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The Social Psychologising of Emotion and Gender

A Critical Perspective

Abigail Locke

Abstract

This chapter offers an overview of psychology's approach to sex differences in emotion, beginning from a discussion of how psychology has approached emotion. The chapter takes a critical, social-constructionist stance on emotion and critiques psychology's essentialist stance. Moreover, it introduces a new direction in psychology in which emotion and gender are studied from a discursive perspective, in which emotion words and concepts can function interactionally. The article considers two examples. In the first, a woman is positioned as emotional and by implication, irrational. The second example investigates how the popular concept of 'emotion work', one that typically constructs women as down-trodden, can in fact be used as a

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resource for young women to manage their identities in interactions. Indeed it is constructed as something that makes them powerful in relation to the vulnerable males they discuss.

This chapter will provide a critical overview of psychology's stance on emotion and gender. Since psychology's inception as an academic discipline in the late nineteenth century, the topic of emotion has been one of its major themes, from early behaviourist theories of James in 1884 to cognitive explanations (e.g. Lazarus 1994), through to studies in affective neuroscience (Davidson 2000; LeDoux 1995; Panksepp 1992) and social constructionist and discursive accounts (Edwards 1999; Harre 1983; Locke and Edwards 2003). In many social psychological studies, two main approaches have been taken to differences between the sexes with regards to emotional experience and expression: the essentialist and the social-constructionist approach. This article surveys their characteristics and then introduces a more recent development in psychology's study of gender and emotions, the discursive approach. This approach is inspired by the social-constructivist movement, but takes a new perspective by focusing on the ways in which emotion talk is employed strategically in local interaction.

The essentialist approach of emotions in psychology treats differences in emotion and sex from an essentialist stance, as a matter of fact and puts them down to reasons of presumed physiological difference between men and women with studies reporting differences in physiological reaction or brain structure (e.g. Frankenhaeuser, Dunne and Lundberg 1976; Kring and Gordon 1998; Gur, Gunning-Dixon, Bilker and Gur 2002). Mainstream psychologists tend to take an essentialist stance to emotion, regarding it as having cognitive, behavioural and biological aspects (e.g. Clore, Ortony and Foss 1987). Essentialist psychologists have argued for the existence of a set of basic emotions (Darwin 1871; Ekman 1992) that are cross-cultural,

universal across time and place, and due to innate human physiology. Although there is still some disagreement as to the number of basic emotions and the labels given to them, this view within psychology is immensely popular with many emotion theorists endorsing it (e.g. Arnold 1960; Frijda 1994; James 1884; Lazarus 1994).

A challenge comes to this side of psychology from social psychologists who endorse a social-constructionist perspective on emotion. Social-constructionist approaches to emotion claim that emotions have a socio-cultural backdrop, and are not simply matters of biology. According to Vivien Burr (1995, 2003) in her comprehensive text on the subject, social constructionism holds that social processes sustain knowledge and that knowledge and action go together. Thus, in terms of relationships between sex, gender and emotion, social constructionists consider how emotion terms are considered within a society, in particular within their assumed gendered usage. As a theoretical stance within psychology, social constructionism has presented a challenge to the essentialism so prevalent within the discipline of psychology, and offered a view that challenges realist assumptions and considers historical and cultural specificity. Within social psychology, different methods have represented themselves as having a social-constructionist backdrop, including critical psychology, Foucauldian discourse analysis, and discursive psychology. We will consider examples from discursive psychology in the field of emotion studies further on in the chapter.

Social constructionist approaches to emotion gained momentum when issues around cultural and historical differences in emotion and etymology were taken into consideration. The essentialist idea of a 'basic set of emotions' was problematized by cross-cultural studies (Heelas 1996). Anthropologists such as Michelle Rosaldo and Catherine Lutz found that in certain cultures names for emotions existed that were not common to Western society. Lutz's work with the Ifaluk in the Southwest Pacific found that this culture had a specific term for justified anger 'song,' that was not present in our society and argued that claims to feel an emotion are bound up with cultural, moral and political considerations rather than inner, discrete feelings (Lutz 1988). Similarly, Rosaldo's work with the Ilongot, a

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tribe living in the Luzon Island of the Philippines, found emotions to be culturally specific rather than universal (Rosaldo 1980). Finally, anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) argued that different cultures have different concepts of self and that emotions are part of this notion of self, hence emotions are culturally bound up with, and enacted as, social processes. These anthropological studies have shown how different cultures appear to experience different emotions and, in addition, how these emotions work within the moral framework of accountability in each culture. Therefore, the work of these three anthropologists caused concerns over the claim that emotion is an inner, discrete, universal state.

