

Emotions and Social Relations

Ian Burkitt



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Ian Burkitt is Professor of Social Identity at the University of Bradford where he teaches sociology and social psychology. His research interests are in the areas of social theory, theories of identity and embodiment, and the social and psychological understanding of feelings and emotions. In his work he has pioneered a relational understanding of the self and of emotions, and future projects include the application of this approach to the understanding of agency. He is the author of *Social Selves: Theories of Self and Society* (2nd Edition, Sage 2008) and *Bodies of Thought: Embodiment, Identity and Modernity* (Sage, 1999).

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1

Introduction: Feeling and Emotion as Patterns of Relationship

... the relationship between the self and others, and the relationship between self and environment, are, in fact, the subject matter of what are called 'feelings' – love, hate, fear, confidence, anxiety, hostility, etc. It is unfortunate that these abstractions referring to *patterns* of relationship have received names, which are usually handled in ways that assume that the 'feelings' are mainly characterised by quantity rather than by precise pattern. This is one of the nonsensical contributions of psychology to a distorted epistemology. (Bateson, 1973: 113)

What Bateson says above is something we still need to ponder 40 years after his words were first published, because the nonsensical contribution not only of psychology but also of our commonsense language to the misapprehension of what feelings and emotions are really about still persists to this day. Because feelings and emotions have received names like love, hate, fear and anxiety, we tend to think about them as though they are 'things' in themselves, entities that exist and can be known if only we can accurately trace their roots back to a causal origin. In commonsense terms, because feelings and emotions are registered first of all by our bodies, we think and speak as if the source of emotion was our own individual bodies and minds. As Bateson says above, it is as if feelings were quantities that existed inside us, ones that we struggle to express and quantify in words. A mother may say to her child, 'I love you more than I can say', telling the child both what her feelings about it are and also measuring that love as a quantity, in this case one that is off the scale of verbal measure. Or we may say to a loved one, 'I love you more than anyone else in the whole

world', showing that our love for that particular person is greater than for anyone else.

Where our commonsense language misleads us by naming specific feelings and emotions is by encouraging us to feel and think about them as if they were private entities that originate in our bodies or minds. But if we think more about the brief examples given above in Bateson's terms, we can see that what we refer to when we express feelings and emotions is our *relationship* to other people. When we say to a child or a lover that we love them more than words can say or more than anyone else, we are saying something about not only the bodily feelings they evoke in us but also the special nature of our relationship to them and how this is different from our relations to others. What our feelings and emotions are the subject matter of, then, are *patterns of relationship* between self and others, and between self and world. It is not only other people we can fall in love with; we can love a landscape, our homes, a treasured personal possession, a piece of music – the list could go on. Our love expresses our relationship to our world and specific people or things within it. It is not wrong, then, to identify feelings and emotions as occurring in the body, because in part they do so: we could not feel without a body and mind which register our feelings and are conscious of having them. The problem comes when the explanation of emotion stops there, with the feeling itself as a thing that is not connected to the wider world of relations and the pattern of relationships.

This problem also exists in psychology, as Bateson said above, for the discipline has tended to fall into commonsensical assumptions about emotions, contributing to our distorted understanding of them. In general terms, most psychologists assume that the words we have for emotions refer to entities that can be described in neuropsychological terms, as to do with underlying neuro-circuitry or cognitive predispositions to certain emotional responses. It is these underlying body-brain systems and networks that produce the emotion, or more to the point, they *are* the emotion. This explanation misses the patterns of relationships in which those emotions emerge in the first place and in which they make sense. Because psychology is a subject that focuses on the individual, the emotion is seen as something to do with what is happening in the individual's body-brain, rather than understanding the embodied person – and their emotional experiences – within patterns of relationship.

Let me give an example to illustrate this. In the 1990s a BBC television science programme called *Wot You Looking At* focused on aggression and violent acts committed by young men. Like in so many similar programmes concerning human behaviour, the central issue was framed

as whether aggression is something learned or innate. The programme quickly dismissed the idea that aggression in men has genetic causes, an explanation that would attempt to show how, for example, some men are more aggressive than others because of genes inherited from their parents that influence the level of chemical neurotransmitters in the brain like dopamine or serotonin, leading to aggressive responses to situations. This was dismissed because twin studies do not provide the evidence to show that twin brothers are both equally or similarly predisposed to aggressive or violent behaviour. Instead of this the programme alighted on the explanation that aggressive responses to situations had to do with learning from 'the environment', in particular the learning of a cognitive style of thinking we call 'paranoia'. That is to say, aggression was seen as the result of a style of thinking in which other people's behaviour is seen as having a negative intent towards the person concerned, and to that person only. In a revealing interview, one young man, in prison for a series of violent offences, was questioned about his behaviour and recounted an incident on a train with a stranger. The man had got on a train with his pregnant wife to find a woman sitting in one of the seats they thought they had booked. An argument developed with the woman, who was said to have got really upset, and although there were other empty seats in the carriage, the man dragged the woman out of the seat and onto the floor and spat on her. The interviewer asked why he'd acted in this way and the man replied it was because of, 'The way she was talking to me, the way she looked down on me'. When asked how he knew the woman looked down on him, he replied, 'The way she was talking to me like a stuck-up snob. She might come from a posh house and a posh area but she got up my nose and I let her fucking know about it 'n' all. ... I thought I'm not having you telling me where my wife's sitting. My wife'll sit there if she fucking wants.'

