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The Public Life of Emotions

Corinne Squire

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Abstract

Emotionalism, the centring of social and political as well as personal judgements on individual feeling, seems to many to be an increasingly prevalent frame for thought and action. A variety of historical and cultural explanations are advanced to account for this situation, ranging from the conceptual contradictions of Enlightenment thinking through the power of popular media to the aftereffects of postmodernism. For some, emotionalism signifies cultural degeneration, depoliticisation and emotional impoverishment, while others view the change as psychologically and socially empowering and potentially democratising. This paper urges a limited acceptance of emotionalism as a historical shift, and a qualified optimism about it. The paper argues that emotionalism can act at times as a kind of pragmatic strategy for theorising areas of cultures that are otherwise ignored or repressed, while at other times emotionalism simply points to insufficiencies within mainstream cultural discourses. The paper also suggests that critical psychology is a particularly apt field in which to consider the reconfigurations of emotion being achieved by its increasingly public performance.

The Public Life of Emotions

In contemporary western public life, it often seems as if emotions speak loudest. Drowning out reason, politics, history, economic analysis and sociological narratives, talk about emotions envisions a future in which all forms of growth, from the personal to the global, are integrated, all following the same principles of openness and mutuality. Emotions are not the only objects of psychological research and practice, nor is psychology the only discipline to address them. But emotions provide psychology's most specific, defining and intractable material. And so emotion-centred visions of the world are the apogee of psychology's authority: in just over a century, the discipline has come to represent ideals of governance from the most intimate to the international level.

In this paper, I want to examine the forms the emotional, 'psychological' turn takes in public life, before going on to consider responses to that turn that range from approval to fury. At the same time, I shall look at this move's implications for psychology, in particular for a critical psychology defined broadly as concerned with subjectivity in its historical and social context, and as methodologically and theoretically reflexive (*International Journal of Critical Psychology*, 2000).

Perhaps the most obvious aspect of the emotional 'turn' is the increasing personalisation of fields such as politics that seem far from emotions. This starts at the top. President Clinton – Bill – feels your pain, whether you have suffered family loss, economic downturn or racist violence. British Prime Minister Tony Blair cries for the People's Princess, touches voters with Oprah-like

commitment and casts his government's neoconservative policies on welfare, education and crime as a matter of 'hard choices' made by individual politicians and constituents. The politics themselves resemble personal growth programmes. They frame education as a matter of lifelong self-development, health as a balance between expectations, risk calculations and lifestyle decisions and international relations as negotiations of needs and conflicts that mirror the processes advocated in relationship counselling. Counselling itself has become a first-choice solution in areas ranging from hostage crises and disaster aftermaths to child welfare, marriage breakdown and neighbour disputes. Popular media too seem saturated with affect; television schedules are filled not just with soap operas' traditional melodrama but with the more varied sentimentalities offered by talk shows, with docu-soaps staking claims on the documentary field and with reality programming colonising the territory of the news. Increasingly, too, public figures are the individualised characters through which substantive issues are represented. In late-1990s Britain the Spice-geist, an everyday epic with six characters – Scary, Posh, Baby, Ginger, Sporty and the Manager – gave voice to many contemporary concerns around femininity, childhood, popular culture and gender relations. That narrative has ceded to a simpler, more classic romance, the Posh and Becks story, in the course of which an even wider range of issues - eating disorders, class mobility, relationship intimacy, parenting and consumerism - get played out.

In all these cases, moral, political and social argument is replaced by what Alasdair MacIntyre (1984: 12) calls emotivism, the reduction of judgements of right and wrong to preferences of attitude or feeling. Such judgements, though they seem authentic, are inevitably somewhat conflicted and nonrational. They are subjective, 'psychological' guides to thought and conduct. It is not surprising, then, that psychology as a profession and as a body of knowledge has considerable power in emotivist societies. The discipline holds out the promise of promoting

healthy emotional judgements and emotional understanding between people. But psychology does not always deliver on that promise. (Perhaps for that reason, one of its most popular current incarnations is ‘evolutionary’ psychology, a field that speculates on the evolutionary origins and survival value of human emotions and that abdicates psychology for a much-reduced and simplified Darwinism; see Segal, 1999). Moreover, psychology is not coterminous with emotivism, though there are elements - like the character of the Therapist, MacIntyre (1984: 30) would argue – that they hold in common. For a critical psychologist, what is interesting about emotivism is not the nature of healthy emotional judgements, or the degree to which such judgements can be held in common between people, but the privileging of particular, taken-for-granted constructions of emotions, what drives these constructions and what they leave out (Malik, 2000).