A second problem for the basic emotions argument came through the study of etymology. Studies on the etymology of 'affect' terms show how the meaning and importance of terms has changed over time (E.g. Edwards 1999; Gergen 1995; Harré 1983). For example in the sixteenth century, words such as 'sanguine' or 'melancholy' were commonplace and yet are rarely used today (Harré 1983). Edwards (1997) examined the etymology of 'worry' and 'surprise' and noted the shifts in meaning that had occurred with these terms. In the case of 'worry,' the term shifted from referring to strangulation in the eighth century, to sheep being attacked ('worried') by dogs in 1380, to today's meaning in which the term denotes an anxious mind-set. Theodore Sarbin (1986) moves the argument one step further to examine the etymology of the word 'emotion' itself and found that until approximately three hundred years ago '[e]tymologically, emotion denoted outward-directed movement, as in migrations. The meaning was transferred to movements within the body. For the past 300 years or more, observers have focused on such perceived or imagined internal movements' (Sarbin 1986, 84). As Edwards (1997 1999) argues, such shifts in emotion labels are tied to changes in moral orders, social relations and accountability. Thus there are similarities between the arguments in the anthropological studies of Lutz and Rosaldo and the etymology of emotion labels, which create problems for the inner, discrete, and universal conceptualisation of emotion.

Gender, emotion and the (re)socialisation of expression

Many researchers argue that traditional stereotypes of the emotional woman set against the rational, non-emotional man are culturally evident and endorsed (Fischer 1993; Lupton 1998; Lutz 1990; Timmers, Fischer and Manstead 2003).

This appears to be the case from early on in childhood. As Widen and Russell (2002) note, even pre-schoolers in the USA were aware of gender and attributed emotions based on gender stereotypes. This construct of females as emotional is an assumption which can be hard to undermine, as Shields and Crowley note: 'stereotypic representations of the emotional female / unemotional male are so prominent in North American culture that these stereotypes reinforce the notion that the starting point for any gendered-based analysis of emotion should be gender *differences* in emotion' (Shields & Crowley 1996, 219; their emphasis). For example a study by Brebner (2003) using both Australian and international samples on experience and intensity of eight emotional states (affection, anger, contentment, fear, guilt, joy, pride and sadness), found that women in both samples reported a higher frequency of emotions than men. The only emotion that men had a higher frequency and intense experiences of was pride. Similarly a recent study by Glenberg, Mouilso, Havas and Lindeman (2009) found that women were more reactive emotionally than men. They further claimed that women understood sadness more than men, whereas men had a greater grasp of anger than women. Their participants' task was to comprehend an emotional message when in an opposing emotional state. Glenberg *et al.* found that for women it took longer to read a happy message when sad, but for men, it was being angry that slowed the reading of a happy sentence. What is of interest for the present essay is the way in which sex differences in emotion were represented (and accepted by the journal!) as an unproblematic statement of fact, rather than a social construct or product of socialisation.

Many studies within psychology that conclude that women are more emotional than men focus only on the *expression* of emotion. Hall (1984) conducted a meta-analysis of facial expressiveness and found that females were more facially expressive than men. However,

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in more recent work, Hall, Carter and Horgan (2000) note that 'non-verbal behavior does not necessarily signify emotion' (97), that is the experience of emotion may indeed differ from the expression of emotion. Other studies have reported that women appear more prepared to talk about and express emotions than men (Fischer 1993). Huston-Comeaux and Kelly (2002) found a link between the appropriateness of emotional expression and sex and argue that this stereotyping leads to 'a fairly narrow range of possible emotional expressions for women' (7). Similarly, Brody (2000) found that display rules of emotion generally conform to gender stereotypes, and that these stereotypes are more robust in interpersonal settings. Simon and Nath (2004) found that in American culture, the sexes differed in their reporting of the frequency of positive and negative emotions. However, they found a strong link between social position and emotional expression, with those in lower social positions, often women, reporting more negative affect. This demonstrates that the relationship between emotion and sex is not a psychological one, but rather a societal and cultural construct, with factors like class and ethnicity intersecting with gender. Thus, Fischer (1993) claims that emotionality should not be considered one of the basic dimensions to distinguish the sexes, and that the 'claim that women are more emotional than men tells us more about our cultural stereotypes than about actual sex differences in emotions' (Fischer 1993, 312).

