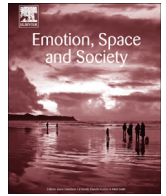




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Feeling differently: Approaches and their politics

Laughing out loud at a funeral. Feeling depressed when you are elected 'employee of the year'. Empathizing with police during a protest. Displaying anger when others tell jokes. Feelings which do not conform to expectations can be problematic in a number of ways. To onlookers, they can be shocking, irritating or awkward, while the one enacting such feelings can feel embarrassed or excluded. If everyone but you is laughing, you are—for at least that moment—not part of the group.¹ Such an experience might be gratifying, intended as open resistance to the prevalent norm or to common sense. Perhaps you did not *want* to applaud the joke. Purposefully rejecting the ways others display or enact a feeling might even endow you with a sense of dignity or pride. If shared feelings are viewed as forming and maintaining social ties – an issue addressed especially in approaches to the emotions that emphasize cultural patterns –, then not having them can outwardly signal both social exclusion and the contestation of norms. But even those feelings we have 'privately' can be experienced in this way, as we carry with us an awareness of how we are 'supposed' to feel. The fact that we often feel differently than expected thus calls for an inquiry into the wider social and spatial processes that support prevalent norms and their contestations. Who can afford to be happy in a particular setting or to show that they are not? Which social and spatial configurations foster conforming or dissident feelings?

These questions lead to a second set of issues which arises when feelings counter expectations. You're entering a bar, where everyone seems to be cheerful. But maybe the atmosphere embraced by others as joyful makes you melancholic. And maybe your melancholia ensues from your particular memories evoked by this specific place or what makes up this atmosphere—say, the celebration of a friend's new baby when you have just had a miscarriage, or a sense that this is the kind of place where 'white folks' bond, and you will never be fully included. Feeling differently as a response to atmospheric spaces is not only related to norms but also indicative of processes of subjectification and their social conditions, as writings emanating from psychoanalysis and cultural anthropology as well as both feminist engagements with emotions and recent discussions of affect have highlighted. Affects and emotions subjectify us, and they do so in concert with social and spatial conditions: they 'put you in your place'. Conversely, such felt dimensions of subjectification can also be regarded as co-constitutive of the very conditions at play: maybe it is *their* joy that makes *you* depressed. This also signals the complexity of felt difference, which can modulate with a change of context that is

not always easy to perceive.

This opens up a third line of investigation, where feeling differently is viewed in the context of the continuous variation of affects. From such a perspective, feeling is always, at least to a certain extent, feeling differently. Think of a worker in the service industries who is awarded a prize for her contribution to the company's achievements and is proud of it. Yet, perhaps this feeling of pride does not quite strengthen her sense of belonging to the corporation, but, rather paradoxically, aggravates a feeling of alienation. In addition to the fluidity and thus built-in ambiguity of feelings, this perspective brings into focus the singularity of affects as they result from complex worldly encounters. "[T]here are necessarily as many kinds of pleasure, pain, love, hatred, etc., as there are kinds of objects whereby we are affected", reasons Baruch Spinoza (1996: Part 3, Prop. 56, 170). Each feeling, in this understanding, varies with the kind of object it springs from in the moment of an encounter in a specific spatial setting. Perhaps it is *this* funeral, in *this* room, with the memories evoked by a certain arrangement of flowers and with its particular constellation of ritualised mourning, evocation of existential loss and a relative's melodramatic performance which makes you laugh. To the extent that each object-encounter differs from others, all attempts at normalisation of feeling can be seen as traversed by an ongoing, irreducible differing of feeling, the feeling differently which subsists within all feeling.

These scenarios illustrate the variety of angles from which 'feeling differently' can be approached. In doing so, they also highlight that engaging different aspects of feeling differently entails distinctive frames and concepts – with particular analytical and political consequences. Do we focus on the power of norms and feeling rules or on the forces of subversion and excess? Is our unit of analysis a culture or a body, a subject or an event? And do we as researchers relate to the phenomena studied as impartial observers or as politically (and affectively) invested actors? Feeling differently seems to be a particularly potent theme for exploring the tensions among different approaches to such issues – as well as their multiple interconnecting threads. In particular, this theme invites reconsideration of some of the basic assumptions that have undergirded conceptual debates, and kept them apart.

For instance, conceptual debates around feelings, affects and the emotions have revolved to a large extent around the question of whether feelings reproduce social orders or disturb them. On one end of the spectrum are rules-based and practice-oriented approaches, which highlight the extent to which emotional experiences and expressions are informed by a shared grammar of emotion words and patterns that pervades specific cultural contexts. On the other end, psychoanalytical and affect-theoretical approaches emphasize the variability and inherently indeterminate

¹ Drawing on Arlie Hochschild, Sara Ahmed (2010: 41) uses the term 'inappropriate affect' to describe such experiences.

or excessive nature of affect. It has long seemed difficult to even bring these divergent perspectives into conversation with each other. Their respective proponents have frequently avoided engaging the others, except to criticise and delegitimise them.²

The main thrust of this themed issue aims at exploring the middling grounds and intersections between such heterogeneous approaches, without seeking to gloss over conceptual, analytic and political tensions. In particular, the articles, and this introductory essay, seek to bring out the importance of social and cultural norms without reducing emotional life to their mere reproduction – and without either neglecting or overemphasising the autonomy of affect and its potential for disruption. The themed issue thereby picks up recent debates that have begun to move more strongly across research traditions – also bringing into relief their unique strengths (e.g. Anderson, 2014; Bondi, 2014; Gould, 2009; Grossberg, 2010). The focus on feeling differently running through the contributions advances such engagement by inviting nuanced investigations of the relations between the norms structuring feelings and the subversion of such norms, considering also affective dynamics that exceed the play between norms and subversion. On the one hand, in relation to rules-based approaches, this focus challenges culturalist assumptions about the pervasive power of emotional conventions, as it brings to light precisely those cases where emotions do not fit. On the other hand, however, engaging ways of feeling differently also contests strong claims around the singular and excessive nature of affective phenomena, which upon closer inspection rarely turn out to be independent from the learned and scripted patterns against which they emerge as variations or deviations.

