Conclusion:  
A Cautious Culture

The argument that runs throughout this study can be summarized briefly. An emotional culture that developed deep roots in the nineteenth century, affecting a variety of behaviors in the family and in public life, yielded to a decisively new style during the second quarter of this century. This new culture was far more consistently cautious where emotion was concerned, and like its Victorian predecessor, it had a wide range of impacts in private behaviors and expectations and in institutional arrangements. It resulted from a concatenation of several shifts in American society, including familiar developments such as the rise of corporate management and consumerism but also important new anxieties about bodily health in an age when fears turned inward. The new culture, finally, did not move in exactly the directions many Americans imagined. It was not entirely liberating, not simply an individualistic alternative to some uniform Victorian repression that in fact had not applied. The culture imposed significant new stress in middle-class life and evoked new needs for secret or symbolic release.

Victorian emotional culture had served more overt class and gender purposes than its twentieth-century replacement did, though the newer standards continued to allow groups to judge each other and opened new areas for gender dispute. Victorians valued emotions as motivators, as the sources of energy in work and politics and as a crucial cement for family life. The twentieth-century emotional style tolerated certain
emotional interests as part of leisure life and personal identity, but urged overall restraint as part of the need to present a pleasing, unobtrusive front to others. Emotions were recognized as inevitable but were seen as more risky than useful, except as they were dissipated in harmless chatter or spectator symbolism. The departure from Victorian fervor was considerable.

These points recalled, it remains to offer a final assessment of significance, to suggest opportunities for further research, and to redraw connections with theories of emotion—three interrelated tasks that can be accomplished on the basis of points already made.

A major change in emotional culture is a significant development in a society’s history. Real redirections, so far as we know, occur rather rarely, though short-term adjustments that maintain basic trajectories may be more common. Victorian emotional culture built on trends, such as heightened familial affection, that had been developing for at least a century, adjusting them to the initial apparent requirements of industrial life. Thus the fundamental shifts that began early in the twentieth century attacked some long-standing emotional patterns, and this inevitably had substantial, sometimes confusing effects. The shifts came as quickly on the heels of Victorianism as they did because of the need to react more fully to the emotional demands of industrial society, which had now also achieved more mature organizational form and generated growing anxiety about attendant nervous and somatic stress.

The results spilled over into a variety of aspects of American life. Not only family relationships but also patterns of leisure and the motivations used in school and work shifted in accordance with the growing aversion both to the so-called negative emotions and to intensity of any sort, resulting in a need for ritual outlets. As a principal conduit through which structural changes in American society were translated into personality goals, emotional culture forms one of the leading facets, and one of the most tangible ingredients, of the kind of character transformation that many scholars have sought to define for this same period. Goals shifted from vigorous motivation to people pleasing, and the redefinition of emotional standards was central to the shift.

Along with specific adjustments in emotional reactions, such as the revision of mourning practices or the new middle-class concern about the immaturity of jealousy, the new emotionology entered into a series
of larger alterations in interpersonal style. Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, use of first names became increasingly common in dealings with college students or business customers. Because contact was meant to convey uninvolved friendliness, some of the traditional distinctions in naming that had been based on varying degrees of emotional intensity as well as social hierarchy fell into disuse. Childhood was redefined, in ways that remain open to further exploration, as emotional maturity became an increasingly important goal amid relaxation of certain other conventional restraints. Fatigue—an extreme of emotional disengagement—became an increasingly acceptable complaint, replacing other forms of deviance, such as hysteria, that had involved a more active emotional performance. The new tension between openness to emotional venting and a sense that emotional issues were childish signs that need not be dignified by much attention became a characteristic twentieth-century sore point, dividing gender values in new ways.

