Linking Emotions: Emotions as the Invisible Threads That Bind People Together

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1.1 Emotions have always been central to sociological analyses. They were already present and even central in the works of the classics of sociology (Flam 2002). And yet, their centrality was only seldom made explicit until the 1970s, when the sociology of emotions became a legitimised field of study within sociology. This was a late acknowledgement and statement of the obvious: an account of social life without emotions is not possible. How could we speak of our interactions, our interrelations, or even about social structure and major institutions without taking into account those emotions that make us orient our actions towards each other, remember each other while being apart, take care of each other, run away from each other; those emotions that let us feel as one in certain special moments or which may blind us with hatred for or fear of others?

1.2 This special section focuses on emotions, understood both as feelings that we individually experience and sometimes share and as invisible threads that bind us together in endless webs of interrelations. Emotions, despite taking place ‘within’ concrete individuals, and thus having roots within concrete psychical and organic systems, are also socially constructed through discourses as well as through repeated practices that cultivate certain emotions over others and certain ways of experiencing them over an array options.

1.3 The perspective on emotions taken by this introduction, and by the articles that will follow, does not deny the existence of individual, psychical and physical dimensions in the study of emotions. However, it seeks to shed light on them from a social-relational perspective. The first seeds of this relational approach to emotions (and to sociology in general) can be found in the works of Georg Simmel (1858-1918). He was the first author who questioned in his sociological works the very existence of society, wondering what makes society possible instead of taking it for granted (Pyyhtinen 2010; Rol and Papilloud 2009; GSG 11 1992; Simmel 1950). His answer to this Kantian-inspired question, ‘How is Society Possible?’, became a digression in his monograph Sociology (1908) (GSG 11 1992: 42-61). Therein he developed the three a priori conditions for social life; three conditions which covered, according to Simmel, at least most of that which had to happen on an individual level for society to become possible. In his third a priori condition, Simmel argued for each individual’s need to feel that she or he belongs to his or her society, that there is a place for him or her to fulfill. This need for belonging brings us straight to the emotional level – and all that which has to happen for a person to be able to feel that she or he belongs.

1.4 Simmel developed the concept of the forms of the second order in his essay Faithfulness and Gratitude (Simmel 1950: 379-395 – published as a digression within his monograph Sociology, GSG 11 1992). Simmel’s work on gratitude and faithfulness constitutes the first (and explicit) work on emotions from a relational perspective. In this essay, Simmel presented the forms of the second order as those overarching forms that gave continuity and durability to the feelings and bonds that would, otherwise, be momentary. Forms of the second order, like gratitude and faithfulness, give continuity to feelings like thankfulness, admiration, or love, and carry them towards the future, allowing us to reactivate them via remembrance, simultaneously bringing back to life the echo of the original feeling and the social tie that spans its invisible threads between us.
It is in this sense that Simmel referred to the emotion of gratitude as 'the moral memory of mankind' (Simmel 1950:388), as a strong binding thread that makes society possible over time. Gratitude is an emotion that we feel at one point in our lives when somebody, who did not have to, does something for us. This feeling of gratitude binds us to this person, and an invisible thread is spun between us. This thread may be dormant, but it can be reactivated, and it sometimes is. We can return the gift at some point (although nothing can be as precious as the first, spontaneous gesture). We can simply remember and feel a closeness that endures, even when the circumstances have changed and the gift has been reciprocated.

Of course, there have been key authors in the sociology of emotions, like Helena Flam or Thomas Scheff, who have focused on this dual character of emotions, namely on emotions as feelings and at the same time ties that help to weave strong social bonds (Flam 2002; Scheff 1994, 1997). However, there is still a long way to go in order to effectively research and explore (theoretically as well as empirically) the role that emotions play in our existence as at once individual and social beings.

There are emotions, such as in the paradigmatic case of shame (Elias 1978; Scheff 2000), that have been examined from this particular point of view. In this special issue, we seek to continue exploring this very special node of individuality and sociability, which we find crystallised and condensed in emotions. In order to do so, the different articles that have been compiled for this special section deal with different emotions from this double perspective: the individual feeling and the social bond (as well as the ways in which we learn to feel and perform our emotions as well as interpret those of others socially). Complex emotions like love, hope, shame, sympathy and rejection are examined in the different articles, creating an interesting dialogue and initiating a path which we will endeavour to traverse further in the years to come.