Psychology has typically offered explanations of phenomena in biological and cognitive terms. This, as some feminists have argued, is due to its unacknowledged patriarchal foundations (see Burr, 1998 for further discussion on this). As Cameron declares '[d]ifferences in men's and women's verbal behaviours are [...] explained in biological terms' (2007, 8). As recent studies on sex differences and emotion in psychology also demonstrate (e.g. Glenberg, *et al.* 2009), the discipline attributes verbal behaviours such as discourse and other affective displays to biological factors rather than cultural display norms. In psychology, the outer, discursive and material world becomes theorised as an inner, emotional essence. However, as Catherine Lutz (1990) notes from an anthropological stance, emotion is cultural, constructed by people and not nature (40).

Within social science more generally, there is strong evidence for constructed gendered perceptions of emotionality and in particular, the stereotypical view of female emotionality (Shields 2002). Indeed Arlie Hochschild in her famous study *The Managed Heart* (1983) conducted in the USA, claimed that women were more emotionally expressive than men, and this was due to their social conditioning beginning in childhood. Hochschild (1983) is one of the theorists who argue that gender roles, emotional expressions and responses are socialised into us (see also Eisenberg, Cumberland & Spinrad 1998). Hochschild further claimed that women were responsible in society for the 'emotion work' which involved amongst other things, caring for others. Specifically, women managed their own as well as men's well-being in relationships. Hochschild argued that the cultural norms for doing this work pointed to 'emotion work' as a female, rather than male, enterprise. This emotion work is linked with notions of the 'capacity to care' (e.g. Hollway 2006) that regards women as being more in touch with their emotions, in particular empathy and caring, and thus as more suited to the caring professions. Catherine Theodosius's recent study (2008) on emotion work in nursing and Billie Hunter and Ruth Deery's (2009) comments on emotion work and midwifery support this view.

Other researchers argue more generally that our personal identities are framed around notions of masculinities and femininities (Lyons 2009) and therefore our gender becomes a salient feature of who we are. If, as Judith Butler argues, gender is a performative construct (Butler 1990), one that is performed through our daily activities, then, emotion and the norms of its expression are part of this performance. Emotions can be seen as something that we learn through our cultural socialisation to express or not express, depending highly on the contexts of both gender and situation. Thus emotion can become part of our identity, something that we express appropriately in the light of societal norms.

Perceived gender differences that appear in emotionality can be seen as being due to cultural expectations of emotional expression and long-held stereotypical notions of the 'emotional female' and 'non-emotional male'. Such a position proposes that emotionality in

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Western culture is culturally coded as feminine, whereas rationality is coded as masculine (Lupton 1998), and masculine identity is bound up with restrictive emotionality (Jansz 2000). Jakupcak, Salters, Gratz and Roemer (2003) in a psychological study based in the USA, found that both masculine ideology and masculine gender roles induced men's fear of emotions. They argue that boys learn through socialisation to be less emotional than girls and they show a fear of being seen as emotional. Indeed many texts on relationships discuss women's complaints of men withholding emotions and intimacy within relationships (Langford 1999; Tannen 1990). As Fivush and Buckner (2000) claim, the traditional stereotypes surrounding gender and emotion remain. They note that : '[a]lthough the traditional stereotype of the weeping female and the stoic male have softened somewhat over the past twenty years [...] one of the strongest stereotypes related to gender continues to centre on emotionality' (Fivush and Buckner 2000, 234). Catherine Lutz similarly suggests that 'qualities that define the emotional, also define women. For this reason, any discourse on emotion is also, at least implicitly, a discourse on gender.' (Lutz 1990, 151). This cultural coding of emotionality as feminine has social and political consequences. Kenneth Gergen has noted that "[e]motion terms are socially and politically loaded" (Gergen 1999, 108) with emotionality having the potential to be used as a subtle and indirect means of evaluating a person. Gergen cites examples of common binaries in western society for example, 'rational versus emotional', 'effective versus ineffective', and 'strong versus weak,' and notes the imbalance provided in the binaries, arguing that the former term is often privileged over the latter, i.e. it is deemed to be better to be rational rather than emotional. These binaries are often used in depictions of sex difference, often with men associated with the privileged terms. The notion that women are more emotional than men is so ingrained in Western cultural beliefs that it is hard to dismantle this myth as a social construction. As Shields and Crowley note '[i]n so far as they are foundational to our understanding of emotion, we may not even recognise them as beliefs, but rather revere them as reality' (Shields & Crowley 1996, 223).