Language itself mirrored the shifts in culture, furthering them in the process. The word “passion” was increasingly confined to the sexual sphere, and use of the word declined. Dictionary definitions of “emotion” itself became increasingly bland. Noah Webster had spiced his definition with terms like “vivid” and “passionate,” but by the 1950s his heirs were equating emotion with the blander word “feelings” and were noting that varying strengths of feeling might be involved in emotion. The adjective “emotional” began to take on overtones of excess by the early twentieth century. Previously a fairly neutral term, in that people could be described as insufficiently as well as unduly emotional, the word began to connote lack of adequate control, at least when applied to individuals. Being described as an “emotional person,” or accused of “emotionalism,” was no compliment, even with no qualifying adjectives attached. By the 1920s another new combination entered in with the concept “emotionally disturbed,” a label most frequently attached to children. It clearly reflected firmer categories of emotional deviance and a new set of parental anxieties. By the 1950s, when the phrase was common in child development studies, it was explicitly defined as a lack of “inner control” and attributed to as many as a quarter of all grade school children on the basis of a host of prosaic symptoms. Here was another way to make emotion a problem.3

Historians have long seen the 1920s or even the ensuing quarter-century as a crucial period of change in American life.4 Obviously,
many factors impelled adjustments besides the redefinition of emotional culture. But this redefinition now warrants a prominent place among the various forces to be assessed in explaining how contemporary life and institutions differ from their counterparts in the Victorian era. The subject of emotional change is, to be sure, still an innovation in the historical lexicon, and it would be folly to expect standard textbooks immediately to be rewritten to give the emergence of a twentieth-century emotional style its due. Even earlier attempts to define character change, like David Riesman's justly famous hypothesis, fit with difficulty into the conventional ways of viewing American history—even on the part of social historians, who pride themselves on openness to innovation. Nevertheless, the challenge is clear. At some point between 1920 and the 1950s most middle-class Americans moved toward emotional values rather different from those of their parents. Some were aware of the change, some not; some were troubled by the decline of older values, others leapt gleefully toward this aspect of modernity. The process not only brought some of the larger alterations in American society into personal compass; it also took on its own power, altering the kind of treatment many Americans expected from others and creating the demanding standards they imposed on themselves.

Much remains to be done as the contours of the emotionological transformation emerge more fully. A host of loose ends must be left dangling after any attempt to convey a phenomenon as complex and as hard to pin down as a sea change in emotional style. Readers will doubtless pick up a number of pathways that I have barely glimpsed. Be that as it may, because assessing a cultural shift should orient further research as well as mark progress already achieved, I would like to issue six specific invitations for additional study.

The first asks simply for ongoing attention to recent developments, oriented toward fuller testing of the previous chapter's claim that, despite adjustments, the twentieth-century emotional style remains essentially intact. In this effort historians but particularly sociologists and social psychologists imbued with genuine historical perspective can utilize understanding of the new culture as a litmus for change. Sorting out ephemeral shifts or mere adaptations from genuine and durable new directions is no easy task, but the emotionological findings of the present study provide some measurement standards.
The second research need involves assessment of a wider range of emotions during and after the transition period. Anger, love, fear, grief, guilt (plus shame and embarrassment), and jealousy do not constitute an entire emotional palette. Implications for other emotions have been offered here. For example, we have seen that new uses for sadness, and possibly a new if somewhat convoluted popularity of this emotion, fit the overall pattern of emotional change, including the reduced availability of more intense grief; but the topic invites further inquiry. Nostalgia may have changed to include real or imagined recollections of earlier emotional bonds conveyed, among other things, as part of media fare. Exhilaration may have been toned down in keeping with the general reduction of intensity, except as conveyed through recreational fare and spectatorship. Even joy, or at least expressions of joy, may have become more circumspect. Envy seems to have increased in complexity, having been encouraged by consumerism but placed under constraints as the concept merged with jealousy in popular belief. But these are suggestions based on the larger framework, not real investigations. Other recently studied emotions, like gratitude or expectations of gratitude, may also have changed, but apparently without much connection to the general style.

