

Emotions in Social Life

Critical themes
and contemporary issues

Edited by

Gillian Bendelow
and Simon J. Williams



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Emotions in Social Life

The development of a sociology of emotions is crucial to our understanding of social life. Emotions are 'social things', they are controlled and managed in our everyday lives and transcend the divides between mind and body, nature and culture, structure and action. In this way, they hold the key to our understanding of social process and can push forward the boundaries of sociological investigation.

Throughout western social thought emotions are seen to be the very antithesis of the detached scientific mind and its quest for 'objectivity'. However, as the course of human history has testified, crucial implications stem from the separation of reason and feeling. Accordingly, emotions have a fundamental import for all pertinent sociological themes and issues, in particular, social action and social identity, gender, sexuality and intimacy, the embodiment of emotions across the life-course (from childhood to old age), health and illness, and the social organization of emotions in the workplace.

Unique and timely, *Emotions in Social Life* acts to consolidate the sociology of emotions as a legitimate and viable field of inquiry. It provides a comprehensive 'state of the art' assessment of the sociology of emotions, drawing upon work from scholars of international stature, as well as newer writers in the field. It presents new empirical research in conjunction with innovative and challenging theoretical material, and will be essential reading for students of sociology, health psychology, anthropology and gender studies.

Gillian Bendelow is a Lecturer and **Simon J. Williams** is a Research Fellow, both at the University of Warwick, Coventry.

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Critical Themes and Contemporary
Issues

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For Tess

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This book is an important 'stepping stone' in the establishment of emotions as a viable area of sociological study, building as it does on the legacies of the BSA study group for the Sociology of the Emotions, established by Veronica James in 1989, and convened by me since 1992. It also reflects the diverse international links and growing network of researchers whose common aim has been to put emotions 'on the map', especially my colleagues at the Social Science Research Unit and the organizers of the Theory, Culture and Society conferences. However, certain individuals deserve particular recognition for their encouragement and support, namely Ann Oakley, Arlie Hochschild, Berry Mayall, Priscilla Alderson and Colin Samson. Last, but not least, I would like to thank my co-editor, Simon J. Williams, for his support and determination to see this project through and his unwavering dedication to the theoretical and sociological development of emotions in this book, and beyond.

Gillian Bendelow

Introduction: emotions in social life

Mapping the sociological terrain

Simon J. Williams and Gillian Bendelow

Despite their obvious importance to a range of issues within the social sciences, emotions, like the body to which they are so closely tied, have tended to enjoy a rather 'ethereal' existence within sociology, lurking in the shadows or banished to the margins of sociological thought and practice. Certainly, it is possible to point towards implicit if not explicit emotional themes in classical sociological writing. Marx's emotions, for example, were grounded in the social, historical and material conditions of existence; conditions which led to feelings of alienation and estrangement, from our species being under the capitalist mode of production. Durkheim, in contrast, in keeping with his claim that social facts are 'things in themselves', chose to emphasize the collective, moral nature of human feelings and sentiments, solidified into rituals, both sacred and profane. To this we may also add Weber's deliberations on processes of western rationalization, asceticism and the emotional significance of the charismatic leader, together with Simmel's analysis of the senses and the sociological significance of embodied gesture. None the less, in conjunction with the recent upsurge of interest in the body and society (Turner 1996; Grosz 1994), it is really only within the last decade or so that a distinct 'corpus' of work, mostly American in origin, has begun to emerge in the sociology of emotions.¹

The roots of this neglect lie deeply buried in western thought: a tradition which has sought to divorce body from mind, nature from culture, reason from emotion, and public from private. As such, emotions have tended to be dismissed as private, 'irrational', inner sensations, which have been tied, historically, to women's 'dangerous desires' and 'hysterical bodies'. Here, the dominant view, dating as far back as Plato, seems to have been that emotions need to be 'tamed', 'harnessed' or 'driven out' by the steady (male) hand of reason. Seen in these terms male rationality becomes wholly 'unreasonable' (Seidler 1994 and this volume; Rose 1994; Bordo and Jaggard 1989). Historically, we should have learnt the important lessons which stem from the 'irrational passion for dispassionate rationality' (Rieff 1979): an ideology devoid of feeling, empathy and compassion for the plight of one's fellow human beings (Bauman 1989; Lynch 1985).

Even to the present day, emotions are seen to be the very antithesis of the detached scientific mind and its quest for 'objectivity', 'truth' and 'wisdom'. Reason rather than emotions is regarded as the 'indispensable faculty' for the acquisition of human knowledge. Such a view neglects the fact that rational methods of scientific inquiry, even at their most positivistic, involve the incorporation of values and emotions. Rather than repressing emotions in western epistemology, therefore, it is necessary fundamentally to rethink the relation between knowledge and emotion and to construct conceptual models that 'demonstrate the mutually constitutive rather than oppositional relation between reason and emotion' (Jaggar 1989:157). This critical attack on the Cartesian rationalist project, in turn, keys into recent postmodernist/ poststructuralist perspectives that have sought to (re)open debates on the relationship between desire and reason, and to celebrate the corporeal intimacies and affective dimensions of social life.

As this suggests, emotions lie at the juncture of a number of fundamental dualisms in western thought such as mind/body, nature/culture, public/ private. A major strength of the study of emotions lies, therefore, in its ability to transcend many of these former dichotomous ways of thinking, which serve to limit social thought and scientific investigation in unnecessary, self-perpetuating ways. All the contributors to Kemper's (1990a) volume, for instance, can be seen as actively engaging with or contesting divisions within sociology such as micro versus macro, quantitative versus qualitative, positivism versus naturalism, managing versus accounting for emotions, prediction versus description and, of course, the biological versus the social.

