



# Towards an Affective Turn in Social Science Research? Theorising Affect, Rethinking Methods and (Re)Envisioning the Social

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The proliferation and impact of theories of affect in the humanities can hardly be understated. Affect has reignited and augmented writings on the body, the everyday, relationality, cognition, and emotion in relation to, but also attempting to go beyond the dominant epistemological parameters of the linguistic turn. It has transformed scholarship on subject-object dichotomies, ontology, psychoanalysis, (post)structuralism, and the relationship between the social sciences and the biosciences, particularly the neurosciences. However, even with clear connections and relevance to the political, ethical, and cultural dimensions of everyday social life, the theorisation of affect has made slower progress as a node of analysis within the social sciences. This is not due to a lack of interest, rather, affect presents multiple, and especially methodological challenges for social scientists. Many of these difficulties in working with affect, which has provided for such a rich discourse in other areas of inquiry, relate to the differential meanings scholars have attached to it, many of which cannot easily be mapped onto existing concepts or forms of knowledge. The multiplicity of understandings of what affect is or can be is highlighted by the different ways the contributors to this special edition have utilised it: as potential, as practice, as technology, as emotion, as feeling, as labour, as relationality, as bodily intensive force, and as below, above, or alongside structure and power. These numerous conceptualisations of affect emerge through a Deleuzian process of territorialisation and deterritorialisation (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987): affect, even as a concept, holds within and without it, the potential to



be other than it is right now. Affect ebbs and flows, turns in and out on itself, and finds new meanings, applications, and potentials through its scholarly use. Great effort is put into conceptually wrangling with the phenomenon, and, apt to affect, this wrangling is always already productively in-process. The theorisation of affect as multiplicitous, ontological potential that is, at least somewhat, separate from the social, is what has made it so appealing to many scholars searching for ways to challenge the seemingly determinate theorising of the social found in much post-modern scholarship. It is in this Deleuzian vein, a vein that has gained particular traction in influencing scholarship on affect, that affect becomes a force of social *indeterminacy* that offers the opportunity for us to look at what is, imagine what could be instead, and grasp that this 'instead' is always already happening.

However, the apparent freedom, outsideness, otherness, excess or 'autonomy' from the social (Massumi, 2002) is a common thread that runs through many theories and conceptualisations of affect, and is also precisely what makes it particularly complex for social scientists, including those in this special edition, to productively utilise it for their own work. If part of affect is always already something else, something outside of what currently is, how do we study the what-is-not-yet, especially empirically? What can affect offer the social sciences when affect, and the world it brings about, escapes representation and consciousness? In other words, given that affect is often framed as a phenomenon that, at least partially, escapes perceptions, knowledge, reason, and language, how can it be made a focus of empirical research efforts? Isn't affect precisely that which, *per definition*, cannot be captured through existing modes of knowledge production and representation? The question of the virtuality of affect is an undercurrent of tension that flows throughout the writings of this special edition.

In this context, the work of scholars such as Clare Hemmings (2005), who questions the distance of affect from the social postulated by Deleuzian scholarship, is especially instructive, including for many of the contributors to this edition. Hemmings's interrogation of two of the powerhouses of affect theory scholarship, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and, particularly, Brian Massumi and his Deleuzian theorising, questions their interpretations of post-structuralist writing as socially deterministic, with affect as the path towards freedom from dominant, determining power structures. Her intervention helps us to understand the relation of affect to the social as one where not only the emergent world is shaped by affect, but in turn

the social world mediates affect. Hemmings (2005) leaves us with the provocation that ‘affect might in fact be valuable precisely to the extent it is not autonomous’ (Hemmings, 2005, 565). It is in this space of this ‘might’ that social science and its scholars must do their labour.

The scholars in this special edition do the labour of leaning into this theoretical tension between affect and the social in productively distinct ways. Sitting in this messy tension is not always easy for those trained in fields that often rely upon clearer, more positivist notions of what is knowable, and, especially, how. All of them, however, engage with this perceived tension and attempt to reconcile it for the purposes of advancing social research. The emerging scholars here grapple with the possibilities that affect brings about, prompting us to rethink our methods by challenging both affect theory and the (inter)disciplinary standpoints from which the authors write. How has affect been theorised in the social sciences so far? How can different theories and understandings of affect be applied, appropriated, and challenged by social science scholarship? What are the methodological implications of grappling with affect theories for the social sciences, especially as a disparate body of theories? How and in what ways does this grappling, the very process of it, assist us in (re)envisioning the social? These questions form the spirit of this special edition, which seeks to illuminate the multiple ways in which different theories of affect have informed social science scholars and early career researchers in their own methodological approaches. In this vein, it also seeks to contribute to wider shifts in the social sciences which illustrate the need to develop methodologies capable of grasping the social and cultural worlds as mobile, creative, messy, sensory or affective, open-ended and changing, and can account for the ‘performativity of the method’ (Coleman and Ringrose 2013, 1).