Psychologists involved in the programme explained this in terms of paranoia because, without any objective justification, this man had interpreted the woman's actions as specifically directed against him, as belittling him. Someone else could have shrugged this off as a simple misunderstanding or confusion and found another empty seat. But this man saw himself as being belittled and had to take a stand, one that restored his status through an aggressive act. Indeed, talking about his string of violent offences and his childhood, the man recalled a formative incident when he was 11 years old. At primary school another child had punched him on the nose and he went home crying to his father, who told him, 'Don't you come crying to my door'. Instead the father – who was described as a 'very violent man' – instructed his son to pick up a milk bottle from the doorstep, go back to the school and smash the

bottle over the head of the child who had punched him. If he didn't do this his father told him, 'Don't come back to my door again'. Although as a child he felt frightened doing this, he did as his father told him and 'it solved the problem'. This then set up a pattern that lasted throughout his life to that point, which he summarised as, 'you've got a problem, you get into a fight, you go out of your way to hurt 'em'. The psychological explanation here is that a paranoid cognitive style of thinking was developed in this man's life which regularly resulted in aggression in order to right the wrongs he felt that others, and the world, were doing to him.

Although I will argue here that such explanations are not entirely wrong, I do believe they are limited, for a number of reasons. First, this is because to look for the cause of aggression will be always a futile search because we are assuming aggression is a thing which has a cause. Many years ago the social psychologists Sabini and Silver (1982) argued there is no such thing as aggression that can be isolated and studied, because aggression is not a thing but a moral evaluation we make of people's actions. Aggression is the name we give to a certain act where, for a variety of reasons, someone or something is attacked, physically or verbally, in a way that a moral community finds unjustifiable. If you are walking home at night and you are attacked and robbed in a subway, this would be seen as an act of aggression. However, if you fight back, provided that the force you use is seen as proportionate, you will not be labelled as aggressive: like the old lady fighting off her attackers with a walking stick or shopping bag, you might even be seen as a hero. So it is not an act of violence or even the feeling or motive behind it that constitutes 'aggression': rather, it is the context in which the act occurs and how this is evaluated in moral terms. A headline in a newspaper which read 'Aggressive victim fights off attacker' would not make sense, not because it is ungrammatical in linguistic terms, but because it is ungrammatical in moral terms. This also means, though, that not everyone will agree on what is an act of aggression. Was the invasion of Iraq in 2003 an attack and occupation, or the liberation of the country from dictatorship? What your answer to this question is will depend on your own moral and political views. If, though, there is no objective standpoint on what constitutes an act of aggression, how can it be studied objectively by a science like psychology and a cause for it found which then might be treated?

The second problem I have with psychological explanations of feelings and emotions is that they ignore patterns of relationship. To consider this let's go back to the example above of the young man on the train and the reaction to the woman sitting in his seat. His explanation of his behaviour, that it was provoked by the fact she was looking down on him and being snobbish, reflects a wider pattern of social class

relations in society in which this young man was brought up. In fact, the TV programme in which he featured noted that aggressive acts like his are often committed by men from a lower socioeconomic background. He perceived the woman he attacked as being of a higher social class, as being snobbish and looking down on him, meaning that he felt she considered him of lesser worth. Moreover, she was telling him what to do, or at least that's what he thought, maybe like so many middle-class people he'd encountered in the past, and now he was having none of it. His act of retaliation was certainly aggressive, in that it was morally unjustifiable, and other things he said in the interview showed he realised that himself after the fact. But to say that the act resulted from a cognitive style that can be classified as paranoid is limited, as it looks only at the *psychological* context of the act. After all, everyone checks the looks, gestures and words of those around them and interprets what they might possibly mean, what those people might be thinking or feeling about us. And our interpretations of those looks and gestures can be wrong. What made this particular young man feel he was being looked down on was his perception of his own social class and that of the woman in his seat. Indeed, what is often thought of as paranoid forms of thinking can make more sense when they are put back into the wider context of class relations in society and the social background and relationships of those labelled as paranoid (Cromby and Harper, 2009). In the situation above, patterns of class relations formed a backdrop against which this particular drama played itself out in the immediate relations between three people in a particular situation on a train. Overlapping this was also the biography of each person concerned and the way that orientated them in this situation, in terms of how they related to each other; the patterns of relationships from their past, embodied in their habits of orientation to others, particularly situations of conflict and how they dealt with them, and their bodily dispositions and forms of perception of others and the world, fed into the creation of the drama.