Whilst debates continue to rage as to *what*, precisely, emotions are and *how* they should be studied (Craib 1995; Williams and Bendelow 1996a)—a situation in which the sociology of emotions, with its proliferation of perspectives and research agendas, becomes a 'victim' of its own success (Wouters 1992:248)—a potentially fruitful way out of these dilemmas is to view emotions as existentially *embodied* modes of being which involve an *active* engagement with the world and an intimate connection with both culture and self (Csordas 1994; Denzin 1984). From this viewpoint—one which is not merely *about* bodies but *from* bodies—embodiment is reducible neither to representations of the body, to the body as an objectification of power, to the body as physiological entity, nor to the body as the inalienable centre of human consciousness (Csordas 1994). Rather, as an 'uncontainable' term in any one domain or discourse (Grosz 1994), embodiment instead lies ambiguously across the nature/culture dualism, providing the existential basis of identity, culture and social life (Csordas 1994).

The interactive, relational character of emotional experience—what Wentworth and Ryan (1990) refer to as the 'deep sociality' of emotions—in turn offers us a way of moving beyond microanalytic, subjective, individualistic levels of analysis, towards more 'open-ended' forms of social inquiry in which embodied agency can be understood not merely as 'meaning-making', but also as 'institution-making' (Csordas 1994; Lyonand Barbalet 1994). In short, the emphasis here is on the active, emotionally expressive body, as the basis of self, sociality, meaning and order,

located within the broader sociocultural realms of everyday life and the ritualized forms of interaction and exchange they involve. Seen in these terms, emotions provide the ‘missing link’ between ‘personal troubles’ and broader ‘public issues’ of social structure; itself the defining hallmark of the ‘sociological imagination’ (Mills 1959). Indeed, from this perspective, social structure, to paraphrase Giddens (1984), may profitably be seen as both the medium and the outcome of the *emotionally embodied practices* and *body techniques* it recursively organizes.²

It is within this exciting and challenging context, one in which previously ossified conceptual forms are seen as increasingly problematic, that the rationale for the present book emerges, the central aim of which is to present, within the scope of a single volume, a ‘state of the art’ assessment of current theoretical and empirical work from leading scholars within the sociology of emotions. This overarching aim, in turn, involves:

- 1 an epistemological challenge to the dominance of western rationality and an ontological commitment to alternative ways of being and knowing;
- 2 a critical exploration of the link that emotions provide between a number of traditional divisions and debates within the social sciences such as the biological versus the social, micro versus macro, public versus private, quantitative versus qualitative: divisions which have dogged sociology since its inception;
- 3 a substantive commitment to demonstrating the centrality of emotions to a range of key developments in contemporary social life, including the ‘somatization’ of society, the salience of health, the advent of cyberspace, the transformation of intimacy, together with changing styles of work and social organization in late twentieth-century capitalist society.

It is with these particular aims in mind that the organizing themes for the volume as a whole have been chosen; spanning as they do, a broad range of current theory and practice, both abstract and empirical, within the sociology of emotions.

1

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON EMOTIONS

In the first part, readers are introduced to a number of differing theoretical perspectives on emotions in social life. Central issues here concern the relationship between biological and social explanations, and the importance of emotions for a more embodied approach to social agency and social (inter)-action. Certainly the role of the biological in social explanation has been an important topic of debate in the sociology of emotions. In this respect, whilst few sociologists would deny the biological underpinnings of emotions, the key question concerns just *how* important this is (Kemper 1990a).

Taking a broadly ‘interactionist’ approach, one that sits in the analytical space between ‘organismic’ (i.e. biological) and ‘social constructionist’ (i.e. cultural)

accounts,³ Arlie Hochschild, in [Chapter 1](#), argues that whilst a sociological approach to emotions involves ‘going beyond’ the biological to the social, cultural and ideological realms, this does not mean ignoring or leaving out the physiological substrate altogether. In taking this position, Hochschild revisits her earlier work on ‘emotion management’, using love as an example. In doing so, she returns to central concepts such as ‘feeling rules’, ‘status shields’, ‘deep’ and ‘surface’ acting; issues which have profoundly influenced the nature and development of the sociology of emotions over the last two decades. It is on this basis that Hochschild is able to fashion her sociological approach to emotions as a new ‘way of seeing’ the world and our gendered modes of emotionally embodied being within it.

The relationship between emotions and social agency is also addressed in the next chapter, by Nick Crossley, on the relevance of emotions for a reconstructed Habermasian project of communicative action. As Crossley argues, although Habermas has been influential in the current move towards intersubjective approaches to social action, he can none the less be criticized for failing to give adequate attention to the affective dimensions of communicative rational action. In this respect, drawing upon existentialist-phenomenological approaches (i.e. Sartre and Merleau-Ponty) to emotions as embodied, purposive, meaningful responses to situations, Crossley argues that Habermas’s approach can usefully absorb and be strengthened by an account of emotional life. Emotional life, in other words, as an existentially embodied mode of being-in-the-world, can and should be seen as interwoven with the fabric of communicative rational action and the constitution of the social world.

The embodied nature of emotions as the active basis of social agency and social life is also taken up and explicitly addressed by Margot Lyon in [Chapter 3](#) in her critique of the ‘limits’ of cultural constructionism. As she argues, an expanded relational understanding of emotion and its social and biological ontology is required in order to move beyond the limitations of cultural constructionism. What is subject to social relations is not simply, as cultural constructionists claim, the cognitive faculties, but living human bodies. Society, in other words, ultimately consists of bodies in social relations of motion and rest, animation and action. We must therefore, as Lyon suggests, overcome our fear of biology, and seek to re-embody sociology.