Shifts in the balance among emotions under the general impulse of reducing intensity warrant attention as well. As jealousy, for example, received particular reproval, anger may have taken up some of the slack, even though it too was discountenanced. Efforts to deny or conceal the "green-eyed monster" easily generated anger at the provoking beloved, and while anger also required restraint, it may have seemed more respectable, less childish than jealousy. Even with emotions that clearly fit under the anti-intensity rubric, additional analysis remains desirable.

The coherence and outreach of the middle class constitutes the third field for further study suggested by an understanding of Victorianism and the transition toward deintensification. Most emotions history has focused primarily on the middle class, and this study is no exception. Victorian emotional culture set standards that other social groups might aspire to or might fabricate as part of an effort at respectability. It was deliberately introduced to marginal middle-class segments like department store clerks. It was also used by the solid middle class itself to judge and condemn inadequate emotional behavior by social inferiors—
including not only outbursts of unwonted spontaneity but also inadequate intensities in such areas as grief, courage, or maternal affection. All of this does not constitute a history of emotional cultures for non-middle-class groups, but it does provide some guidelines.

In the twentieth century, we have less to go on. The new emotional culture was urged on the working class, particularly in such areas as anger control; as the middle class imposed new constraints on its own members, it became even less tolerant of emotional diversity. In this sense twentieth-century emotionology played a key role in the daily subtleties of middle-class hegemony. But we have also seen signs that workers were not expected fully to assimilate middle-class niceties. On the other hand, the rapid expansion of the middle class, through self-identification and the rise of the service sector, implied new needs to acquire a middle-class emotional veneer. How various working-class groups, some with distinct ethnic cultures, reacted to growing middle-class hegemony constitutes a vital area for further study. Modification of mainstream standards, unusual utilization of certain outlets, including ethnic celebrations, or outright rejection of key standards all are active possibilities, even as middle-class authorities labored to create emotionally controlled work personalities and a more uniform pattern of child-rearing. The addition of new immigrant groups after the 1950s adds to the complexity inviting attention. African American assertiveness, celebrated in highly emotional crowd scenes, and a bristling individual resentment at certain white standards suggest an obvious disharmony in recent decades. Among many employment barriers to inner-city blacks, unwillingness to live up to middle-class definitions of emotional decorum, particularly in service-sector jobs, plays a definite role. This divide in emotional cultures can be exacerbated by white assumptions about African American passions, which are regarded as entertaining on a playing field but inappropriate, even frightening, at closer range.\(^7\)

In sum, examining class and ethnic variations and divisions over emotional culture forms one of the ways to investigate living social structure in any historical period. Ironically, we have made less use of this opportunity for our own era than for periods in the past.\(^8\)

Range of impact constitutes the fourth area open to further analysis. One of the crucial findings about both Victorian and twentieth-century emotional culture is that they affected not only self-evaluations and
private relationships but also areas of public life such as work or even political styles. Emotional standards allow the social constructionist, through history or anthropology or sociology, to relate individual values and socialization to a much wider realm. This is why, despite social historians’ common preference for assumptions of mass rationality, the subject of emotion has such important potential for investigations of the past. We can easily see implications of changing standards for law or for protest potential—in combination, of course, with other factors—but to date we have only broken the surface of this subject. Does the increasing American interest in an emotional style that appears friendly but not unduly engaged relate to diplomatic efforts to identify friends abroad and to worry (excessively, in European eyes) about whether we are “liked”? Does the same interest help explain the eagerness of individual negotiators, like Franklin Roosevelt at Yalta or George Bush with his horseshoe games with foreign dignitaries, to elicit superficially friendly expressions from their interlocutors (including, for FDR, the stony-faced Stalin)? These clearly tantalizing extensions of the new emotional style may be unwarranted, but they are worth examining as we continue the process of figuring out how long a shadow the anti-intensity culture cast.