The first paper, *Affect and Sociology: Reflection and Exploration through a Study of Media and Gender in Urban China*, by Eva Cheuk Yin Li, considers the potential for sociological applications of affect, particularly for the purposes of empirical research. Initially grounding her understanding of operationalised affect through Margaret Wetherell’s (2012) ‘affective practices’ presented as ‘embodied meaning-making’, Li uses this foundation to make the analytical move of (re)reading sociological traditions, such as the sociology of emotion and symbolic interactionism, for their engagement with emotion, feeling, the corporeal, the body, and the emergent. This move allows Li to place her own sociological research on *zhongxing*

sensibility in China and Hong Kong within a reclaimed affective history of sociology. Through her explication of the gender and sexual dimensions of *zhongxing* sensibility, affect, then, is signified as a useful supplement for existing sociological methods in exploring less determined and static phenomena in the relational social world.

The tension in and potential of the relationship between affect and the social sciences in the first article is engaged with for the purposes of advancing social movement theory in the following article, *The Emergent Political: Affective Social Transformation in Two-Spirit, Queer and Trans People of Colour Media*, by Anabel Khoo. Khoo explores the everyday lived experiences of social justice movement making, processes brimming with relational affective potential, as a means of moving beyond the hegemonic neoliberal discourses that work to forge sedimented boundaries and outcome-based imperatives of what a movement should be, and do. She thereby opens up a discussion about different ways of attending to connections between political thought and action such as ‘pre-conscious embodied reactions, memory or lack thereof, emotional attachment and spiritual practices’ and challenges us to be attentive to the finer attunements of social transformation. By examining two-spirit, queer and trans people of color (2-QTPOC) media making, Khoo argues that theoretically and methodologically, an affective lens allows for the conceptualisation of social movements as assemblages, which constantly transcend the boundaries of time, space and discipline. Through negotiating and reimagining the past in the present in order to forge new futures, 2-QTPOC media artists use their lived experiences to assist in reorienting the way we think about and do social movements as emergent processes of *movement*. Khoo concludes that an attention to the affective dimensions of the social emphasises the potentialities of the social world and resists the consolidation of meaning and identity, which are so commonly taken as the basis of social justice movements, and highlights the affective registers of connection and attachment.

The affective queer temporalities explored in Khoo’s text form a common thread with the next article in this special edition, *DISTILLED: Queering Identity, Affect and Community*, by Slavco Dimitrov. Here, the author seeks to utilise affect in relation to subjectivity, the body, and queerness in order to dislodge the depoliticised logic of hegemonic identity politics. However, as he asserts, much theorising on affect is not up to this task when subjectivity is placed in determinate

opposition to indeterminate affect. With the assistance of John Protevi (2009) and his work on political and ecological affect, the author calls for and utilises a ‘bio-social dynamic’ that helps us engage with subjectivity as an emergent, embodied affective property in relation to a broader ecological field of assemblages. Dimitrov draws on the work of Macedonian artist Velimir Zernovski to explore related issues of vulnerability and shame, rethinking subjectivity and community from a generative place not necessarily tied to identity, but in productive tension with identities’ histories and potential futures. Through Zernovski’s work, queering subjectivity and community becomes an affective act, illuminating the emergent potentialities of opening ourselves to each other. This affective horizon is certainly not yet reality (and perhaps never will be), but its consideration offers hope of altering queer politics today.

The next two articles share a concern for the affective dimensions of post-Fordist forms of labour, particularly in relation to structures of power. Trina Joyce Sajo’s *Cybersex as Affective Production: Notes for a Framework* shows how power, manifested in governmental, technological, and economic structures in the Philippines, produces cybersex as a form of labour centrally involving the production and circulation of affects. As Sajo argues, cybersex highlights politically crucial intersections between capitalism, racism, and sexism, and, on an affective level, involves real bodies that are produced by and productive of emotions, vulnerabilities, and actions within this broader system of power relations. Affect helps us attend to the experiences as well as the risks and agential potentials of affective bodies in the environment of the cybersex industry. Affect and its circulation, then, is a form of value in excess of, but implicit to, cybersex, and the author asserts it must be taken into account in any critical analysis of capitalist control and exploitation.