It is not only that the public sphere seems increasingly emotionalised. Emotivism also means that emotions themselves ‘come out’ as topics of general discussion, gaining a more public life. Again, representations of public figures demonstrate this newly intense concern. We cannot understand such representations merely as devices for the enactment of social debates, for their ‘superficial’ emotional content is highly meaningful in itself. Strong public interest attended the cross-media coverage of Bill Clinton’s one-day-at-a-time progress towards emotional probity, for instance, or, more recently, popular press reports on the feelings of Cherie Blair, the Prime Minister’s wife, about pregnancy in her mid-forties. Such interest expands to take in the almost infinite series of emotions on baroque, repeating display in television talk shows and, more generally, the nature and function of all the emotions that now characterise the civic sphere. What is at stake in the emotionalisation of public life¹, then, is not just a restructuring of popular and political argument around specific categories of affect, but also a reconfiguration of affect itself as a phenomenon with fascinating public as well as private faces, none of which are

necessarily more authentic than the others. This area is one where critical psychologists can offer a helpfully dynamic perspective on affect as a category: on where it is located in the political hierarchy and on the sociocultural map.

Is the emotionalisation sketched out here a good or a bad thing; is it even as new a phenomenon as it appears? MacIntyre dates emotivism to the Enlightenment transition from theism to a rational self whose morality has always been problematic since it cannot be derived from its nature. In these circumstances, only individualised 'emotivist culture' can guide morality (1984: 61). Many cultural critics, however, attribute the emotionalisation of public life to the post-World War II hegemony of popular media in the West (Postman, 1985); or to the postmodernism that followed – bizarrely, given postmodernism's distancing from all form of authenticity, including emotional authenticity; or to crises of moral confidence arising from the erosion of old certainties of religion, nation, generation, employment and family (Bauman, 1993; Giddens, 1991, 1992; Himmelfarb, 1994); or to new forms of technology and globalised markets (Bauman, 1998); or link it to the rise of psychology itself (Rose, 1996; Richards, 1999); or to the dominance of an identity politics that turns all political thinking into a matter of what it 'feels like' to be a woman or a black person or someone with a disability. Perhaps the most appropriate description is a qualified one that acknowledges a long history of contest over what I shall call simply *emotionalism* in western public life. But this description must also recognise significant recent discontinuities in emotionalism, resulting from postwar changes in work, family, sexual and gender relations; the loss since the 1980s even of the certainties of identity politics; the explosion of popular media that purvey predominantly emotional currencies and the increasing transnational exchanges of economic, population and cultural resources that diffuse and reshape emotionalism (Friedman and Squire, 1998).

Even if we adopt this weak theory of a modest shift in the public place of emotions, such a shift requires evaluation. Psychologists have contributed to such evaluations, but they can learn from the enormous cross-disciplinary span of opinions on offer. The most exorbitant and enticing are probably those extremely negative evaluations that construe contemporary emotionalism in the public sphere as an all-round debasement of the human condition. MacIntyre argues that what he calls 'emotivism' removes politics and history as well as rationality from moral argument. It becomes impossible to discern the moral traditions within which you are acting, let alone to negotiate between them and other traditions or to decide which is the more persuasive moral voice on any specific issue.ⁱⁱ More specifically, in *BAD* (1996), the literary critic Paul Fussell relates emotionalism to US popular culture, which he argues is capital-letter Bad, rather than simply trashily bad (a condition that can be entertaining). By this, Fussell means that pop culture reduces complex, difficult aspects of aesthetics, knowledge and ethics to a misleading common sense and accessibility, premised on shared and easily comprehensible structures of feeling. On television news shows, for instance, 'events are either sentimentalised or melodramatised,' while current affairs discussion show rest on 'an inflexible set of personality cliches and *ad hominem* ideological conventions' (1991: 186). Mirroring such condemnations, Ian Craib (2000), a sociologist and group psychotherapist, suggests that the public playing out of emotions, specifically those around death, which presents fear and grief as part of psychological growth, prevents engagement with the difficulty, complexity and horror without which genuine psychic development is impossible (see also Craib, 1994). Still more drastically, societies that depends on such superficial, rootless emotionality may, in Zygmunt Bauman's (1998) account, leave us emotionally wracked, anxious, ambivalent and estranged from real community, real affect.

