willing to identify their emotional experiences and were particularly strong in their desire to conceal the negatives. With regard to certain emotions like anger, American culture did not reach the top of the repression scale, but its systematic blasts at negative emotions and the unusual concern for their concealment demonstrated the impact of the new good-bad categorization.
Despite these distinctions, however, the uniform concern about excess and loss of control cut across the good-bad divide. It was perhaps no accident that shortly before the rise of the new emotional culture, concern about obsession made new headway in psychology and some resultant popularizations. While psychological research defined obsession carefully, popular treatments loosely associated loss of rational control to the point of compulsive thought and behavior with the power of emotion in excess. Thus a *Harpers' Monthly Magazine* story of 1906, entitled “The Obsession of Ann Gibbs,” showed how the protagonist’s grief leads directly to uncontrolled obsession over “fineries,” and ultimately to stark insanity. A 1913 story in *The Outlook* used the word “obsession” to describe an intense emotion that could ultimately kill. While obsessive loss of control applied most readily to emotions like fear, it was increasingly extended to grief and even to certain forms of love, where intensity might burden not only the individual but also the others exposed, whose whole emotional balance might be thrown off by the effects of untrammeled passion.6

The new principles of emotional management, and particularly the underlying concern about intensity, also involved some subtle tensions between individual and group: here was the second implicit debate. The new emotional standards often seemed bent on defending individual autonomy. Control over fear or anger protected the individual’s rational power to decide, while immunity from overweening love was explicitly portrayed as an essential step in the process of individuation. Hence twentieth-century culture is often, and not inaccurately, seen as a triumph of individual expression in which intensity is attacked precisely because it could limit this expression either from within or from without.7 But the new culture also placed strong emphasis on smooth relations between the individual and others. Grief, as we have seen, earned new demerits not only because it unseated individual reason but also because it disturbed others. The same held true of jealousy, which was feared both for its all-consuming qualities and for the burdens it placed on the object of jealousy. Thus the culture was in no simple sense individualistic. Rather, it sought to combine apparent individual control with important promptings of group harmony. Again, the link was intensity itself, which worked against both goals. Ultimately, the burden that intensity placed on group harmony outweighed the apparent commitment to individuation in directing the new styles of emotion manage-
ment. The desire not to feel obligated, and therefore to resent emotional intrusion by others, surpassed interest in maximizing one's own opportunities for expression, while the new concern about avoiding embarrassment added group pressure in a more direct sense.

Finally, the new management principles struck a subtle balance between regulation and independence. Attacks on Victorian standards frequently created an aura of new freedom. The decline of gender differences opened some new emotional areas, and the interest in reducing emotional enforcement of hierarchy—particularly the rejection of anger as a management tool—painted new vistas as well. More fundamentally still, the growing attack on guilt promised independence in a variety of directions; emotion could now be proclaimed as a no-fault domain. Emphasis on ventilation promoted a sense that any emotion could be discussed, with open communication guaranteed. Yet rules of another, perhaps more subtle sort formed an integral part of the new culture. Emotion must not get out of hand. Embarrassment must be avoided. Undue emotional commitment was wrong. Even open communication must not lead to dramatic or upsetting scenes. The underlying principle, clearly, was the systematic constraint on intensity. Emotions were fine as long as they stayed in check; old rules could be waived so long as the results did not become intrusive; muted communication must often substitute for full expression.8

Here was the most subtle of all the tensions embedded in the new standards. American periodicals and other prescriptive materials frequently trumpeted the triumph of individualism and spontaneity over real or imagined Victorian restraints. Advertisements offered enticing images of personal expression wherein "true" personalities could shine forth, shedding their purely institutional roles. As in the heralded shifts in fashionable dress during the 1920s, autonomy seemed to triumph over regulation. But, as we have seen, the conformist impulse gained new strength as well, and the necessity of fitting in with groups and with larger institutions put pressure on emotional independence. Muting of intensity was a vital precondition for reconciling group needs with apparent spontaneity; here was the crucial new rule.

The apparent emphasis on freedom explains why so many observers, then and since, have erred in heralding twentieth-century culture as an undiluted triumph of emotional deregulation. A more careful historical assessment, juxtaposing the new style with its Victorian predecessor and
cutting beneath the somewhat misleading rhetoric, reveals the constraints that accompanied some personal latitude. While specific rules varied with professional context, and while individuals could negotiate some space precisely because the leading guidelines embraced antiregulatory language, the room for maneuver did not include major opportunities for intense outpourings. This was the bedrock of the new emotional regime.

The tensions in the new culture—between a penchant for pleasant emotions but the desire to control them, between the individual and the group, and between real and apparent freedom from regulation—all revolved around the insistence on restraint. Thus one could “be oneself” only so long as one’s maturity assured that one’s emotions would remain in check and not bother others. Rules could be jettisoned as long as fear of embarrassment maintained the basic principles of control. Good emotions blurred with bad when excess threatened. The replacement of Victorian emotional culture raises a host of analytical issues, such as the need to assess the extent of acceptance of the new values. Yet we cannot fully understand the culture without first exploring the reasons for its existence, the combination of factors that rendered Victorian norms anachronistic and implicitly centered the goals of emotion management on the problem of intensity. A full celebration of a “cool” value system would await the 1960s, when the word emerged from its traditional service in describing an alternative to fiery passion to characterize the standards of a whole generation. But the bases for esteeming cool control had been set some decades before.