The fifth direction for future study lies in the obvious desirability of comparative inquiry. Both Victorianism and the transition toward a more complex set of constraints were shared between the United States and Western Europe. But sharing is not equivalence, and further work on both time periods is necessary to establish greater comparative precision. For the twentieth century, the research of Dutch and German sociologists suggests some trends very comparable to those in the United States, as well as similar causes, including new employment structures and growing consumerism. But the timing was different, with the European break occurring more in the 1960s than earlier. Different timing suggests a somewhat different pattern of causation, manifestation, and results. Some of the confusions that have appeared in definitions of twentieth-century emotional style have resulted from unwarranted assumptions of transatlantic equivalence, as opposed to considerable similarity. An obvious if challenging task is to begin to sort this out. Exploration of the American transition helps refine the questions to ask: Why the 1960s as a starting point rather than the 1920s? Did Europeans share some of the health concerns that helped direct American cool? Did Europeans end up embracing spontaneity more fully
(as some of the Dutch studies suggest), and if so, why? Why did Americans seem disproportionately eager to conceal?

Finally, fuller understanding of our recent emotional history may help improve interdisciplinary inquiry into the constructionist aspects of emotion itself. History is a newcomer amid explicit studies of emotion. In introducing a more self-conscious attention to the process of change, it fleshes out many of the theoretical claims made by constructionists. For the twentieth century, history employs many recent findings and explanations developed by the growing breed of sociologists of emotion. Thus a certain amount of interdisciplinary crossover is built into our growing ability to define and explain recent patterns in emotional standards. But history also challenges students of emotion to tackle some new complexities. Anthropologists, the most empirically successful constructionists to date, have not usually dealt with change. Psychologists, the kings of the hill in emotions research, tend to seek constants. They do share some sympathy with constructionist claims, in terms, for example, of investigating culturally specific emotions functions rather than some grand evolutionary scheme, but they do not inquire into change directly. Their causation focus involves microlevel, proximate relationships rather than more sweeping phenomena such as bureaucratization.

In principle, the establishment of a new emotional culture toward the mid—twentieth century sets up topics for psychologists to investigate from their own vantage point; they might, for example, test different generational values or standards held by different segments of the occupational structure. Examination of childrearing styles in light of an overarching, if implicit, attempt to curtail intensity could readily blend psychological and historical approaches. Social psychologists have already contributed to the task of exploring the anti-intensity culture, but have not yet wedded this essentially historical outline to the actual developmental processes. Psychologists and historians have also joined in identifying the emergence of a newly playful style with children on the part of middle-class fathers beginning in the 1920s. This parental strategy, designed to build bonds through shared entertainment rather than more traditional moral or emotional intensity, provides another framework for exploring the actual operation of new parental tactics in a socialization process; but the next, more strictly psychological step has yet to be taken. Interdisciplinary bridges of this sort are immensely
difficult, but they do follow from a growing understanding of some of the kinds of changes that have enmeshed our society.

For students of emotion generally, of whatever disciplinary stripe, the exploration of twentieth-century emotional culture already contributes to a theoretical understanding of what emotion is all about. History and historical sociology, along with cultural comparisons, provide the clearest empirical basis for constructionist approaches to emotion. The sweep of the movement away from Victorian culture and the causes that intertwined to shape a new culture constitute a major case study in the constructionist mode. To be sure, the study does not resolve the nature-versus-nurture debate, that hardly perennial in emotion theory. On the one hand, the avid twentieth-century search for outlets for constrained emotions supports attention to basic or "natural" passions such as anger or fear, or to more general "vital affects" that are biologically based but shaped through parental care into more precise emotions. On the other hand, the shift from Victorianism to a more cautious emotional culture demonstrates that culture counts for a great deal in directing emotional responses and evaluations according to changing social needs, though it does not specify exactly how much.