From a political-economic perspective, the sociologist Arlie Hochschild (2000) has recently argued that feelings are a new market commodity, increasingly globalised. The more that

developed economies privilege emotionality, the more these economies must be supported by the emotional work of developing countries. The maids, nannies, gardeners and other domestic workers who globally sustain affluent families' emotional wellbeing – and allow the women in those families, especially, to profit from their emotional as well as their intellectual and physical labour in the waged economy - are increasingly 'imported' from less-developed countries of Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean. These second-tier emotion-workers may themselves be paying women to support their families, while the families of those women, the last link in the chain, are left to bear an enormous, underrewarded burden of care. In these circumstances, Hochschild suggests, global divisions are replicated at the level of emotions: only the first world can afford emotional self-realisation. The other possible conclusion, that the first-world emotional economy is essentially ersatz, built on the grief and loss of economic exiles and divided families, is no more hopeful.

A criticism of emotionalism that is subtler and more concise than many written versions is the film *Safe* (Haynes, 1996), in which a white middle class Los Angeles housewife becomes allergic to her suburban environment, fainting and vomiting in reaction to cars, new furniture, dry cleaning fluid and her husband. The most helpful, empathetic responses come from the Latino gardeners, maids and other workers who surround her. Eventually, a cult-like organisation takes her away from the chemical artificiality of modern life into the natural wilderness, a space of genuine emotional connection with herself and others. However, this space is also one of absolute technological regulation, rigorously protected from pollutants, and of complete emotional control: If you love yourself enough, you will heal. In the last scene, the woman looks at herself in the mirror and says, 'I love you,' with perfect conviction, for the first time. But she achieves this self-love only when she has entered the final, contamination-proof isolation zone, from which occupants never get out alive. ⁱⁱⁱ

There is a degree of elitism in some criticisms of emotionalism, for example in Fussell's irascible dismissal of the popular culture of self-improvement, as if the great unwashed should be content to consume entertaining, 'bad' culture and to provide it glatorially for the rest of 'us' through television game shows and talk shows, rather than aspiring to the more complex understandings that support the middle-brow abominations of Bad. More generally, though, critics of emotionalism tend to underestimate all the participants in emotional economies except themselves. They take simplified and globalised representations of emotions in the media and in everyday speech as *prima facie* evidence of undeveloped emotions and impoverished understandings in producers and audiences, speakers and listeners. A dramatic example was some British cultural critics' dismissal of public reaction to the death of Princess Diana as hysterical, phoney and quasi-fascist sentimentality. Critics also tend to assume they know what 'good' emotions and emotional 'development' mean. MacIntyre, Fussell and Craib confidently diagnose emotional phoniness in cultural formations where others might see meaningfulness. Hochschild ends up treating emotional relations between biologically related individuals as the truest kind, despite questioning that assumption. As Hochschild herself recognises, moreover, a concept like her 'emotional exploitation' presupposes that emotions are a zero-sum commodity: the love given by a maid to her employer's children is subtracted from that woman's children, to be only partly compensated for by, say, her sister's treating them as her own. A critical psychologist might suggest, however, that emotions cannot be calculated using such simple formulae, or even the more complicated equations, with many free parameters, invoked by Craib (1994, 2000). A more provisional, limited theory may be required.

Does such a theory emerge from positive evaluations of the contemporary public life of emotions? In general, these evaluations, like the negative evaluations considered above, tend to