In the final chapter in this part, Tim Newton takes up these emotional issues across the long historical curve of the civilizing process. As we have argued elsewhere (Williams and Bendelow 1996a, 1996b), a particular strength of Elias’s approach to emotions and the ‘civilized body’ lies in the manner in which, in considering the emotions, he is able to interlock biological and social in a dynamic sociological way; one in which, through an evolutionary process of ‘symbol emancipation’, the balance has tilted ever more heavily in favour of learned versus unlearned forms of human behaviour and emotional expression. In taking these issues forward, Newton not only provides us with a detailed historical analysis of changes in emotion codes from the seventeenth- to nineteenth-century bourgeois society, he also critically re-examines, in the light of this Eliasian analysis, Hochschild’s work on emotional

labour. These insights, in turn, have implications for our understanding of twentieth-century social life; in particular, the theorization of gender, the public/private division and the development of emotion codes in the workplace.⁴

Taken together, these four chapters, in their differing ways, illustrate the lively nature of theoretical debate within the sociology of emotions, and the relevance of these issues for more general debates within mainstream sociological theory. The time for emotions, in short, has arrived.

2

THE 'MEDIATION' OF EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE

Moving to our second major theme, a striking feature of contemporary western society concerns the exponential growth of information systems and communications technology. From radio, newspapers, television and film, to computer technology and the recent advent of so-called 'cyberspace', we live in an increasingly 'mediated' age; one which carries potentially important implications for traditional notions of (gendered) embodiment and self-identity (Featherstone and Burrows 1995; Stone 1991; Springer 1991). This, in turn, gives rise to a number of important questions regarding the 'fate' of human emotions at the turn of the century. Will this, for instance, lead to an intensification or a diminution of emotional experience, are new modes of emotional trust, intimacy and sharing beginning to open up in the (erotic ontology) of cyberspace (Heim 1991), and if so, what light does all this shed on existing categories and concepts within the sociology of emotions?

Clearly, definitive answers to these questions are well beyond the scope of a single volume such as this; for many, only time will tell. The three chapters contained in this second section of the book do, none the less, provide some provisional clues and tentative answers to these questions.

In [Chapter 5](#), Keith Tester develops a general account of the emotional responses of television consumers to the images of war and violence they see daily on their screens. We are, Tester argues, the children of a tradition of the television, and that tradition is one which articulates the blasé and reserved attitudes emphasized by Simmel. These attitudes, he suggests, are defining of the emotional responses of individuals to all that we can know and see thanks to television.

If Tester comes down on the side of a blunting or diminution of emotional response in a digitally 'mediated' age, then Norman Denzin, in the next chapter, offers a very different view of the role of information technology (IT) through an exploration of the gendered, emotional talk and 'narratives of self' that are posted in an on-line Internet newsgroup called 'alt. recovery.codependency'. As Denzin argues, the advent of cyberspace has created a site for the production of new emotional self-stories, stories that might not be told elsewhere. These narratives, he suggests, are grounded in the everyday lives and experiences of the women who write them, yet they circulate in the anonymous, privatized territories of cyberspace. The gendered talk that occurs in this newsgroup does not connect to an oral

tradition of group story-telling; there are no canonical texts that are referenced. Rather, their talk is personal and emotional, filled with evocative symbols connected to mothers, families, holidays and children. They are talking about things the men in their lives will not listen to, using this information technology to create new identities and lives for themselves whilst men still debate the rules of discourse. In this sense, the implications of cyberspace are truly revolutionary in their consequences for emotional democracy. Yet as Denzin also warns, these virtual reality (VR) relationships frequently tilt in the direction of men telling women what to do and how to feel. In this way, virtual reality reproduces the real world (RW) as gendered modes of being are upheld rather than unravelled.

These issues are further explored in [Chapter 7](#) by Simon Williams, who offers a timely critical appraisal of the constraints as well as opportunities that cyberspace affords for contemporary forms of emotionally embodied experience. As he argues, the tensions between representation and reality, emotional involvement and detachment, together with the associated problems of high-tech dualism in cyberspace, suggest a number of dilemmas for the (post)modern individual: issues which defy easy answers or simple solutions. Moreover, the advent of cyberspace may also necessitate a fundamental rethinking of existing concepts within the sociology of emotions, including the 'self, the 'expressive' body, 'emotion work', 'feeling rules', 'deep' and 'surface' acting. In raising these issues, Williams's intention is not to play down or neglect the emotional opportunities which the advent of cyberspace affords, but to challenge some of the over-inflated claims and disembodied visions which it spawns. Only on the basis of our carnal bonds in the real world, he suggests, can a truly human ethics of trust, emotional intimacy and responsibility emerge; one grounded in a shared sense of bodily contingency, limitation and constraint.

3

EMOTIONS AND THE BODY THROUGH THE LIFE-COURSE

Building on some of these earlier themes, [Part III](#) seeks to extend and develop sociological approaches to emotions across the biographically embodied life-course. A central issue here concerns whether or not emotions, like the body, undergo some form of distinctive transformation over time, and if so, to what should we attribute these changes: biology, culture or both? The study of emotional continuity and change over the life-course, in other words, serves as an important 'test case' for a purely 'constructionist' approach; one which is forced to confront the physical as well as cognitive aspects of growing up and ageing, and the feelings associated with these distinct bodily states and physiological changes. More generally, it also enables us to question, again, dominant notions of western rationality; modes of thought which have sought to exclude children and the elderly, like women past and present, from the public world of (male) reason.

In [Chapter 8](#), Berry Mayall makes a preliminary exploration of these issues through a focus on the neglected topic of children's bodies and emotional lives. In doing so, she highlights some crucial ways of incorporating children and childhood into sociological discussions on the importance of emotions in social life. As Mayall shows, children take their embodied selves daily across the private/public divide and in so doing encounter a range of adult-determined social structures. Key issues here include the 'civilizing', 'regulation' and 'construction' of children's bodies and minds, both at home and at school, together with the tensions between children's time and adults' time. Rather than being the passive recipients of these processes, children are in fact active participants in the construction of their bodies and minds. The quality of children's emotional and embodied living therefore depends, Mayall argues, on how far adults accept and value their personhood and contributions to the social order; a message as applicable to existing adult-centred approaches and perspectives within sociology as it is to society in general.