The rhetoric of emotion: insights from discursive psychology

This view of the binary operations of gender norms and emotion, however, leaves little room for individual agency. A third and more recent approach in psychology takes the social-constructionist approach a step further by studying emotion as discursive and interactional. This approach studies the ways emotion discourse and concepts are used rhetorically in interactions. The social constructions of gender and emotionality contain certain internal contradictions that individuals can use to their advantage in interactions. A person's (in-)ability to control their emotions, for example, may form a criterion for judging their actions and construct dispositions (see also Edwards 1999). It can be argued that there is a shared Western cultural view that emotions, if not controlled, can be dangerous (Parrott 1995), something that Catherine Lutz calls the 'rhetoric of control' (Lutz 1990). From this perspective, the corollary of emotional weakness is an elevation of social status for those who have the ability to control their emotions (Lutz 1990; Parrott 1995). However, rhetorically another construction exists in which being unemotional, cold or aloof is seen as a negative characteristic, as is the case with restrictive masculinity and 'fear' of expressing emotions (Jansz 2000; Japucak, *et al* 2003). As Lutz notes when discussing the rhetoric of control, the (Western) culturally constructed emotionality of women similarly contains a number of contradictions. Although women's emotions are never seen as a characteristic strength or as controllable, women are on the one hand seen as pliant and weak, and on the other as potentially dangerous, powerful and uncontrollable (Lutz 1990). Similarly, emotional expressiveness is on the one hand seen as related to better dealings in social relationships (a discourse of emotional intelligence), yet, on the other hand, being too emotional has been portrayed in a negative light and at times, linked with gender (a discourse of vulnerability). These contradictions in the social and gender constructions of emotionality leave room for individual manoeuvre in interactions.

An example of such room for manoeuvre can be found in a case study in the business realm in the USA by Callahan, Hasler and

Tolson (2005). When examining emotional expressiveness and gender differences amongst senior executives, they found that female executives reported themselves as less emotionally expressive than male executives. The authors claim that their results are surprising, as femininity and emotional expressiveness are becoming regarded as important in the business world. Interestingly, male executives may report higher levels of expressiveness due to a 'changing culture which is just beginning to accept "feminine traits" such as expressiveness' (521). However, what is also of interest is that the female executives were not willing to claim to be emotionally expressive. This example demonstrates not only that there are contradictions within the discourse of gender, emotionality and leadership in the workplace, but also that individuals are able to appropriate these social constructions strategically in their everyday lives by profiling themselves as adhering to, or deviating from, them.

This interactional nature of emotion discourse has been studied discursively in psychology (e.g. Buttny 1993; Edwards 1997, 1999; Locke 2001, 2003; Locke and Edwards 2003). Rather than studying the 'actual' role or existence of emotional states, emotions are approached as social and discursive phenomena (Edwards 1999; Parrot and Harré 1996), produced as part of a narrative framework and utilised for accounting purposes. Accounting in this sense refers to the ways in which we use language to justify ourselves or blame others. Research in this field has demonstrated how emotion discourse and concepts can be used rhetorically to construct versions of character and to signify to others how events are problematic or out of the ordinary (Buttny 1993). It has been proposed that emotion talk or discourse is an important part of how social accountability is produced (e.g. Lutz 1988, 1990) and forms an integral part of the accounting process. It can be used to make sense of people's actions (Sarbin 1989), or to imply that circumstances are problematic or out of the ordinary (Buttny 1993) or in contrast to rational thought (Edwards 1999). The literature on emotion discourse within psychology is still rather limited and has been related to interpersonal areas such as relationship and couple counselling (Edwards 1999) and legal discourse (Locke and Edwards 2003). However, it borrows heavily