Thus moving across heterogeneous approaches also entails reconsidering the very terminology used to talk about feelings, emotions and affects. While some authors have advocated clear-cut distinctions between these terms, attributing them to different (physiological, personal, social) registers (e.g. Shouse, 2005), others have favoured more fluid understandings. Especially the notion of ‘feelings’ – which as an analytic concept bears less discursive baggage than ‘emotion’ and ‘affect’ – has been invoked in approaches that evade, or explicitly interrogate, binary conceptions (e.g. Sedgwick, 2003). With its “double meaning, tactile plus emotional” (Sedgwick, 2003: 17), signifying touch while also invoking ‘feeling rules’ (Hochschild, 1979), it enables multiple points of entry for the discussion. This is why we have chosen to favour ‘feelings’ as a heuristic term here.

However, combining heterogeneous approaches should not be seen as an end in itself. We also need to ask: which are the particular epistemological and political projects animating different routes into the study of feeling? Which kinds of differences do these strands engage, how do they frame them, and what might be their effects? To tackle these questions we will first outline how prominent approaches to feelings have engaged feeling otherwise. Introducing the contributions to this issue, we will then consider how the optic of ‘feeling differently’ serves to re-assemble this broader study of feelings. As we will discuss towards the end, this also enables a fresh perspective on the political ramifications different approaches to researching feelings have—also beyond the academy.

1. Approaches to feelings and their takes on feeling differently

The three lines of enquiry sketched out in the opening

paragraphs highlight, in turn, the exclusionary as well as self-assertive effects of breaching norms; the complex interplay between atmospheres and subjectifications; and the continuous variation and excess of affect. These dimensions of feeling differently indicate how the topic lends itself to connecting divergent strands of research initiated by what some have called an emotional or affective turn in a range of humanities and social science disciplines, including history, sociology, anthropology, cultural geography and cultural and media studies (see Gregg and Seigworth, 2010; Lorimer, 2008; Plamper, 2015). While the notion of disregarding norms or habits picks up on rules-based and practice-theory approaches, the issue of subjectification invokes especially psychoanalytical engagements, as the concept of continuous variation invites affect-theoretical perspectives. These strands differ greatly due to their distinctive disciplinary genealogies as well as their wider epistemological projects. To begin unpacking how the focus on ‘feeling differently’ can still foster cross-cutting discussions among them, it seems useful to review briefly how each of them has framed relations between norms and difference.

Rules-based approaches focus primarily on the power of emotional conventions, only at times touching upon their violation. While within this line of research ‘emotionology’ concentrates on the display rules a society promulgates for discrete emotions (Stearns and Stearns, 1985), research on ‘feeling rules’ (Hochschild, 1979), ‘emotional regimes’ (Reddy, 2001) and ‘emotional communities’ (Rosenwein, 2006) strongly criticises the notion that there are ‘display rules’ for a fixed set of ‘basic emotions’. These approaches do not strictly separate the experience of feeling from its expression and thus give language a particularly central role in shaping emotion – even leading to suggestions that emotions can be considered a kind of discourse (Lutz and Abu-Lughod, 1990). They therefore emphasise repertoires or even speak of emotional ‘cultures’ or ‘styles’. With their focus on language and meaning, all these variants of rules-based approaches run the risk of reproducing mind-body dichotomies. This is the case even where they seek to show how emotional standards vary across time and space, for example concerning the extent to which anger was viewed as acceptable (see Althoff, 1998; Briggs, 1970; Hollan, 1988). If these studies engage with difference in feelings, this difference is of a collective nature—the difference of one group or society from another, or sometimes also the difference of one space from another.³ This, however, offers no explanation for why someone might diverge from the norm *within* a collectivity or a particular setting. The predominant assumption has been that everyone there shares the same emotional grammar.

Similar tendencies can be spotted in approaches based on practice theory. Characterised by their use of terms such as ‘affective’ or ‘emotional practices’ (Burkitt, 1997; Reckwitz, 2016; Scheer, 2012; Wetherell, 2012), ‘habitus’ (Holt et al., 2013) or even more specifically ‘emotional habitus’ (Illouz, 2007; Gould, 2009), these approaches reveal their indebtedness to Pierre Bourdieu’s or to other versions of practice theory. Though they seek to overcome the mind-body, subject-object dichotomies which have haunted rules-based approaches, norms and social conventions still remain central, as emotions are viewed as embodied in habits and routines. ‘Doing emotion’ is seen as part of a continual process of learning or training as part of a social group and in a particular space. Again, the notion of shared emotional grammar can make it seem difficult to explain how a habit can be broken to produce a different feeling. This problem is mitigated somewhat when this approach draws more strongly on the performativity framework based in speech-

² See for instance the debate between Ruth Leys (2011) and William E. Connolly (2011) in *Critical Inquiry*; see also Sharp (2009).

³ On spatially specific emotional styles, see Gammerl (2012); on the distinction between work and leisure spaces, see Hochschild (1979).

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