These issues are further explored in the next chapter, by Shirley Prendergast and Simon Forrest. Drawing upon empirical research carried out in secondary schools, they examine 'emotion work' in adolescent boys. Compared with girls, boys speak 'hard', act 'hard' and ultimately, perhaps to their detriment, learn to be 'hard'. In this respect, as Prendergast and Forrest suggest, definitions of (male) dominance and hierarchy based on embodied attitudes can be seen to play a significant role in the gendered construction of emotions. In particular, embodied metaphors of size, height and 'hardness', themselves indicative of male superiority, together with the enacted rituals of peer group behaviours and transitions, create a paradigm of 'proper' masculine selfhood that sharply proscribes emotional expression. Seen in these terms, hegemonic forms of masculinity are not only ritually embodied in adulthood, but enacted at an early stage in the life-course through stereotypical forms of gendered emotional behaviour.

Moving to the opposite end of the life-course, Mike Hepworth, in [Chapter 10](#), takes up the controversial issue of ageing and emotion through a moving and sensitive analysis of the social construction of emotions in old age, set against the backdrop of historically changing conceptions of the life-course in western culture. For several centuries 'growing old' has been framed within a model of the 'ages', and more recently 'stages' of life, of (wo)man, which, in addition to defining age- and gender-related dress, comportment and conduct, is also emotionally prescriptive. Each 'age' or 'stage' of life incorporates definitions of desirable or 'normal' states of feeling. Yet, as Hepworth shows, beneath the surface of these public images and vocabularies of the life-course, there is evidence of a complex cultural and subjective imagery indicating a considerable degree of struggle, contest and conflict. In taking this position, Hepworth pays particular attention to the role of gender in the tension between public emotional prescriptions and private emotional expressions of later life, and their broader implications for the sociology of emotions.

Taken together, these chapters point to the culturally pre/proscriptive nature of western emotional styles over the biographically embodied lifecourse and the

gendered forms of transition, struggle and resistance they involve across the public/private divide.

4

SEXUALITY, INTIMACY AND PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

An implicit, if not explicit, theme in many of the chapters considered so far has, of course, been the issue of gender. Certainly, exploration of the relationship between gender, emotions and the body opens up a vast array of important issues, spanning everything from feminist critiques of western being and knowing (mentioned above) and the newly emerging field of men and masculinities (Connell 1995; Hearn and Morgan 1990; Morgan 1992, 1993; Jeffords 1989, 1994; Kimmel 1987), to the gender division of emotional labour (Hochschild 1989b), domestic violence (Hearn and Morgan 1990), prostitution (Scambler and Scambler 1997), homosexuality (Plummer 1992) and the recent emergence of 'queer' theory (Burston and Richardson 1995).

The critique of (male) rationality is explicitly addressed by Seidler in [Chapter 11](#). As he argues, masculinity and femininity are inevitably emotionally opposed in western society by the structuring of social theory into reason and nature. The Cartesian legacy renders sexuality 'animal', needing taming, regulation and control. Subsequently, dominant masculinist thought encourages the notion that nature is inherently flawed, intimacy becomes unworkable and men regard themselves as unlovable, whereas women, who are unable to be dissociated from those processes, become subject to male control. In exploring these issues, Seidler claims that a major influence in this development has been the impact of Weber's Protestant work ethic, with the subsequent moral culture of the rejection of the body and emotional life, and that other cultures (although still open to accusations of patriarchy) may offer different perspectives on carnality and sexuality. Inevitably, he argues, what is needed is a more unified 'feminine' concept of reason which accepts emotions and sexuality as having an important role in the acquisition of knowledge. In this respect he echoes the views of certain poststructuralist feminist thinkers such as Cixous and Irigaray who have sought to 'rewrite' western (masculine) thought through a more pluralized metaphysics of female desire, fluidity and flow.

Another important theme in current writing around gender, sexuality and the emotions concerns the issue of love and the transformation of intimacy in late modernity. Jackson (1993), for example, has recently focused on the cultural meanings of love as a neglected issue within sociological discourse, arguing for an approach to the emotion itself as just as much cultural as the conventions which surround it. Certainly it is clear, as a variety of commentators have suggested, that a profound transformation in the spheres of sexuality and interpersonal intimacy is currently taking place in late twentieth-century western society (Cancian 1987). Today, for the first time, women claim equality with men in a reflexive age where sexuality—freed from the rule of the phallus and the constraints of reproduction—

becomes ‘plastic’ and ‘pluralized’ (Giddens 1992) and love becomes a ‘blank’ which couples must ‘fill in’ themselves (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). Increasingly, individuals who wish to live together are becoming the ‘legislators of their own way of life’, the ‘judges of their own transgressions’, the ‘priests who absolve their own sins’ and the ‘therapists who loosen the bonds of their own past’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995:5).

As critics have pointed out, the problem with this type of analysis is that, although suggestive, it tends to paint these transformations in broad brush-strokes with little attention to empirical detail. In this respect, not only is Giddens’s ‘pure relationship’ best seen as an ‘ideological ideal’ of late modernity (Craib 1995), but recognition of the impact of differential power on actual relationships seriously undermines many of its ‘core’ features (Hey *et al.* 1993–4).

These issues are explicitly addressed in [Chapter 12](#) by Jean Duncombe and Dennis Marsden. As they argue, the exploration of socially regulated or ‘managed’ gender divisions in intimate emotional behaviour entails two interrelated, yet distinct, questions: are men and women equally ‘susceptible’ to emotions or discourse of love and intimacy; and, do they handle such emotions in similar ways in the context of these close personal relationships? Using evidence from a variety of recent research, they begin by trying to find empirical examples of the kinds of emotion work that women and men do in heterosexual couple relationships. This evidence indeed *appears* to conform to gender stereotypes of ‘Stepford wives’ and ‘hollow men’. However, as Duncombe and Marsden argue, this is partly a product of the conceptual and methodological problems involved in researching men’s and women’s performance of emotion work. In raising these issues, they then proceed to use recent theories of gender pluralism and ‘doing gender’ in order to discuss Hochschild’s work and psychodynamic theory, which suggests that doing emotion work may lead to a loss of ‘authenticity’. Finally, drawing upon their own research on couples, they show how attempts by individual men and women to preserve their sense of authenticity may vary, depending on what the authors term their ‘core identities’. In doing so, they attempt to clarify some of the ‘conceptual confusion’ that surrounds the term ‘emotion work’; a concept, they suggest, which has been adopted, adapted or criticized to such an extent that it is in danger of becoming a ‘catch-all cliché’.

