

# Emancipating ourselves from emotional repression at work

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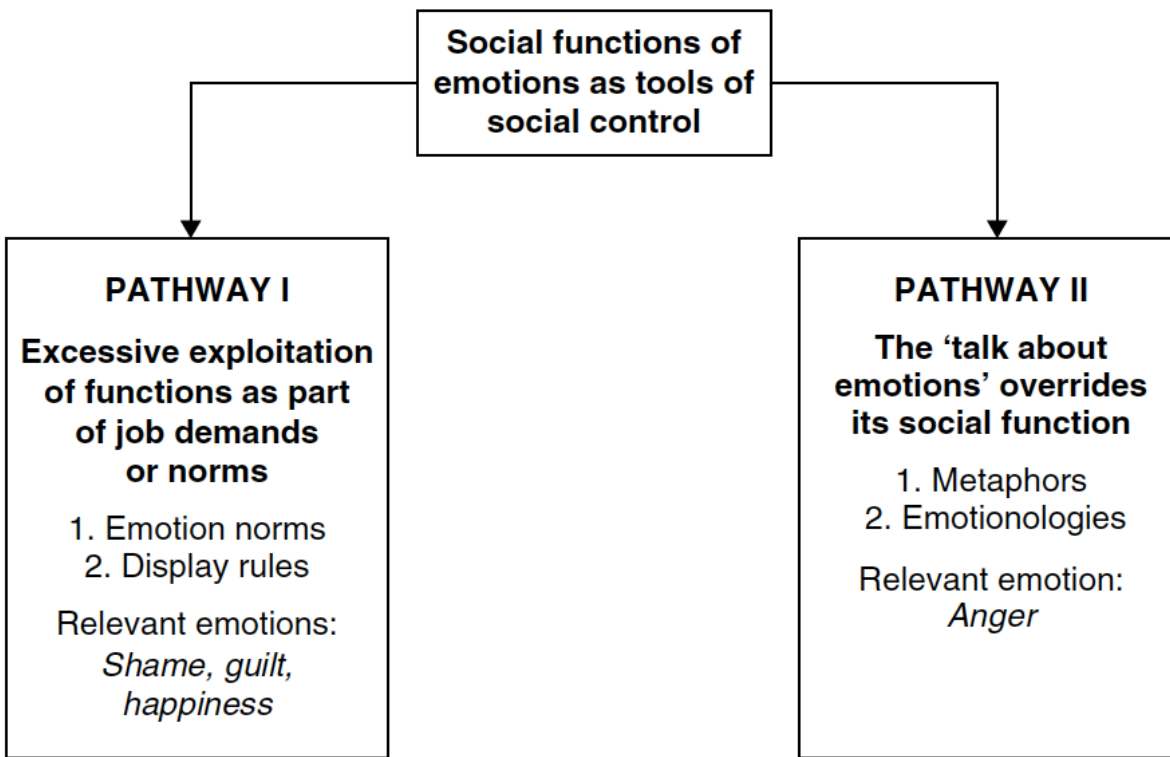
Are your emotions always yours? If you think so, you'd better think again. In a recently published book, I argue that emotions are often used by organizations to manipulate and repress workers.

"So what?" you might wonder . . . Are organizations not supposed to explore ways to control the behaviour of their staff so that it supports the bottom line? To some extent, of course. But what if there are considerable costs to workers in the form of adverse psychological, physiological and social consequences as a result of that repression?

My modest aim in this book is to help readers 'see through' the emotional repression at work (as represented in the chain on the [book cover](#)), and to offer emotion regulation as a means for workers to emancipate themselves from that repression. [Emotion regulation](#) refers to 'the processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions'.

Let me explain this in a little more detail. In the book, I maintain that repression works through two pathways to social control hitherto largely unexplored in psychological and management studies (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Social functions as means to emotional control at work: the two pathways**



The first pathway reflects a condition in which the social functions of emotion are exploited. For instance, [felt shame](#) is related to our negative self-evaluations after we violate standards, because valued others depreciate us (or we anticipate they will). The social function of shame is to motivate behaviours that centre on dealing with endangered ‘positive’ self-views – often in the form of reparative actions following one’s violation of moral standards.

However, shame can also perfidiously be employed by management to endanger one’s ‘positive’ self-view *simply because one has not* met performance targets at work. Imagine being shamed into better performance by co-workers or management placing a cabbage on your desk every Friday if you fail to meet your financial targets. As reported in the [news](#), this practice was employed by managers at two HBOS branches in Scotland. What we can see here is that some organizations aim for enhanced worker performance by using shame as a tool of social repression, while the failing worker incurs psychological suffering, such as depression.

By contrast, the key idea of the second pathway is that the way we talk about an emotion, especially anger, overrides its social function. The social function of anger is to redress injustice. More precisely, redressing injustice is both a function and consequence of experiencing and expressing anger. And yet, past [research](#) characterizes anger as ‘a significant social problem worthy of clinical attention and systematic research’.

Since psychologists seemingly spend more time help clients manage their anger compared to any other emotion, it is incredibly easy to label co-workers as having ‘anger management’ problems. *They* have an issue in need of resolution. Likewise, metaphors we use in everyday language (e.g., Anger as ‘blowing one’s top’) are so pervasive that it still dominates our ‘thinking’ about ‘feeling’ this emotion. Metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities, and therefore may be a guide for future action. Thus, without denying that some forms of anger can be destructive (as we argue [here](#)), the moral significance of anger is such that ‘a world without anger would be, possibly, a compliant and quiescent world but not a just world’.

Both pathways entail emotional repression of workers through either exploiting the social functions of an emotion for organisational benefits (as in Pathway I and the example of shame), or if the way we talk about emotion (as in Pathway II about anger) means its social function is negated (i.e., anger is suppressed) in fear of being sanctioned.

With the aid of work-relevant vignettes, I show in the book how workers can start to regulate their emotions

differently in order to emancipate themselves from the emotional repression at work. This progress is indicated in the book cover, where the chain links are intact first, but progressively break up until such moment where the last link falls out, or has been liberated from repression.

For instance, in the case of shame, I advocate the use of re-appraisal (e.g., “this doesn’t affect me”) to protect workers from the consequences (e.g., depression) of unjustified attributions of shame. In the case of anger, if anger is motivated by moral concerns, I advocate its genuine (yet constructive) expression. This is important, as we tend to experience more [negative health consequences](#) if we suppress emotion on matters that are important to us.

These strategies may work in the short to medium term but, in the long term, workers may eventually change jobs due to the accumulating costs that both pathways entail for them. In both cases, if staff turnover becomes unsustainable, the organization may seek to change the social structures causing the repression of workers in the first place.



Notes:

- *This blog post is based on the author’s book [Emancipation Through Emotion Regulation at Work](#), May 2017, Edward Elgar Publishing.*
- *A short video animation introducing the book can be found [here](#).*
- *You may also like Dirk Lindebaum’s article [What neuroscience can\(not\) bring to the world of business](#)*
- *The post gives the views of its author, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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**Dirk Lindebaum** obtained his PhD from Manchester Business School, and he is now a Professor in Management at Cardiff Business School. One stream of his research activities pertains to organizational phenomena that involve emotional processes broadly defined. Another stream that he has pursued of late concerns the increasing visibility of neuroscientific theories and methods in the study of organizational behavior. Further details on publications, media engagement, online talks and other issues can be obtained from his website: [www.dirklindebaum.eu](http://www.dirklindebaum.eu) Email: [mail@dirklindebaum.eu](mailto:mail@dirklindebaum.eu)



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