
Editorial

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Biographical notes: Andrea Stöckl moved to the UK in 1995 after having completed an MA in the history of medicine at the University of Innsbruck, Austria. She completed her education with an MSc in medical anthropology (Brunel) and a PhD in social anthropology from the University of Cambridge. She is currently a Lecturer of Medical Sociology at the University of East Anglia. Her research has focused on how society, culture and history shape our understanding and knowledge of health, illness and disease. She also has an interest in how our knowledge and practices of managing health and illness are gendered.

1 Introduction

The study of emotions has resurfaced in the social sciences and the humanities after lying dormant for at least seven decades. In the 1930s, phenomenologically inclined sociologists such as Scheler (1992) showed an immense interest in understanding emotions from a social perspective rather than a psychological, and Buber (1937) argued for the necessity of an empathic approach to the other as constituent for sociality. Sociology and social anthropology have only quite recently taken up its inquiry into the emotional world of human beings again (Turner, 2009). However, mainstream sociology still lacks a theoretical framework to understand and research emotions, and so does socio-cultural anthropology. Merely replicating a psychological definition of emotions does not seem to suffice. It seems that rekindling this debate is of great importance for the study of emotions, be it sociological or anthropological, because emotions define how human beings relate to each other and thereby create sociality. It is even more surprising that subdisciplines such as medical sociology, despite researching people and their emotional states with regard to health and illness, also have not yet developed a conceptual framework for researching emotions and the impact they have on wellbeing or illness.

It was this lack of research which led to the organisation of the colloquium in qualitative healthcare, held at the University of East Anglia in May 2010, at which the papers presented in this themed section were discussed. In the colloquium, we addressed this question by critically examining the conceptual framework of emotions research (James, 2009) and by focussing on the notion of empathy as an exemplary concept in which many approaches are assembled. At the time of the colloquium, the study of empathy had proliferated in medical education. By then it was already a well-known fact that medical students start out with an idealistic concept of empathy in their approach to

their respective future patients, but they end their degrees with a rational and disengaged approach to other human beings. Byron Good had already called attention to this phenomenon in 1994 by analysing how medical students described their training as a ‘forced emotional experience’ which ‘changes their brain’ so that they necessarily would have to turn themselves into less empathic human beings by the end of their degrees [Good, (1994), p.65]. Recent research on empathy in medicine and in the social sciences has confirmed this, especially in qualitative research on empathy amongst care personnel (Spiro, 1993; Spencer, 2004; Smajdor et al., 2011). Researchers in medical education have also picked up the debate and they became interested in empathy, and here again mostly by researching the decline and lack (Hojat et al., 2004). The papers presented in the colloquium reflected this trend because they all centred on the topic of empathy: Gabriela Pounds was suggesting new research on understanding how linguistics can help assessing emotions and empathy in clinical practice. She asserted that if clinicians recognise emotions in clinical empathy, it could ‘provide medical professionals with a valuable diagnostic tool and ultimately lead to patients’ higher recovery rates’ (see Pounds 2012, this issue). Herta Nöbauer introduced us to the idea of affective landscapes in late modern global work environment and the impact on the sentient body of women who work in these settings and the lack of empathy that these women seem to have for themselves. John Cromby set the scene by discussing the affective turn in the social sciences and making us aware that there is more to emotion research than just ‘emotion’. In the discussion during the colloquium, it quickly became clear that emotions and empathy are elusive concepts. We decided that we would have to take a step back if we wanted to have a fresh look at this concept, and contextualise research on them in current disciplinary debates. In this editorial, I will thus focus primarily on the notion of empathy but I will briefly outline the current debates and approaches in a social sciences on the study of emotions and sentiment. I will then locate the three research papers within these debates. In the conclusion, I will draw attention to the gaps in research and suggest areas for further research on empathy.

2 Sociological research on emotions

Sociologists concerned with research on emotions, such as Turner and Stets, argue that it is important to introduce distinctive approaches to the study of emotions (Turner and Stets, 2006; Turner, 2009). In two seminal papers, the authors point out that a revoked interest in the sociology of emotions goes back only for about 35 years. Turner and Stets suggest that emotions research can be divided up into five distinctive approaches: “dramaturgical approaches, symbolic interactionist theories, interaction ritual theories, power and status theories and exchange theories” (2006, p.25). However, in later publications, Turner agrees that even finding a definition for the term ‘emotion’ in itself is not an easy task. He explains this with the fact that emotions “operate at many different levels of reality – biological and neurological, behavioural, cultural, structural and situational” (2009, p.341). Turner concedes that the definition of emotion will vary according to the interest and the paradigm from which the researcher operates. His categorisation reflects the way in which we have organised our knowledge of the world into academic disciplines. As with most research on human beings, the persistent bifurcation of body and mind has its repercussion in these debates. To my mind, this bifurcation lies at the heart of the challenges to define the concept of emotions. I would

dare to say that by not taking this into account, a lack of theorising in Turner's accounts on concept such as 'affect' and 'feeling' becomes evident, a gap which John Cromby in this issue tries to fill.