reproduce existing conceptions of emotions, simply viewing them more optimistically. The British sociologist Anthony Giddens, for instance, describes the contemporary West as characterised by newly fluid emotional relations, relatively independent of context. Such relations, despite their unfamiliarity and difficulty, offer, Giddens says, exciting possibilities of personal development and social change (1992, 1991). While the analysis invokes feminism as the precursor to this broader emotional paradigm shift, it skates over the differential power that people have to transform their emotions and identities. Moreover, in Giddens's account, the essential nature of emotional health, and its characteristics – lack of conflict, stability, integration - are givens. As a consequence, the analysis reads at times like an academic version of growth psychology, centred on the transformative potential of self-development. Barry Richards's (1999) account of twentieth century therapeutic culture also describes an increasing emphasis on emotional expression and analysis. Richards recognises the attendant problems of depoliticisation and emotional trivialisation, but assesses emotionalisation, overall, as a psychologically and sociologically progressive move. Here a specific theory of primal conflicting emotions of love and hate, and the problematic individual and cultural task of their containment, informs the positive appraisal of emotionalisation: again, emotions are pretheorised, and emotionalisation judged according to established criteria. Another account, less tied to the contemporary public state of emotions though made possible by it, is that of Axel Honneth (1995), who argues that recognition is a fundamental principle of human sociality, grounded first in infantile love, trust and self-confidence, proceeding through self-respect, and a sense of agency and dignity, ending, ideally, in a particularised self-esteem built within community solidarities^{iv} This socioemotional progression must, Honneth argues, be acknowledged and planned for if societies are to be balanced and satisfying. Again, specific emotional characteristics are unproblematically viewed here as of private and public value: recognition, not its twin misrecognition; trust, not mistrust; certainty and continuity, not

uncertainty and fragmentation. Again, the question of whether and to what extent this normative theory of emotions holds good, and what it leaves out, is one that is important for critical psychologists to address.

I want to suggest that more cautious but not pessimistic forms of evaluation are helpful for psychologists looking at emotions in the public domain. Such evaluations would base themselves in pragmatism but would allow occasional more hopeful moments (West, 1989). I am taking as a model for such evaluations the writing of feminists of colour about the political importance of autobiography, about the voice of emotional experience speaking against theory. Such work, it is argued, often disrupts established academic discourses and creates a new kind of theory in itself (hooks and West, 1991; Williams, 1991). bell hooks discusses the way in which Black intellectuals' and specifically Black women intellectuals' work is viewed as not 'academic' because of its preoccupations with style, audience and cultures of knowledge that are not those of the academy. Such writing claims intellectuality for 'nonacademic' lives; it draws into the academic sphere fields of knowledge such as the African American religious tradition, 'folk life', and play (hooks and West, 1991: 79) and its emotionality in a traditionally non-emotional arena has sufficient force to compel acknowledgement of those lives, those fields. hooks herself for instance frequently writes autobiographically, but that writing is not a simple or univocal emotional expression, but a complex and change-directed intervention, as when, at the end of *Yearning* (1990), she interviews herself. White feminists have also become increasingly aware of how apparently nontheoretical, emotion-suffused realms, not just that of autobiography but also that of popular culture, break up existing theoretical structures (Brunsdon et al., 1997; Haraway, 1991)^v As Gayatri Spivak (1996) has argued, such initiatives should indeed be

understood as theory, since they implicitly theorise what has been omitted or rejected, though often not in recognised ‘theoretical’ language^{vi}

In part, then, the public life of emotions can operate as a pragmatic strategy to achieve otherwise unlikely effects. Of course these strategies do not always work, as hooks and others acknowledge; often autobiographical ‘theory’, for instance, is read as purely personal writing that has nothing theoretical about it. Media participation, too, is not equivalent to political power, and may even perpetuate marginalisation. At such times, public emotionality acts only as a gesture towards existing theory’s inadequacy in the face of difference – but this is, as Unger (1999) points out, an inadequacy that we must be continuously aware of when trying to formulate theory.^{vii}

Television talk shows provide some popular examples of both the limitations and the possibilities of performing emotions in public. The public emotionality of the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, for instance, has inserted ‘race,’ violence against women, child abuse and, through the recent Book of the Month selections, literacy and literature, into the televisual culture of citizenship. We do not need to decide if this emotionality is genuine. The emotions are presented and read in the specific context of television, and this televisual affect acts, pragmatically and effectively, to change understandings and practices around citizenship (Livingstone and Lunt, 1993; Squire, 1994). Women’s sorrow, guilt and rage at domestic violence, for instance has become on *Oprah* and similar shows a kind of theory, a shared emotional currency, not an individualised one as it often was before, which can achieve definite personal and political outcomes: self-acceptance, higher prosecution rates, education. This emotional currency functions despite the different investments in it of women and men, and of different women. For what is at stake in it is a pragmatic emotionalism concerned with what is

possible rather than what is best.^{viii} A critical psychology might therefore be interested in the televisual emotions on display in these shows, not as inferior copies of derivatives of the real thing, but in their particularity: the contexts that support them, the constituents they command and the changes they effect.