from the sociology of emotion that is firmly routed in social-constructionist ideals (e.g. Denzin 1984). Derek Edwards (1999) proposed a set of rhetorical tropes of emotion discourse such as 'irrational' versus 'rational', and 'event driven' versus 'dispositional', where the emotion is constructed as a reaction to an event or as a dispositional state, i.e. that it is inferred that a particular person has an emotional character.

The following extract will demonstrate some of the rhetorical uses of emotion discourse in action and draws on points made by Locke and Edwards (2003), from the cross-examination of the then President of the United States of America, Bill Clinton. President Clinton is being asked to account for his conduct with Monica Lewinsky, an intern he is accused of having sexual relations with, which he has denied to this point. The extract follows questions from the prosecution asking Clinton to account for his dealings with Ms. Lewinsky in the light of her being called as a witness in the Paula Jones sexual harassment case against him. What is of interest for this chapter is how emotion terms are used rhetorically within discourse to account for one's own behaviour, and to apportion blame to others.

To sketch a context, throughout the cross-examination it has already been claimed that Lewinsky was angry at being unable to see Clinton on a particular day because he was in a meeting with another woman, thus inferring that there was some cause for Lewinsky's upset. Having discussed Lewinsky's anger that day at the White House, Clinton is invited to confirm that *he himself*, and his secretary, Mrs Currie, were 'very irate' with Lewinsky. Q refers to the prosecution and C refers to President Clinton.

Clinton testimony

Q: Isn't that correct that you and Mrs Currie were very irate
about that
[4 second pause]

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- C: Well I don't remember all that uh what I remember is that she was very um Monica was very upset, she got upset from time to time,
[10 lines omitted]
- C: And I was upset about her conduct. I'm not sure I knew or focused on at that moment exactly the question you ask. I remember I was- I thought her conduct was inappropriate that day.

The prosecutor (Q) invokes both Clinton's personal secretary (Mrs Currie) along with Clinton, as being emphatically, 'very irate' with Lewinsky's actions. In his response, Clinton avoids description of his own emotions and shifts the attribution to Lewinsky: What he *can* recall is how 'upset' *she* was. Not only was Lewinsky memorably upset on that occasion, rather we are immediately informed, that 'she got upset from time to time.' This represents Lewinsky as getting upset not just on the one occasion in question, but repeatedly. It is implied that she was perhaps *prone to* getting upset, such that any pursuit of the reasons for her getting upset, on *any* occasion, might look to reasons within her, and not only to external causes such as what (in this case) Clinton might have done or said to provoke her. Thus there is an important rhetorical move here on Clinton's part, deflecting inquiry away from the proximal causes of Lewinsky's emotions (i.e. potentially his actions), and towards her dispositional tendencies of high emotionality. Rather than being prone to getting upset, Clinton emerges as understandably reactive to specific circumstances, which in this case were Lewinsky's unreasonable demands and reactions. What the analysis here demonstrates is how the rhetorical tropes of reactive versus dispositional emotion work within our everyday discourse to construct characters and versions of events. From this extract we have evidence that being ascribed a high level of emotionality can lead to being situated within a 'discourse of vulnerability': that is, it serves to make the social actor (in this example, female) weaker, and represents them as acting out their passions, rather than taking rational actions.