The real contributions of this kind of inquiry into emotional change lie beneath the most conventional nature-versus-cultural-construction controversy. Constructionists have too often ventured theories about the kinds of social functions that can shape emotion without offering sufficient empirical grounding. Or, in anthropology, they have demonstrated vivid cultural contrasts without determining precisely what caused them. In the case of the twentieth-century transition, causation can be explored. It can be demonstrated that although new economic forms redefined the functions an emotional culture was to serve, they did so in combination with new cultural forces, particularly beliefs about physical health. This precise pattern is surely unique, but the basic model of seeking a combination of functional factors and examining how they were shaped by new beliefs may well apply in other instances.

More systematic attention to causation also leads to considerations of timing, another key factor in a historical approach to the construction of emotions. In this area we have too few cases thus far to venture a theory of timing. However, we have seen that there was a lag between initial indications of a new emotional culture—which actually preceded
the 1920s in expressions such as grief—and evidence of wider incorporation of the standards a generation later, followed a bit later still by institutional reactions in some areas of the law or school regulations. This twentieth-century pattern establishes a baseline that should be tested in other historical frameworks.

Debates about emotion have also tended to narrow assessments of the results of particular emotional styles. Biological and psychological determinists tend to emphasize the functions of an emotion for the individual: grief is a signal for help, sadness an opportunity to withdraw and regroup, etc. Apart from the culturally specific limitations of this approach, it simply does not capture the wider social impact of emotional values. Constructionists have been more sensitive to emotions' effects, for example in dealing with the responses an emotion elicits, but they may limit inquiry to a largely private or familial sphere. Exploration of the twentieth-century emotional style furthers an inquiry into the wider ramifications of changing standards. Individual experience and function remain relevant, but so do the signals given to others about how to deal with an individual's self-presentation—one of the most sensitive barometers of the twentieth-century uneasiness over intensity—and so do the results of emotional standards in arrangements at the workplace or in public law. Here, too, an explicit historical synthesis helps define some of the subordinate theoretical issues in the constructionist approach to emotion.

Finally, historical inquiry into emotional culture inevitably addresses theoretical issues in history itself. The present study provides additional ammunition to the numerous critics of modernization theory as applied to the emotional realm, showing that a simple repression-liberation contrast between Victorianism and the twentieth century is profoundly misleading. Understanding the actual emotional style that emerged from the 1920s onward, and its causes, also casts doubt (at least for the United States) on a second common formulation that sees recent change as somehow continuing a "civilizing process" of emotional restraints that began several centuries back. Without totally disproving this approach, I have argued that the twentieth century is quite different from the nineteenth in the area of emotional standards, and that this difference was caused by very new factors in social organization and popular beliefs. Both the differences themselves and their deep-seated causes indicate that it is not useful to explain recent patterns in terms of
some overarching process that cuts across definable historical periods, including our own. Indeed, in certain respects twentieth-century culture recalled some pre-Victorian emotional qualities, particularly in urging against undue emotional intensity within the family—though it would be misleading to conclude, as Willmott and Young have implied, that Victorian delight in appropriate intensity constituted a historical oddity that contrasts with an emotional caution bounding Victorianism at both chronological ends.¹⁶

For the aversion to intensity that emerged among middle-class Americans in the twentieth century translated the apparent needs of an increasingly managerial, health-conscious society into the emotional realm. The resulting emotional standards were at least as unusual as Victorianism had been, and they were decidedly modern. Just as they differed from earlier American precedent, so they also contrasted with emotional cultures in other parts of the world, particularly in the pressure they placed on Americans to conceal reactions. The cool, chilled-out character popular among American teenagers was matched by the businessman claiming control of his life and his passions, eager to fit into new campaigns like Quality Management that called for careful monitoring of emotions during meetings (no “attacking or defending” behaviors, please). In the culture of the twentieth century, undue emotion, whether anger or grief or love, meant vulnerability as well as childishness. By the 1990s, several generations had been schooled in the desirability of keeping most emotions buttoned up and expecting other people to do the same. American cool still prevails.