Another social scientist writing on emotions, Barbalet, defines emotions as an indicator for "the experience of involvement" (2002, p.1) and with this definition already points to the function of emotions in the establishment of social relationships. I would second Barbalet's notion that there is no such thing as a society without emotional involvement, hence making emotions a necessity for sociality. This approach echoes Buber's (1937) suggestion that there is no 'other' without an 'I'. Having said that, Barbalet also points to a tendency within sociology of dividing human beings up into either driven by emotion or by reason. These implicit assumptions permeate the debates on how people lead their lives and make decisions on how to relate to others. Barbalet even goes so far as to condemn Max Weber for having introduced a bias towards emotion research in his work on *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) by accusing him of not taking into account that all rational actions requires a careful handling of the emotions that lead to certain decision. Barbalet rightly suggests that sociology needs a well-developed appreciation of emotions, should we really want to understand that "no action can occur in a society without emotional involvement" (ibid: 2). Here, his definition resembles that of Turner because he emphasises the function of emotions in sociality. Barbalet points to what he calls a structured differentiation: according to this perspective, emotions are not only a personal reaction to an event, but they also provide the basis for social interaction. He then proceeds to a model elaborated by Theodore Kemper: Power and status can only be kept when a certain bodily agency is involved. Barbalet points out that this links physiology and sociology because, as has been shown in numerous research projects, stress, for instance, is directly linked to myocardial infarction. Recent debates in phenomenology have brought up this point as well: The German phenomenologist Hermann Schmitz (2009) links lived experienced and the sentient body directly to emotions and to the space that people inhabit. Schmitz' endeavour to link the sentient body with emotions is facilitated by a word that cannot be easily translated from German into English, namely the idea of the 'leib'. The leib describes exactly this monadic entity which is not bifurcated by the mind/body paradigm. From this phenomenological perspective, the leib is simultaneously the producer and recipient of sentiments, or 'feelings', which then in turn are crafted and interpreted as emotions. Veronica James echoes this perspective by linking nursing and care with touching and bodywork, what in turn leads to emotional work. Again, James' point of departure is the taken-for-grantedness of the lived experienced and the sentient body which predates emotions.

Having given a short overview of how emotions can be conceptualised from a sociological perspective, and this overview is by now means exhaustive, I would like to proceed to the question of empathy, the topic that lead us in the first place to try and find a new approach to the study of emotions.

3 What is empathy?

Similarly to the concept of emotion, empathy defies a precise definition. Yet, despite of this, in contemporary medicine it is regarded as an essential attribute for medical

personnel and a prerequisite for any aspiring psychotherapist. The General Medical Council (GMC) guidance for medical education includes quite a few references to empathy. Empathy is seen as a quality that makes a good doctor (GMC, 2009). Yet, strangely enough, even the GMC presumes a consent definition of empathy without spelling out what is actually meant by it. Bearing all the above discussed literature in mind, I arrive at the conclusion that empathy is an action rather than an emotion. I would thus like to suggest a working definition of empathy: it is an act, sometimes conscious, sometimes unconscious, based on an emotion that binds people together. The act of empathy makes people think that they understand each other, that they can see each other's point of view, or even feel each others emotional state. Which type of emotional state is secondary, but the act of recognising the emotion in the other is crucial.

4 How to locate the papers in this themed section

Emotions and bodily functions are indeed a way of keeping power and status, and these locations are the first to be affected when things go wrong, as Nöbauer has shown. Thus, as James (2009) also suggest, research on emotions can contribute to understanding the emergence of a new moral framework. The modern globalised workforce faces an imbalance of work and leisure time which can only be overcome by exploiting the sentient body. This would suggest that successful work relationships could only function by listening with empathy to the emotions of others and of oneself. This is when Gabrina Pounds research becomes interesting and links with Nöbauer because she explains in very minute detail how emotions and empathy can be linked in the way doctors, and by extension human beings, improve communication. Cromby in turn introduces a very fruitful debate on the notion of affect, which I hope will contribute to a broader discussion on the differences between sentiments and emotions which has already started with early phenomenological research and is taken up again by Hermann Schmitz. Phenomenology has always conceptualised debates on the essence of entities within a dualistic approach of the I and Thou, to rephrase Buber. Yet, the question of power and status, which is so crucial to a sociological approach, is to be discussed within this framework, not separately. I hope that by presenting these research papers, a start in this direction can be achieved.

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