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mixed feelings

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Mixed Emotions: Anthropological Studies of Feeling

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This collection of essays aims to introduce students of anthropology to that discipline's contribution to the interdisciplinary field of work on the emotions. It should be said at the outset that it is reviewed here by a non-anthropologist who is unable to assess whether it adequately represents the history of vicissitudes of thought about emotion in anthropology, or the range of current anthropological thinking on a topic which has emerged as a pervasive concern across the humanities and social sciences over the last decade. Having said that, as a reader from another discipline I found that the introductory essay by Maruska Svasek gives a broad but useful overview of the history of the main currents of thought about emotion in anthropology, which she characterises as on the one hand a European, broadly psychoanalytic concern with kinship in which culture is generated by 'drives' (e.g. Malinowski), and on the other, the US-based 'culture and personality' mode with its strong interest in developmental psychology (Benedict, Mead). She delineates the differences between anthropological, psychological and sociological approaches to the topic, and reads current moves in anthropology as a shift from an emphasis on discourse to one on embodiment. This in itself entails an opening to disciplines beyond the social sciences, and although the introduction does not fully address this, it soon becomes clear in what follows that anthropology is beginning to do so, albeit in a way that strikes this reader as somewhat erratic.

The opening chapter by Kay Milton elaborates on analytic effects across the disciplines

of the form taken by the western distinction between nature and culture, and proposes an 'ecological' approach similar to that taken to perception by J.J. Gibson as a way out of the opposition between them.¹ This would mean paying attention to the specificity of an organism's connection to its environment, which in turn constrains what can be learned from that environment. Milton draws on the psychological work of Neisser (on memory) and Izard, on Damasio in neuroscience and Scherer in sociology to insist on the importance of emotion to learning, and on the importance of learning in interpreting the 'same' physiological responses in different contexts. For example, a quickening heartbeat and tightening stomach muscles may indicate fear, anxiety or love, depending on whether one is contemplating a snake, an exam, or a new lover. Milton implies, without actually saying so, that the process of such individual affective socialisation may then be generalised so that we may imagine the possibilities of different forms of socialisation in different cultures. Although I think she is absolutely right about the need for this kind of approach, I found it frustrating that I came away with no concrete sense of what this might be like in an anthropological study.

On the other hand, Lisette Josephides's essay later in the volume, on 'Resentment as a Sense of Self', does give more of a picture of the possibilities here, though without actually claiming her work as ecological. Revisiting old field notes and realising that her subsequent writing did no justice to the intensity of emotions she recalled in the social life she describes, Josephides

reflects on the way in which her own emphasis on pragmatism and political strategy conceals the strength of felt resentment as a motivating force in Kewa social life, and as a significant shaper of Kewa selfhood. Describing resentment as 'weak person's witchcraft', she shows that fear of provoking it provides an important check on expressions of contempt and disdain, which would be met with an immediate, violent response. Critical of the cognitivism of Solomon and others who view emotions as interpretations, Josephides draws on Nussbaum, Kant, Heidegger and others to argue that emotions are motivating forces, expressive of internal states, and, in Lutz and Abu-Lughod's formulation, they are 'pragmatic acts and communicative performances' that exceed discourse.² But it is not clear to me whether she is contending that emotions are simply likely to give rise to certain kinds of action, or that they are already actions in themselves. What is clearer in her discussion is that emotions produce the self as both interiority capable of self-reflection and agent seeking recognition in the world.

Josephides describes the peculiar character of Kewa resentment as anger with a very specific source: an insult to the self. Any reader familiar with the work of American psychologist Silvan S. Tomkins may wonder why she doesn't simply call it an angry response to the experience of shame, for this is just what she seems to be describing. Here anger, rather than the complementary response of contempt, or the equally conceivable response of distress, is the culturally mandated response to potential

humiliation and it is accompanied by certain familiar behavioural repertoires whose predictability is surely central to their effectiveness as threat.

In fact, I find myself often exasperated by the fact that these essays often seem to retrace arguments that Tomkins's work has simply outflanked—and then I wonder whether I am not simply guilty of an over-investment in it which may blind me to the questions it fails to ask. Nevertheless, there is unquestionably a strange silence around the name of Tomkins in this volume, most obviously in Peter J. Bowler's essay, 'Darwin on the Expression of the Emotions'. Arguing that Darwin's evolutionary approach to the affects failed to be taken up until Paul Ekman did so in the 1970s, which provided an enabling context for renewed interest in the biologically-informed study of emotional expression, Bowler does not say that Ekman was in fact one of Tomkins's graduate students and that his work is deeply indebted to Tomkins's in many respects, including his theory of innate discrete affects. Bowler does show in some detail that the reasons Ekman offers for the contemporary resistance to Darwin are anachronistic, and that it was the ideology of evolutionary progress that posed the major obstacle to the development of Darwinian thought on the affects. By the time Freud interests himself in Darwin, progressionism was being more widely challenged, and anthropology and sociology 'refused to privilege European society as the goal to which all others were moving' (51), even if in psychology behaviourism expelled biology altogether. This

actually makes Tomkins's work—and its absence from any consideration at all in this volume—all the more remarkable, since he was a psychologist who used psychology against the grain. Moreover, he carried out extensive research (but not, as far as I know, actual field-work) into affective expression and socialisation in China and India. Though this work was never written up for publication, Tomkins's notes are available (unsorted) in the History of Psychology Archives at the University of Akron, Ohio.