The first article in this special section, 'Is Romantic Love a Linking Emotion?', addresses precisely the dual nature of emotions: as individual experiences and as social bonds. We learn to identify, frame, express, and tame these emotions within a social context, but, even beyond this, these emotions are a fundamental fibre of the threads that bind us together in a durable manner. Memories, desires and projections are all emotionally shaped and coloured, just as our emotions are all socially moulded and learned. In their article, Seebach and Núñez have analysed over 100 interviews in which people seek to define love and describe their amorous relationships. Their narrations illustrate an attempt to bring together these two approaches to love, two approaches that do not simply coexist but in fact need each other in order to make sense, allowing us to love (as a something we do and direct towards a special other) and to feel love, deep inside.

The next article, 'Does Distance Make the "Heart Grow Fonder" or Am I "Following You to the Ends of the Earth"? Distance and Love in Mixed Transnational Couples', addresses love and hope as triggers for action. King-O'Riain argues along the lines of Eva Illouz's definition of emotions, which, among other dimensions, strongly emphasises this action-triggering aspect of emotions (Illouz 2009:382-383). Empirical evidence for her reflections comes from King-O'Riain's analysis of the narratives of transnational couples. In their narrations, couples reported about the role emotions played in the ways in which they made crucial life decisions and how they shaped their social bonds. In fact, the couples King-O'Riain interviewed positioned themselves in social life in relation to the emotion of love, and, closely linked to it, to the emotion of hope.

Contrasting with King-O'Riain's approach to love and hope, Sylvia Terpe, in her article 'Social Dynamics of Isolating and Disabling Forms of Hope', provocatively addresses the emotion of hope. In dialogue with the assumption that emotions are triggers for action, she argues that the emotion of hope might actually be a hindrance for action, a trigger… not for acting, but for waiting and hoping. The bravery of the hopeless, when there is nothing left to lose, does not appear as long as people can hold to the slightest hope of success, even when (or especially if) success only means survival. Thus, in a way, as Terpe argues, hope may, instead of strengthening the bond with those who are with us, isolate us from each other, and link us to a(n individualistic or collective) projection of the future rather than to our immediate surroundings and circumstances.

Flam and Kleres also focus on the way in which emotions trigger certain relations that crystallize in certain ways of being together. However, they place emphasis on the way in which emotions become an invisible subtext relating us with and contributing to produce supposedly 'others'. In their selected case involving German academic literature on Neo-Fascist groups and school results for children of immigrants, they find evidence for this emotional structuring of academic writing, which raises general questions regarding the emotional colouring of scientific production. It also makes the reader aware of academics' emotional bias as writers. Despite the explicitness of Weber's claims for a value-free sociology, in which one should become conscious of one's own positioning regarding one's research object in order to counteract it, some of the papers...
Flam and Kleres have analysed simply take the value neutrality of their perspective for granted, and analyse their results without reflecting on the emotional implications they bring into their work. They thereby produce unwanted effects on their objects of inquiry: rejection, even rejection through indifference, on the one hand, and sympathy, on the other. Furthermore, the findings they make affirm those emotions that had influenced their perspective in the first place. The implied emotions are a condition for and results of not fully conscious actions (thus the causal line of Illouz’s definition is interestingly turned around), and thus the presence and genealogy of what moulds the glasses with which the objects of study are viewed becomes invisibilized.

Notwithstanding, as we have known since Simmel (and as has been stated at the beginning of this introduction), those invisible threads that bind us together and mould our social ways are certainly powerful despite their not being visible. In this particular case, after reading Flam and Kleres’ contribution, the need to make them visible, conscious, and graspable becomes strikingly clear.

The last contribution to this special section, ‘Performativity and the power of shame’, highlights the regulating role that shame has in the context of our professional performance when being observed (and evaluated) by others. Shame is a highly complex emotion, and, just as hope, may trigger actions that link us together, or actions that isolate us from each other. In Ursula Edgington’s case study, teachers and staff involved in observations have been interviewed in relation to their personal experiences of being observed while teaching and/or conducting observations in somebody else’s class. Edgington as well as Flam and Kleres in their case study (despite all the differences) all emphasise the strong need for reflexivity in order to understand and, to a certain extent, guide the ways in which emotions are awakened and reinforced in social relationships and interactions. Furthermore, they also highlight the ways in which certain forms of linking to each other are born from these particular emotions and emotional contexts and thus contribute to creating dynamics that do not always meet the purposes of those involved in them.

It is the purpose of this special section to emphasise the need to view emotions as crucial nodes that unite the most individual and social parts of ourselves, not as the two sides of a coin, but interpenetrating each other, moulding and forming each other.

References