Finally, in an Eliasian vein, the ‘emancipation of sexuality’ and the transformation of intimacy are considered by Cas Wouters in [Chapter 13](#). Focusing on the period from the ‘sexual revolution’ of the 1960s onwards, Wouters approaches these issues from the perspective of the ‘lust balance’, a concept inspired by Elias, which explores the tension that may arise between the longing for love and enduring intimacy, and the longing for sex. Using empirical evidence from the Netherlands, the chapter argues that since the sexual revolution, more and more men and women have been experimenting with the ‘balance’ in between the extremes of desexualized love (i.e. a relationship in which most or even all sexual longing has been subordinated to the continuation of the relationship), and depersonalized sexual contact (i.e. the idea of sex for the sake of sex). As the notion

of erotic and sexual awareness increases both through increased (pleasurable) sexual contact, or through a more equal balance of power between the sexes and by mutual consent, both types of longings, Wouters suggests, intensify and feelings become tense and ambivalent.

In their different ways, each of the chapters in this part of the book underscores the point raised earlier about the extent to which notions of the pure relationship and emotional democracy remain ideological ideals in an era where traditional masculinist concepts of (un)reason, stereotypical gender divisions of emotional labour and tensions in the 'lust balance' between love and sex are still very much alive and kicking.

5

EMOTIONS AND HEALTH

Finally, in the last section of the volume we return to many previous themes and issues within the volume through an explicit focus on health. As we have argued elsewhere (Williams and Bendelow 1996b), the sociology of health and illness is a particularly fertile terrain upon which to explore the role of emotions, raising as it does deep ontological questions concerning the nature of embodiment as both nature and culture and the symbolic transformation of suffering into meaningful human experience (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987; Kleinman 1988).

These issues are clearly illustrated in [Chapter 14](#) through a sociological focus on pain, emotions and gender. Drawing upon our own research in this area, we show how people's experiences of pain, far from being 'unscientific', are complex, subtle and sophisticated, incorporating not only physical and sensory components, but also feelings and vulnerabilities of an existential, moral or religious kind. Despite the widespread endorsement of emotional pain, significant gender differences were none the less evident in terms of the importance attached to emotions and in social expectations of men's and women's ability to 'cope' with pain. Here, as we show, the attribution by both sexes of women's superior capacity to cope with pain was not only linked in our respondents' minds to their biological and reproductive functioning, but also underpinned by a constellation of cultural assumptions about gendered roles and patterns of socialization, particularly in relation to 'emotion work'. Using a sociological perspective on emotions in this way, we suggest, helps transcend false mind/body dualism, thus facilitating an understanding of pain as an everyday emotional, as well as a 'medicalized', phenomenon, which, in turn, is crucially linked to gender, culture and embodiment.

Taking these arguments further, Peter Freund, in the next chapter, examines the interrelationship between social status, control, emotion work and bodily states, including those that may contribute to illness. In doing so, Freund advances what he refers to as a 'geography' of emotions and emotional relationships across social-physical and psycho-somatic space. The concept of 'dramaturgical stress' provides a tool, he suggests, for analysing the intermingling of bodies, emotions and social interaction, whilst emotional labour may be regarded as a 'stressor'. In particular,

there are two main features of the sociocultural situation in which such dramaturgical stress takes place, namely the form of social control that prevails and the relative social positions of the actors involved. It therefore follows that those in subordinate positions (e.g. women and minority groups, workers in lower-class service occupations, etc.) are likely to be particularly vulnerable. Under such conditions, neuromuscular, hormonal and respiratory activity produced in response to dramaturgical stress may have an impact on health. Altered physiological reactivity may also influence moods and emotional states. Hence social performances and their 'discontents', and the capacity to cope with these, can, Freund suggests, contribute to illness.

Taking this critical exploration of the micro—macro divide further, the last two chapters in this volume build on previous studies of emotions in the workplace (Fineman 1993; James 1992, 1989; Smith 1992; Lawler 1991) through a focus on gender and the changing institutional dynamics of health care. The dramatic nature of such emotion work is perfectly illustrated in [Chapter 16](#) by Susie Page and Liz Meerabeau in their analysis of nurses' (*post-facto*) accounts of cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR). As they show, preparation of nursing and medical personnel for such an event is fraught with difficulty, not least because the reality of the event frequently bears little resemblance to how it is presented in a training situation. In doing so, Page and Meerabeau insightfully link issues of emotion management to the medicalization of death and its subsequent amenability to human manipulation. As they argue, this manipulation is also true of the emotions engendered for those involved in 'body work', with its 'clean' and 'dirty' associations mediated by ritual. From this perspective, CPR is perhaps best seen as a symbolic event which often involves a loss of dignity for both parties, and an outcome which is all too frequently dichotomized into good/bad, desirable/undesirable or success/failure.