My feelings of impatience with much of the theoretical argument (though not the ethnography) in these essays derives from the fact that, for all that talk of affect seems to be omnipresent these days, the development of affect theory seems to have been forestalled by a certain defensiveness about the project in the face of local resistance in the social sciences, which have tended to privilege particular forms of rationality and to regard any approach to thinking affect as marking a dangerous decline into subjectivism. The social sciences in particular seem to have been drawn down the dead end of a debate about whether emotions are natural or cultural phenomena (often without recognising that the distinction itself is culturally produced), between a universalising, essentialising biologism on the one hand and a newer orthodoxy of cultural constructivism on the other. Critiques of the former have become second nature. The latter was extensively critiqued as so ingrained as to be reflexive by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank in their introduction to *Shame and its Sisters*, the

volume of writings that introduced the work of Tomkins (marginal to psychology, although it had been actively taken up by some contemporary psychotherapies) into cultural studies in 1995.³ Sedgwick and Frank proposed that it may be more productive to look beyond familiar theoretical routines to what has now become a rapidly burgeoning interdisciplinary field in which biology in particular no longer functions as the sign of essentialism, but as a potential opening onto other ways of thinking relations (including relations between terms and relations) drawn from nonlinear dynamics and systems and complexity theories. (If this sounds a little like the structuralism of the 1960s, then yes, everything old is new again, as it so often is in the history of thought.) This coincides with a renewed interest in thinking both cognition and memory as distributed systems, neither fully localisable in the brain (neurons, for example, also reside in the heart, the gut, the knee, and so on) nor independent of the sensory and affective systems which are indispensable to them. Such a conception of cognition implies certain things about thought, including its partiality (in both senses of the word) and its dependence on figuration.

‘The essential dynamic of unification in theory construction, in science and in affect theory construction alike, is error and inconsistency’, writes Tomkins.⁴ Such failures, essential though they are to further thought, nevertheless give rise to shame, to an interruption or attenuation of ongoing interest and enjoyment, rather than to its absolute rupture. This is the pause that allows for reflection and

adjustment, which again makes possible exchange and dialogue. Unless, that is, the shame involved is too intense, and humiliation generates rage: repeated sequences of shame and rage (the ‘shame-rage spiral’, as it has been called) fragments the self and makes thought impossible. This suggests the need for modulation of the shame we may inadvertently produce in others, and the importance of trying to think in the face of shame, to think with shame, rather than attempting to avoid it altogether. Shame signals something in the dialogue that requires attention. Anthropological fieldwork inevitably generates shame in the distinction it instantiates between subject and object, researcher and researched—a shame which ‘long-term participant observation’ can never completely abolish, and which may indeed generate its own further sources of shame, as Jennifer Biddle has shown in writing about the sudden trauma of a car accident and the death that followed it, which shattered the routine and ongoing traumatising of such an immersive experience as intensive fieldwork in a remote community.⁵ So too she amply demonstrates it in the writing of her story ‘Yarla’, a trenchant fable about the responsibilities both enforced and assumed by relations established through fieldwork, which introduces her new book on Warlpiri women’s art.⁶ But fieldwork, of course, is also the strength of much contemporary anthropology, since it forces active negotiation with one’s own shame and the shame of others, of oneself as cause as well as site of shame. It requires precisely the kind of negotiation and exchange with the other that is the

source of so much misery and misunderstanding when it is refused or avoided out of fear, habit, or shame itself.

The essays on fieldwork in this book disappoint even as they do usefully inform the uninformed about the parameters of the discipline. They tend to place the reader alongside the writer in the position of relative mastery afforded by professional knowledge without rendering the crucial experience of not knowing, or something of the limits of understanding. What is missing is the rendering of sensory immersion in another culture, the experiences of dislocation, surprise and tentative discovery that require the poetic writing of a Lingis or a Biddle, or the descriptive and narrative powers of a novelist—perhaps even, at times, a comic novelist. Elizabeth Tonkin narrates secondhand an encounter that makes some of the immediate difficulties of negotiation clear. A linguist in South India asks a street vendor if he sells cigarettes, and when the vendor slowly shakes his head the linguist automatically turns away in disappointment—even though he ‘knows’ that in this cultural context the headshake means yes. (56) Did the vendor ‘feel puzzled at the customer’s rejection, or personally criticised in some way?’, Tonkin wonders. When she writes that ‘imagination makes real’ (58), one might wish for more of it in the writing of these essays, though perhaps the fault here lies less with the writers than with the strictures of the publishing industry which wants textbooks for the largest possible number of large courses. My own feeling is that students are more likely to be excited by the way in which Jennifer Biddle’s writing makes inventive use of a kind

of free indirect discourse in which Warlpiri English and untranslated Warlpiri terms interrupt and relativise the smooth taken-for-grantedness manufactured by certain forms of scholarly discourse, and in which structures of repetition not usual in English (though their use is doubtless inspired by Tomkins’s famous concatenations) move towards elegy at moments in her essay on death and trauma or mimic the amplification of shame by positive feedback in her essay on that the workings of that affect in a very particular intercultural context.⁷