In the case of the young man on the train, his biography is partly composed of the pattern of relationships in which he had lived, in particular his relationship to a violent father. The lesson his father taught him, that a man can restore his pride and dignity through an act of violence, was just one small recounted incident from an entire childhood. To see the learning of such lessons in terms of a cognitive-behavioural style of conditioning ignores the wider social context and the patterns of relationship in which they are set. Given that these kinds of 'random' acts of aggression and violence are mainly committed by *some* men – but still only a minority – from the lower socioeconomic orders, could it be that violence is an easily accessible way of restoring pride and controlling your

world – especially the people around you – in a society that denies this group other resources for power and advancement, such as economic, educational, or other cultural resources? Furthermore, the perpetrators of such acts are mainly men, and thus they cannot be divorced from the more hegemonic forms of masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) – portrayed in innumerable cowboy and war movies – in which it is seen as part of the nature of masculinity to be able to protect oneself (including one's honour as a man), one's home and family, and the nation-state, by the use of violence. In certain localities and subcultures, a man's use of violence may not only restore his status but win a higher status within that community, although it may get him into trouble with mainstream morality and the law (Marsh et al., 1978).

Overall, though, the argument I am running here is one that I will build throughout this book. That feelings and emotions cannot be understood as things in themselves which, as such, can be isolated and studied. Feelings and emotions only arise in patterns of relationship, which include the way we look at and perceive the world, and these also result in patterns of activity that can become dispositions – ways of acting in particular situations that are not wholly within our conscious control and are, thus, partly involuntary. I say here they are not 'wholly' within our conscious control and are 'partly' involuntary because I think that the study of feelings and emotions calls into question any rigid distinction between consciousness and unconsciousness, and between voluntary and involuntary control. In that sense the idea I will develop here of emotional dispositions is set within this framework, in that by dispositions I do not mean a determination to act in certain ways, or of acts oriented to a given outcome, but a *tendency* to act in particular ways that is highly sensitive and oriented to certain situations as they develop. In this I will follow the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey (1922/1983), who thought that habits of action were flexible responses adaptable to unique situations, rather than mechanical responses with a given outcome. Thus as Dewey said, a person disposed to anger may commit murder only once. That is to say, someone disposed to anger *may* commit an act of violence, but they are not *bound* to: indeed, they may never do so. Yet dispositions such as this are part of what characterise us as individuals, in that our emotional dispositions form part of what others recognise as our personality: Paul is a laid-back kind of guy, while Joe is uptight and anxious.

But in my desire to give you a flavour of the book and the line of thinking I will build, I am getting ahead of myself. In talking about feelings and emotions I need to say something about what they mean and how I will use these terms throughout the book, along with other terms that will be important.

Feeling, Emotion and Affect

In ordinary, everyday language we regularly run the words 'feeling' and 'emotion' together, as in statements such as 'I feel love' or 'I feel angry'. Indeed, emotion is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed.) (or OED) as a 'strong feeling deriving from one's circumstances, mood, or relationships with others' and I want to stick to something like this definition in this book, as it emphasises my view of emotions as relational, although I do not think that emotions necessarily have to be strong feelings. It is not the strength of a feeling that makes it into an emotion. All emotions, though, seem to be certain types of feeling, but not all feelings are emotions. Someone may feel caution about a business deal or nervous before a job interview, but we do not usually class caution or nerves as emotions: more often than not we would just refer to them as feelings. And there are other feelings that are not thought of as emotions at all, such as feeling hungry or feeling pain. In this vein, Cromby (2007) has claimed that there are three categories of feeling: first, feelings experientially constitute the somatic, embodied aspect of emotion, such as the lightheaded sensation in the first flush of love: second, there are extra-emotional feelings like hunger, thirst, or pain, and some feelings like being tickled that have an emotional dimension but are not themselves emotions: third, there are more subtle, fleeting feelings like William James described as the feeling of hesitancy when we say words like 'if' or 'but'. In this latter sense, feelings give us a 'sense of our embodied relation to the world, and their influence is continuous' (Cromby, 2007: 102). Because of this we cannot separate out feelings, or emotions for that matter, from our bodily ways of perceiving the world, as perception is the ability to see, hear, or become aware of something through senses such as vision, hearing and touch. But sense is more than the organs of sense perception, as the term 'sense' also means a feeling that something is the case. Thus, sense in all its meanings, including sense perception, is to do with the bodily relation we have to the world and to other people within it, and feeling and emotion is part of this too.