Finally, the last chapter by Virginia Olesen and Debora Bone moves the sociological analysis and understanding of emotions to considerations of processual and structural issues, located in the context of a discussion of US health care settings and organizations. These, they argue, represent prime cases of substantial ongoing change, especially increasing rationalization, in contexts where emotions are significantly embedded in the work, thus generating a theoretically intriguing tension between demands for affective neutrality and desires for particularity. Transitions in these health care systems bring forth new structures where expectations, deeply ingrained in professional care-givers and related to important emotional and social issues, are no longer appropriate and new emotional responses have not yet been sufficiently developed or are fragmented. In opening up these questions of emotions in cultural, social and economic change, a topic thus far little explored in the growing literature on emotions, Olesen and Bone therefore move the analysis of emotions from 'point in time' issues to a more dynamic view. In doing so, they draw on previously developed concepts and positions such as emotional labour, feeling rules, the sentimental order, and the relationship of structure to emotions and evocative transformations, concluding with an agenda for future research utilizing comparisons of other settings such as business and industry.

All in all, the chapters contained in this volume suggest an exciting future for the sociology of emotions, keying as it does into a number of important issues and debates within mainstream sociology, including the recent upsurge of interest in the body and society, and the critique of western rationality. In particular, as we have argued, one of the most important features of this newly emerging field of inquiry lies in the manner in which it is able to transcend many of the sterile divides and dualistic legacies of the past through a truly embodied form of sociology. Despite this promising start, much still remains to be done, particularly if we are to move from the current proliferation of competing perspectives and alternative research agendas, towards a more integrated phase of sociological theorizing on emotions in social life. Whilst this suggests constraints as well as opportunities, it none the less points to the fact that a sociology of emotions, alongside the body, could potentially become the ‘leading edge’ of contemporary social theory. Whatever the outcome, one thing remains clear: emotions, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, have truly come of age.

NOTES

- 1 Kemper, for example, traces the beginnings of American sociological interest in emotions back to the ‘watershed year’ of 1975, arguing that, by the brink of the 1980s, the sociology of emotions was truly ‘poised for developmental take-off’ (1990b: 4). Landmark texts here include Hochschild’s *The Managed Heart* (1983) and, more recently, *The Second Shift* (1989b); Denzin’s (1984) *On Understanding Emotion*; together with a variety of edited collections including Franks and McCarthy’s (1989) *The Sociology of Emotions*, Kemper’s (1990) *ResearchAgendas in the Sociology of Emotions*, and two recent British texts, Fineman’s (1993) *Emotions in Organisations* and James and Gabe’s (1996) *Health and the Sociology of Emotions*. To this, we may also add other, populist texts, such as Goleman’s (1996) recent number one best-seller: *Emotional Intelligence: How It Can Matter More Than IQ*.
- 2 For critical explorations of the role of emotions in micro—macro linkages see Collins (1981, 1990), Kemper (1990a), Gordon (1990).
- 3 Classic examples of ‘organismic’ approaches can be found in the work of Darwin (1955 [1873]), Freud (1923), James and Lange (1922) and Ekman (1982, 1984). In contrast, social constructionists, as the name implies, view emotions as capable of considerable historical and cultural variation: see, for example, Harré (1986, 1991), Stearns (1994), Stearns and Stearns (1988), Lutz (1989) and Rosaldo (1984).
- 4 For another lively and interesting debate, from an Eliasian perspective, on the historical merits of Hochschild’s emotion management approach, see Wouters (1989a, 1989b) and Hochschild (1989a).

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Part I

Critical perspectives on emotions

The sociology of emotion as a way of seeing

Arlie Russell Hochschild

INTRODUCTION

The sociology of emotion is a new, growing field within the larger discipline of sociology,¹ and part of a wider interdisciplinary renaissance in interest in emotion. All of the nineteenth-century founders of sociology touched on the topic of emotion and some did more. As the American sociologist Randall Collins has pointed out, Max Weber elucidates the anxious 'spirit of capitalism', the magnetic draw of charisma, and he questions what passes for 'rationality'. Emile Durkheim explores the social scaffolding for feelings of 'solidarity'. Karl Marx explores alienation and, in his analysis of class conflict, he implies much about resentment and anger.² Max Scheler explores empathy and sympathy, and Georg Simmel a rich variety of sentiments. Sigmund Freud calls attention to the primacy of conscious and unconscious emotion (what he called affect), though not to its sociological character.

In the twentieth century, Erving Goffman traces out the complex web of unconscious rules of acting that guide us through a typical day. Goffman also implies, though he draws back from positing, feeling rules, and an emotional actor capable of managing emotions in accordance with such rules. As a whole, current sociology is rich in ethnographic 'thick descriptions', which leak evidence of emotion, on one side, and in theories that imply them, on the other. But missing until recently has been a carefully developed, grounded, sociological theory of emotion. This volume gathers research that forms part of this larger project.

As with any new body of work, the sociology of emotion has generated lively debate, and been quickly subdivided by area, theoretical approach and methodology (Kemper 1989). So it is no easier to speak these days of a 'typical sociologist of emotion' than it is to speak of a 'typical' sociologist. Still, we can ask: what is it like to see the world from the point of view of the sociologist of emotion?³ Perhaps the best way to convey this point of view is to look very closely at one small episode, and to compare different ways of seeing it. As my episode, my 'grain of sand', I have chosen one youngwoman's description of her wedding day in 1981, drawn from my book *The Managed Heart*. The young woman says this:

My marriage ceremony was chaotic and completely different than I imagined it would be. Unfortunately, we rehearsed at 8 o'clock the morning of the wedding. I had imagined that everyone would know what to do, but they didn't. That made me nervous. My sister didn't help me get dressed or flatter me and no one in the dressing room helped until I asked. I was depressed. I wanted to be so happy on our wedding day.... This is supposed to be the happiest day of one's life. I couldn't believe that some of my best friends couldn't make it to my wedding. So as I started out to the church thinking about all these things, that I always thought would not happen at my wedding, going through my mind, I broke down and cried. But I thought to myself, 'Be happy for the friends, the relatives, the presents.' Finally, I said to myself, 'Hey, other people aren't getting married, *you* are.' From down the long aisle I saw my husband. We looked at each other's eyes. His love for me changed my whole being from that point on. When we joined arms, I was relieved. The tension was gone. From then on, it was beautiful. It was indescribable.⁴

The sociological view without emotion in focus: the function of a ritual

As Emile Durkheim (1965 [1915]) points out in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, rituals create a circle within which things become extra-ordinary, amazing, sacred, and outside of which things seem unremarkable. The marriage ceremony makes a profane bond between bride and groom into a sacred one.