A second example of a discursive study of emotions comes from work by Hannah Frith and Celia Kitzinger (1998), which looks at the ways in which young women use emotion, in particular 'emotion work' as a resource in their accounts of 'saying no' to sexual activity in a relationship. As earlier studies noted, 'emotion work' is regarded by many as a gendered concept, with women performing the majority of emotion work in interactions. Such studies (e.g. Hochschild 1983) use 'emotion work' as an analysts' rather than participants' category, thus viewing accounts as somehow reflecting the 'actual' emotion work taking place. What Frith and Kitzinger argue through an in-depth analysis of focus group discussions with young women is that whether women appear to be involved in 'actual' emotion work or not (and they argue, there is no way of knowing this from self-report), 'emotion work' also functions as a useful category for the young women to claim that they have to manage in their interactions with young men. An example of this in practice is given in the extract below. This extract is quoted from Frith and Kitzinger (1998, 311)

'Just say no': Emotion work extract

- JILL: But if you were in a relationship and you said no, then he could end up feeling 'Oh God', you know, 'what's going on?...he could end up getting really upset about it, and you wouldn't really want that ... If you had a boyfriend and you said no, then they would think things like –
- KAREN: - 'Oh what's wrong with me? She should enjoy it.'
- JILL: Yeah, get worried, and think whether you were still interested or not.
- KAREN: Yeah, so you'd have to be very careful –
- JILL: - and then they might ask questions, and you might end up saying, 'Well there's nothing actually wrong'
- INTERVIEWER: 'I just don't feel like it, actually'
- JILL: I think boys would find that very difficult.

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KAREN: 'Don't you find me attractive?', and all this stuff, and you think, 'No just ...'

As Frith and Kitzinger (1998) note, in this extract all of the participants, including the interviewer, are constructing saying no to sexual activity as something that is accountable, i.e. needs to be justified. They note that in their data, the young women talked in terms of performing this emotion work, as in this case, managing the feelings of the young men when they did not want to sleep with their partners. Frith and Kitzinger argued that rather than demonstrating women did actually perform this emotion work, their talking in such terms portrayed the women as emotionally strong – 'knowledgeable and sophisticated social actors' (312) able to manage the demands of men, whereas their positioning of men in their talk depicts the males 'as emotional weaklings who agonise about their own sexual desirability and performance' (312). The speakers actively voice what the responses would be from these generic males: 'don't you find me attractive?' Frith and Kitzinger (1998) note that for the young women in their sample, and by implication elsewhere, emotion work is used as a resource to maintain the presentation of self (Goffman 1959) and is useful in interaction to manage issues of identity, in particular to portray themselves as strong, young women. If the traditional analyst take to emotion work had been followed, the talk would have been taken as transparent and these specific uses of emotion work would have been overlooked. When we consider the perceived stereotypical relationships between emotion and gender, we can see that a discursive psychological approach, inspired in part by the social-constructionist movement, offers a differing perspective, one that focuses on what the invocation of emotion talk accomplishes in the local interaction. When we consider perceived relationships between gender and emotion in everyday life, an understanding of how the concepts are used discursively is crucial to see how such discourses operate in shaping, maintaining, and resisting the social order.

Concluding comments

Psychology as a discipline is a 'broad church', operating from a variety of standpoints, from neuroscience to cognitive and social approaches. This essay has focused on the social aspects of psychology and investigated how sex differences in emotions come to be documented and interpreted within psychological theory. Within much of psychology, emotions still form part of a wider essentialist movement. In its search for the 'grand theory' of emotion, a theory that would fit a global, cross-cultural model, psychology has typically overlooked issues to do with society, culture, and power, amongst others. In essence then it has ignored the social construction and contextuality of emotion. This chapter presented the evidence for a social-constructionist view of the emotions and gender, and subsequently introduced the new approach of discursive psychology, which analyses how emotion talk is used as an interactional resource in gendered contexts. We saw on the one hand how it was used by Bill Clinton to construct Monica Lewinsky as having an emotional disposition. On the other, we saw how young women used 'emotion work' as a strategy to manage presentation of themselves when discussing relations with the opposite sex. Both of these avenues of investigation were made possible by the advent of social constructionism into psychology.

Whilst social-constructionist and discursive approaches to emotion have allowed a thorough reconsideration and reframing of social psychology, it has recently been suggested that yet another new approach is called for. Greco and Stenner (2008) argue that since emotion is where the different areas of psychology converge, the time has come to study emotion from transdisciplinary perspectives (see also Brown and Stenner 2009). Until we do so, they argue, we will never completely understand the phenomenon of emotion. However this new field of 'Affective Science' develops, it is certain that the relation between emotions, sex and gender will remain a topic for discussion.

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