In fact, what distinguishes feeling and emotion is not just that feeling is the bodily sensation which is central to all experiences of emotion. It is also to do with the social meanings we give to perceptual experiences and the context in which they arise. This is why certain bodily feelings are felt as emotions while others are experienced as feelings. The queasy feeling we get before a job interview – the butterflies in the stomach – we experience as 'nerves', whereas the lightheaded feeling and sense of restlessness we get after meeting someone special we experience as an emotion called falling in love. What distinguishes feeling and emotion, then, is not the strength of feeling, because before a big occasion 'nerves' can

become overwhelming, even though we wouldn't normally class them as an emotion; nor is feeling a bodily sensation while emotion is not, for as Cromby showed feelings are central to emotions. Rather, it is social meaning and context that distinguish what we feel as an emotion or some other type of experience. If I'm walking down the street and feeling lightheaded and disoriented yet I haven't just met that special someone, I may start to think I'm coming down with the flu rather than falling in love. As John Dewey said, emotions do not get experienced initially as emotions, intrinsically defined as such; rather, 'some cases of awareness or perception are designated "emotions" in retrospect or from without' (Dewey, 1929/1958: 304). When Dewey says here that bodily awareness or perception is designated as emotion, or feeling, in retrospect or from without, what he means is that it is designated in terms of its contextual reference and its social meaning. I would also underline the *relational* quality of what we define as emotion or feeling. It is in relation to others or to certain situations that feelings are identified as specific emotions: that is the reference point by which we can say that I'm in love, am angry or nervous. What is interesting, then, about feeling and emotion is that they are prime examples of how the body and bodily sensations are always fused with social meanings in the patterned relational weavings of our immediate social encounters. Given this, what I will develop throughout this book is an *aesthetic understanding of emotion*, in the sense of aesthetics not as art theory but as the study of how humans make and experience meaning, and how the body is a fundamental element in this (Johnson, 2007).

Indeed, our feelings and emotions, along with other bodily perceptions, are the means by which we meaningfully orientate ourselves within a particular situation, as well as in relation to others who are part of that situation. Throughout our lives we may develop habitual ways of acting and responding emotionally in given situations, but these habits are themselves the sedimentation of past patterns of relationships and actions, and they must be open to change and adaptation to the situations we encounter. None of us are blank slates emotionally, for even in early infancy we have ways of responding to the world that characterise us as emotional beings. Yet as we enter new situations our emotional habits have to be fluid and open enough for us to be able to interpret our circumstances and to reorientate and adjust ourselves according to our changing feelings and thoughts about such circumstances. If we can't do this, we run into trouble. This is something that I hope to develop throughout this book.

There was, though, another term in the OED's definition of emotion above, which was that emotion is a feeling deriving not only from

circumstance and relationships, but also from *mood*. Here, I will follow Denzin's (1984) definition of mood, in that it refers to an emotion that lingers in our dispositions to action and habit, and in our outlook on the world, long after the situation that created it is over. Thus mood is an emotional disposition, both bodily and psychological, that people bring with them from past situations into new ones that may not have relevance to that emotion. We have all experienced this on occasions where a group of people is cheerful and happy and someone comes into the group bad tempered or grumpy. Normally we would say this person was in a bad mood and, not knowing what the reason for this is, we say things like 'what's got into them?' or 'what's eating them today?' A mood, then, is an emotional hangover from other situations that can be long lasting.

Another term that has become increasingly popular in social and psychological research on emotions in recent years is that of 'affect'. However, I do not want to substitute the term affect for emotion, as I have my own definition of emotion as discussed above. Instead, I will use the term affect with reference to the word's subtle shading of three meanings. First, according to the OED, 'affect' means 'to have an effect on' (and note the difference between the terms 'affect' and 'effect', the former meaning something that makes a difference to something else, while the latter means the result of an influence) or 'make a difference to'; this includes the meaning of to 'touch the feelings of' or 'move emotionally'. Here, affect means being changed by a feeling or emotion in relation to someone or something else, so that one is *moved*, quite literally as well as metaphorically, from one state to another. This accentuates the relational aspect of feeling and emotion because it underlines that it is other people and things that we are related to (other bodies and bodily selves) which can affect us, just as we can affect them. Indeed, the word 'emotion' derives from the French *émouvoir* (excite), which in turn is derived from the Latin *emovere*; *movere* meaning 'move'. Emotion, then, is a word derived from the sense of e-motion. My view of emotion is not of a static state or a thing in itself – such as a psychological phenomenon – which then moves us to act, but as movement itself within relations and interaction. In these interactions we are constantly being affected by others, being moved by them to other actions, in the process constantly feeling and thinking – being moved from one feeling or emotion to another.

The second meaning of 'affect' is that we can pretend or enact a particular emotion to have an effect on others, in the sense of *affectation*. The latter term is defined by the OED as 'behaviour, speech, or writing that is pretentious and designed to impress' and as 'a studied display of