But this fretful young woman's wedding was not doing its Durkheimian job. For only when the young bride focuses on herself does the occasion seem to become fully meaningful to her. As she says, 'Finally, I said to myself, "Hey, other people aren't getting married, *you* are."' In a certain sense, the bride reverses Durkheim. She de-ceremonializes the ceremony. She has to remove herself mentally from the collective nature of the ceremony in order to feel her wedding as sacred and to feel herself transformed.

The psychoanalytic view: the bride's narcissistic expectation

What in our bride's tale might catch the psychoanalyst's eye? Dr Christa Rohde-Dachser, a commentator on an earlier version of this chapter (a paper given at the German Psychoanalytic Association in 1995), offered the following interpretation.⁵

The young bride held 'narcissistic expectations of this day'; she expected to feel central, elevated, enhanced. She was therefore disappointed when these expectations were not met. When faced with an inattentive sister, absent friends and bumbling bridesmaids, she grew anxious at having to adopt the 'female depressive solution'; namely to abandon hope of fulfilling her own needs and to focus on the more urgent needs of others. Then she experienced a moment of 'Oedipal triumph', as shown again by the phrase 'people aren't getting married, *you* are'. This is the moment,

Rodhe-Dachser argues, in which the young woman leaves the sexual ‘white desert’ of childhood in which she watches her parents’ sexual happiness from the side. Now she may enjoy her own sexual gratification. Why, Dr Rodhe-Dachser also asks, does the story end when it ends, at a moment of happy union? Is this a fusion of her narcissistic expectation with her Oedipal triumph, central and united for ever, and do these form a denial of reality?

In looking at our bride in this way, the psychoanalyst relies on the idea of personality structure, itself formed in the course of early psycho-sexual development within the immediate family. This is because psychoanalysis is a body of theory about *individual human development*. Its focus is on those moments in human development when things go wrong, attachments are ruptured, traumas occur. The psychoanalyst thus often dwells upon extreme or pathological emotion, and, as a practice, focuses on healing emotional injuries. Culture enters in as the *medium* in which human development, injury and repair take place.

Like the ‘regular’ sociologist, the psychoanalyst might not ask how it is that a certain emotion—like anxiety, or feeling ‘his love for me’—does or does not stand out from an array of expectable or appropriate feelings. Both might rely on an intuitive notion of appropriate affect, based on a prior notion of a mentally healthy response to this situation in this culture at this time. They might see feeling as a simple matter of instinct or nature, and leave it at that. They would pass over the crucial question of how cultures shape feeling.

THE SOCIOLOGY OF EMOTIONS VIEW

How would a sociologist of emotion approach the same bride? Like the psychoanalyst, the sociologist of emotion notes that the bride is anxious, and links her anxiety with the meanings she attaches to the wedding. But the sociologist of emotion does not usually focus on a person’s childhood development *per se*, or on injury and repair, but instead on the sociocultural *determinants* of feeling, and the sociocultural bases for defining, appraising and managing human emotion and feeling.

Three questions arise. Why did the bride feel ‘nervous’, and ‘depressed’, as she put it, and break down and cry? How did she define her feelings? And how did she appraise the degree to which they corresponded with what she thought she ‘should’ feel?

To answer the first question, we would need to discover far more about the bride’s prior expectations and her current apprehension of the self-relevance of her situation. I would personally argue that emotion emerges as a result of a newly grasped reality (as it bears on the self) as it clashes against the template of prior expectations (as they bear on the self). Emotion is a biologically given sense, and our most important one. Like other senses, hearing, touch and smell, emotion is a means by which we continually learn and relearn about a just-now-changed, back-and-forth relation between self and world, the world as it means something just now to the self.⁶

Most of us maintain a prior expectation of a continuous self, but the character of the self we expect to maintain is subject to profoundly social influence. To understand the bride's distress, we would need to understand the template of prior expectations she had about herself, as a daughter, a girlfriend, a woman, a member of her community, and her social class. We would need to know how close she felt she 'really was' to the friends who didn't appear at her wedding, to the sister who didn't reassure her. We would need to know just what she picked out to see and absorb as she saw her sister from the dressing-table, and what gestures caught her eye among participants at the rehearsal. From these details we might reconstruct the social aspects of the moment of disappointment and tears. To be sure, the social aspect isn't everything. Emotion always involves some biological component: trembling, weeping, breathing hard. But it takes a social element, a new juxtaposition of an up-until-just-now expectation and a just-now apprehension of reality to induce emotion. That is one aspect of emotion the sociologist of emotion studies.

Second, how does the bride define her feelings? She draws from a *prior set of ideas about what feelings are feel-able*. She has to rely on a prior notion of what feelings are 'on the cultural shelf, pre-acknowledged, pre-named, pre-articulated, culturally available to be felt. We can say that our bride intuitively matches her feeling to a nearest feeling in a collectively shared emotional dictionary. Let us picture this dictionary not as a small object outside herself, but as a giant cultural entity and she a small being upon its pages.

Matching her feelings to the emotional dictionary, she discovers that some feelings are feel-able and others not. Were she to feel sexual and romantic homosexual attraction in China, for example, she would discover that to most people, homosexual love is not simply considered 'bad'; it is considered not to exist.

Like other dictionaries, the emotional dictionary reflects agreement among the authorities of a given time and place. It expresses the idea that within an emotional 'language group' there are given emotional experiences, each with its own ontology. So, to begin with, the sociologist of emotion asks, first, to what array of acknowledged feelings, in the context of her time and place, is our bride *matching* her inner experience, and, second, is her feeling of happiness on her wedding day a perfect match, a near match, a complete mismatch? This powerful process of matching inner experience to a cultural dictionary becomes, for the sociologist of emotion, a mysterious, important part of the drama of this bride's inner life. Forculture is an active, constituent part of emotion, not a passive medium within which biologically pre-formulated, 'natural' emotions emerge.