Like much of Biddle’s writing, Tonkin’s anecdotes testify to the somatically ingrained nature of affective knowledge, but also make clear that affects are cultured. The distinction between affect and emotion seems to allow for a clearer understanding of the corporeality of affect, both the way in which affect is inevitably *of* the body, and the way in which this means it feels real. This is the essence of affect as a (or even *the*) motivator in human life. Just as affect is an interface between the self and the social, so too it is an interface between consciousness and what remains unconscious. We are only ever partially in control of our own affective expression: we can communicate without wanting to; we can dissimulate, but only with difficulty conceal our dissimulation. Even the muscles we can move voluntarily are dependent on the autonomic neurons which function beyond the control of the neocortex (which we tend to imagine as ‘higher’ intelligence, the locus of consciousness in general and the will in particular). These in turn respond to the environment (including the social environment) which is itself not fully separable from us but is partially brought into

being by our movement in it as recent work on vision by writers such as Francisco Varela or Rudolfo Llinas makes clear. In Merleau-Ponty's succinct summation, '*behaviour is the first cause of all stimulations*'.⁸ Affects are not local but systemic responses which feed back into the body and which are represented by it to itself and to others. The feedback system extends beyond the boundaries of the individual body and is mediated by others and by cultural amplifiers such as media. Affects produce instant changes in the body's chemistry and in hedonic tone, all of which produces new dispositions in the world and readiness to certain kinds of action (including further affective response, and reflection) rather than others.

The same distinction also allows for certain kinds of work to be done: it makes possible studies of discrete affects rather than of a generalised, encompassing, but essentially dematerialised 'affect' in the singular; it gives us a precise indication of how and where different affects inhere in the body; it provides an affect dynamics on the basis of the different neurological and physiological profiles of the different affects which then enables the tracing of specific lines of force and their intersection with other such lines, and it opens the way to a study of the differential socialisation of the affects and their (con)scripting in certain cultural and social narratives. It also allows us to think what the affective components of complex and culturally specific emotional formations like *amae*, *song*, or *ressentiment* may be, and to try to grasp the immediate contagious and automatic elements in the corporeal activation of these formations, as well as that in them which is

learned and cultured as a form of social regulation. Moreover, the distinction between affect and emotion helps us think with more care about the constitution of subjectivity both historically and culturally, and the ways in which different forms of subjectivity are enfolded with the social and cultural milieu in which we move, which shapes us and which we in turn may shape. It allows us to analyse different formations of social responsiveness so that emotions can then be seen as the social and cultural technologies of affect generating a range of available behavioural repertoires.

It is crucial that the theory of discrete affects be brought into dialogue with historical studies of the emotions that periodise ways of thinking about emotion and with those that focus on the social regulation of affect at different times and places, including the present, as Anand Pandian recently pointed out.⁹ Kay Milton concludes the volume under discussion by articulating three questions to guide further research: how do people in different cultures learn what and how to feel about what; how do they learn to perceive specific bodily sensations as particular feelings; and how do they learn whether and how to express or suppress those feelings? These are important questions, and perhaps they should have been the ones contributors were explicitly asked to address, along with developing explicitly the ecological approach proposed by Milton. This is obliquely taken up in John Knight's essay on the creation of 'emotional affinities' between monkeys and humans in Japanese monkey parks, but an opportunity is missed to theorise the approach explicitly here.

These, finally, are all interesting and worthwhile essays which all contribute to an examination of the ways in which the five emotions Ekman and other post-Darwinian writers broadly agree have a very high degree of intercultural intelligibility (fear, anger, sadness, enjoyment and disgust) are differently socialised in different cultures, and how they are wrought into complex cultural emotional forms and practices which don't necessarily translate into each other easily or at all—even if some of these writers would not accept that view of affect (as opposed to emotion) as innate. But they do also testify to the ways in which affect theory requires a sustained interdisciplinary (as well as disciplinary) endeavour, since the location of affect at the interface of nature and culture, self and the social, cognition and the senses, means that it is inevitably constituted differently as an object by a number of incommensurable disciplinary knowledges. Some of these disciplines, I would suggest, have also produced problems that might dissolve or which might appear otherwise if Milton's ecological approach were to be rigorously and explicitly developed and it was possible to see what difference such an approach actually made in practice to the particular studies of emotion presented here. Such an approach, it seems to me, would challenge any absolute distinction between culture and the bio-physical realm, and would want also to take account of the different ways in which affect interfaces with communications media (television, the internet, dance, ritual, etc.) so as ultimately to call into question the limits of 'the human' itself, to highlight its potential plasticity, and

something of its openness to the world that both shapes and is shaped by it.

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