Of course such effects are limited. At times the emotions exchanged on talk shows have at best a disruptive effect, pointing us towards what cannot be understood and what seems impossible to change (Masciarotte, 1991). The extreme melodramas acted out on the shows tend to provoke such disruption, even – perhaps especially - when they may be faked, as does the emotional repetitiveness of much of the content, the endlessly reiterated progresses from confrontation to reconciliation, self-blame to self-love. But to recognise this limitation is not the same as to dismiss talk shows' emotionality as superficial, pathological or deliberately self-deceiving. Critical psychologists might indeed be interested in this emotional excess, even though it is not amenable to the theoretical models of conventional psychology and may require us to use concepts derived, instead, from psychoanalysis.

Another example of the reformulation of emotions in the public sphere is the self-help group. These groups have become exemplars of emotionalism, endorsed by those to whom it seems a template for overcoming personal and social pathologies (Schaefer, 1988) and even by government leaders who publically follow their prescriptions, adopting the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, travelling along *The Road Less Travelled* - but derided energetically by those who view them as dumbing down, depoliticising and dehumanising (Craib, 1994; Fussell, 1991; Kaminer, 1993; Peele, 1991). As more detailed studies of self-help groups suggest, though (Denzin, 1987), such groups do not aim for the kind of emotivist final solutions they are accused of pursuing. Despite the deep emotional engagements they provoke, they are highly socially situated forms,

working within the fundamentally pragmatic US self-help tradition. They are eminently practical; with their lists of objectives, they aim at achievable change for all. People use the emotional education they offer to negotiate ways to live with specific dilemmas, such as problematic drug use or difficulties in relationships, not to resolve them entirely. People are sensitive to the possibility of becoming defined by self-help groups rather than helped by them, and they are aware of the emotional issues beyond the group programme that the group's emotional failures may point towards. They resist replacing substance with group 'addiction' or 'dependency,' for instance, and they often articulate more idiosyncratic emotional problems that the pragmatic strategies of the group have revealed, but that lie beyond them. People also treat the programmes selectively, leaving out what they do not need, and translating terms into their own emotional vocabularies. The deployment of elements of self-esteem programmes in African American projects of empowerment is a good example, for while such projects use the same words and call for the same self-affirmations as the mainstream self-esteem discourse, they resituate this discourse in the context of Black historical consciousness, community development and the cultural and political importance of the autobiographical voice. hooks, for example, in *Sisters of the Yam* (1993), emphasises the value of work that addresses emotional hurt and desire at the same time as political struggle. This book takes the notion of 'self-recovery' away from the addiction movement and applies it to emotional decolonisation.

A world in which emotions have an increasingly public life, is not, then, something to dismiss, as if public feelings are culturally negligible, intellectually disreputable and politically meaningless, or are merely the feelings the dominant culture 'tells' us to have. Nor is the public life of emotions a guarantee of psychological health, social progress or democratisation. At times, though, this newly prevalent emotionalism can act as a kind of pragmatic theorisation of phenomena left out of conventional theory; or, less concretely, it can act as a sign of the limits of

theory. Critical psychologists, who are themselves engaged in remaking theory, are perhaps uniquely placed to see the value as well as the difficulty of these emotional reconfigurations and insurgencies in the public realm.

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ⁱ I am indebted to Susannah Radstone, Barry Richards and Amal Treacher, co-organisers with me of the 1999-2000 series of seminars on 'Affect, Ethics and Citizenship: The Emotionalisation of Public Life' for help in understanding this process.

ⁱⁱ MacIntyre discusses emotivism initially as a philosophical position; it is a theory rather than a form of moral judgement. We also live in an emotivist culture, and our thoughts and actions presuppose that emotivism is true. Emotivism is thus the theory validating what I am calling emotionalisation, rather than emotionalisation itself.

ⁱⁱⁱ The film understates its critique, with the sole exception of a shot of the mansion that is said to be the cult leader's home (Vachon)

^{iv} Chodorow (1999) has recently made a similar argument.

^v I am grateful to Flis Henwood for pointing out the autobiographical disruptions induced by the cyborg.

^{vi} Spivak includes not just affect-laden forms such as autobiography but also some ‘nontheoretical’ but eminently rational empirical work in this category.

^{vii} MacIntyre (1984) presages this analysis when he lists the Manager and the Aesthete as the other characters through which emotivism is enacted.

^{viii} West (1989) though argues that utopian moments are written into the history and structure of pragmatist thought.