Third, we ask: what does the bride believe she *should* or shouldn't feel? If, on one hand, the bride is matching her emotion to a cultural dictionary, she is also matching it to a bible, a set of prescriptions embedded in the received wisdom of her culture. The bride lives in a *culture of emotion*. What did the bride expect or hope to feel on this day? She tells us a wedding 'is supposed to be the happiest day of one's life'. In so far as she shares this wish with most other young heterosexual women in America, she has internalized a shared feeling rule: on this day feel the most happy you have

ever felt. Specifically, the bride may have ideals about *when* to feel excited, central, enhanced, and when not to (around age 25, not 15). She has ideas about *whom* she should love and whom not (a kind, responsible man, not a fierce one) and *how strongly* she should love (with a moderate degree of abandon; not complete abandon, but not too cool and collected either).

Her feeling rules are buttressed by her beliefs concerning *how important* love should be. The poet Lord Byron wrote, 'Man's love is of man's life a thing apart, 'tis woman's whole existence.'

Does love loom larger for our bride than it does for her groom? Or does she now try to make love a smaller part of her life, as men in her culture have tried to do in the past? What are the new feeling rules about the place of love in a modern woman's life? How desirable or valued is the emotion of love or the state of deep attachment?

According to the western 'romantic love ethic', one is supposed to fall 'head over heels' in love, to lose control or come close to doing so. Within western cultures, there are subcultural variations. In Germany, *romantische Liebe* has a slightly derogatory connotation that it lacks in the USA. In many parts of non-western societies, such as India, romantic love is considered dangerous. On the basis of interviews with Hindu men on the subject of love, Steve Derne found that the Hindu men felt that 'head over heels' romantic love was dangerous and undesirable. Such love occurred, but it inspired a sense of dread and guilt, for it was thought to compete with a man's loyalty to his mother and other kinspeople in the extended family. This dread, of course, mixes with and to some extent alters the feeling of love itself.⁷

So we do not assume that people in different eras and places feel 'the same old emotion' and just express it differently. Love in, say, a New England farming village of the 1790s is not the 'same old' love as in upper-class Beverly Hills, California in 1995 or among the working-class Catholic miners in Saarbrücken, Germany. Each culture has its unique emotional dictionary, which defines what is and isn't, and its emotional bible, which defines what one should and should not feel in a given context. As aspects of 'civilizing' culture they determine the predisposition with which we greet an emotional experience. They shape the predispositions with which we *interact* with ourselves over time. Some feelings in the ongoing stream of emotional life we acknowledge, welcome, foster. Others we grudgingly acknowledge and still others the culture invites us to deny completely.

Finally, like any sociologist, the sociologist of emotion looks at the *social context* of a feeling. Is the bride's mother divorced? Is her estranged father at the wedding? And the groom's family? How unusual is it for friends not to attend weddings? How serious were the invitations? Mothers, fathers, siblings, step-parents and siblings, friends: what are the histories of their 'happiest days'? This context also lends meaning to the bride's feelings on her wedding day.

THE MODERN PARADOX OF LOVE

Given the current emotional culture (with its particular dictionary and bible) on the one hand, and the social context on the other, a society often presents its members with a paradox—an apparent contradiction that underneath is not a contradiction but a cross-pressure.

The present-day western paradox of love is this. As never before, the modern culture invites a couple to aspire to a richly communicative, intimate, playful, sexually fulfilling love. We are invited not to hedge our bets, not to settle for less, not to succumb to pragmatism, but, emotionally speaking, to ‘aim high’.

At the same time, however, a context of high divorce silently warns us against trusting such a love too much.⁸ Thus, the culture increasingly invites us to ‘really let go’ and trust our feelings. But it also cautions: ‘You’re not really safe if you do. Your loved one could leave. So don’t trust your feelings.’ Just as the advertisements saturating American television evoke ‘*la belle vie*’ in a declining economy that denies such a life to many, so the new cultural permission for a rich, full, satisfying love-life has risen just as new uncertainties subvert it.

Let me elaborate. On one hand, the culture invites us to feel that love is more important than before. As the historian John Gillis argues, the sacredness once attached to the Church and expressed through a wider community has been narrowed to the family. The family has become fetishized, and love, as that which leads to families, elevated in importance. Economic reasons for a man and a woman to join their lives together have grown less important, and emotional reasons have grown more important.⁹ In addition, modern love has also become more pluralistic.¹⁰ What the Protestant Reformation did to the hegemony of the Catholic Church, the sexual and emotional revolution of the last thirty years has done to romantic love. The ideal of heterosexual romantic love is now a slightly smaller model of love within an expanding pantheon of valued loves, each with its supporting subculture. Gay and lesbian loves can, in some subcultures, enjoy full acceptance; single career women now have a rich cultural world in which a series of controlled affairs mixed with warm friendships with other women is defended as an exciting life. Some of this diversification of love expands the social categories of people ‘eligible’ to experience romantic love, whereas some of it provides alternatives. But on the whole, the ideal of romantic love has increased its powerful grip by extending and adapting itself to more populations.

Paradoxically, while people feel freer to love more fully as they wish, and to trust love as a basis of action, they also feel more afraid to do so because love often fades, dies, is replaced by a ‘new love’. The American divorce rate has risen from about 20 per cent at the turn of the century and stands now at 50 per cent, the highest in the world. Norms that used to apply to American adolescent teenagers in the 1950s, ‘going steady’, breaking up, going steady again with another, now apply to the adult parents of children. The breakup rate for cohabiting couples is higher still. In addition, more women raise children on their own, and more women have no children.¹¹