An attention to affective labour, especially when viewed through the cybersex industry, begins to resonate with a history of feminist concerns with emotional, care, and reproductive labour. A feminist reading of affective labour is directly taken up in Svenja Bromberg’s *Vacillations of Affect. How to reclaim ‘affect’ for a feminist-materialist critique of capitalist social relations?* The author purports that affective labour is necessarily a gendered form of labour, with deep effects on women’s lives and solidarities. As such, theorisations of affective labour require a more systematic interrogation of the concept’s embeddedness in different

existing power structures and systems of oppression to allow for the possibility of political thinking and resistance autonomous from the capital relation. Affect here becomes an analytical tool for expanding our understanding of relational subjectivity in late capitalism and think (historical) materialism through the very materiality of the body.

The final contribution to this special edition is Sabiha Allouche's *Western Media as 'Technology of Affect': The Affective Making of the 'Angry Arab Man'*. More directly than the previous contributions, this text works firmly within a Deleuzian framework and attempts to 'de-colonise affect theory' through the disclosure of the affective dimensions of media narratives about and representations of the Middle East, operating, ultimately, as technologies of affect. The author shows how Western media constructs and territorialises the affect-stereotype of the Angry Arab Man as the emotive Other, drawing on postcolonial theory and the Deleuzian concepts of refrain and de-/reterritorialisation. The affect-stereotype as refrain, here, temporarily consolidates the configuration of the Arab Man through the capture of its affective excess. However, as Allouche goes on to argue, we should not take for granted the pre-conscious nature of affect, but conceive of emotions as spaces of resistance and counter activity. Drawing on the work of Lila Abu-Lughod and bell hooks, she highlights the politically charged nature of affective and emotional states, and their potential for challenging existing representations and formal politics.

Finally, this special edition includes two book reviews and one conference proceeding review. Whitney Stark reviews *Depression: A Public Feeling* by Ann Cvetkovich (2012), offering a nuanced critical race and post-colonial reading of the author's politicised engagement with depression. Katie Wetzel reviews Mel Y. Chen's (2012) *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* and highlights the theoretically eclectic ways Chen analyses animacy, and how affect is utilised to critique the limitations of animate language. Finally, Nayeli Urquiza Haas and Arturo Sánchez García give a detailed account of scholarly engagements with vulnerability that occurred during the 2013 PECANS Interdisciplinary Workshop for Postgraduates and Early Career Academics in the Area of Law, Gender and Sexuality. In a truly affective reading of vulnerability, the writers discuss the multiple ways in which the 'vulnerable subject is always encountering and being encountered, moving towards and being moved by others'.

A common theme develops through these essays that is at once political, as it is ethical. For affect to be in relation to the social means that affect and power-laden systems of oppression work above, below, and upon each other. With this in mind, it is difficult to think of social scientists *not* engaging with affect in terms of the feminist, postcolonial, queer, critical race, and Marxist theories that so greatly inform our understandings of the social. The potential of affect theory for forming new bodies, relationalities, movements, communities, and worlds makes it a suitable companion to the study of power in the social, political, and cultural worlds. Affect, then, can be 'a starting place from which we can develop methods that have an awareness of the politics of aesthetics: methods that respond with sensitivity to aesthetic influences on human emotions and understand how they change bodily capacities' (Hickey-Moody 2013, 79). What does it mean to (re)imagine the social through theorising affect? Are we creating affective methodologies here? What are the unexpected consequences, in the present and multiplicitous future, of bringing affect and the social closer together? The authors in this special issue have provided some preliminary answers to these questions, but as it is with affect, its impacts (many, not one) on social science are still full of possibility. However, let's not forget what is also conversely true: the social sciences hold transformative potential to make productive impingements on affect theory, as the authors represented here have contributed to show.

The – intensely affective – process of editing this special issue has been as much a challenging as it has been a rewarding process, and it certainly has inspired us to develop further our own thinking about and practicing of (affective) social research methodologies. However, we are by no means solely responsible for the final version of this issue and would like to express our gratitude to many who have immensely supported our work over the last months. First, we would like to thank all the authors for sharing their thoughts, ideas and fascinating research projects with us and for patiently going through multiple rounds of revisions and editing. We would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers who have voluntarily shared their time and expertise to provide feedback to the authors and to make this issue a success. Most importantly, however, we would like to express our gratitude to the GJSS team, especially the former editors-in-chief Alexa Asthelan and Rosemary Deller who provided much needed support in the early stages of the editorial process, the current editors-in-chief Remi Salisbury and Arpita Das for

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