

# Affect and Emotion, Anthropology of

Kathleen Stewart and Elizabeth Lewis, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA

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## Abstract

Attention to emotion and affect is a wide register running through the history of anthropology. Until recently, however, emotions and affect have not often been explicitly articulated as a force in themselves in theories of culture, history, and ways of life. This article traces the history of affect and emotion in anthropology and reveals emergent trajectories for future work. It situates affect and emotion historically and highlights key writings on these themes in cultural, physical, and linguistic anthropology, and in archaeology. Ultimately, it positions affect as a fruitful analytical tool for anthropology and as a generative source of cross-subfield dialogue.

## Emotion and Affect as an Analytical Object

In anthropology, attention to emotion and affect is a wide register running through the history of the field. But emotions and affect have not often been explicitly articulated as a force in themselves in theories of culture, history, and ways of life. They have, instead, been taken to be natural and universal states of being, atmospheric backgrounds to life, pervasive but subterranean and coded forces, or the secondary constructed effects of an order of representation or structures of power including class, race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and the state. Until the recent emergence of an anthropology of emotion and affect and the replacement of theories of cultural wholes with theories of assemblages, force fields, and micropolitics, emotion and affect were rarely recognized as anthropological objects, but were treated instead as idioms for the then more obviously significant phenomena of structures of power and sociality. Broad affective questions of force, impact, and intensity have long been alluded to in studies of known anthropological objects such as violence, attachment to place and identity, or resistance and revolution. The emotional or affective force of social-cultural orders has been approached through studies of kinship, ritual, hierarchy, exchange, honor, and shame systems, and specific traditions and institutions such as head-hunting and veiling.

These investigations have taken place, for the most part, within a dynamic that pits close contact against distant observation and personal feelings against public knowledge. The idea that perspective and theory are themselves essentially produced through an originary act of distancing has been haunted by affective and emotional marginalia. Raymond Williams's (2001) work on structures of feeling has been long accepted and used to specifically address the qualities of emergence and the residual surrounding reductive models of structure in itself. However, even the relatively recent ethnographic work of anthropologists such as Renato Rosaldo (1993), Michelle Rosaldo (1980, 1984), Jose Limon (1994), and Steven Feld (1982) operated as eruptions in the field that drew strong reactions when they made emotion and affect the explicit object of analysis. These and other scholarly works articulated with both the writing culture critique (Clifford and Marcus, 1986) and feminist interventions that also began to directly document the power of affect and emotions (see, for example, Lutz and Abu-Lughod, 1990).

The generative clash between structure and history, observation and participation, and expert knowledge and the felt impact of everyday life opened divergent trajectories for current anthropology. Anthropology is still driven by a dynamic between emergent phenomena, complex causality, and an attention to the felt presence of historical events and present moments, on the one hand, and an attunement to the clarity of structures, institutions, cultural categories, norms, and conventions on the other. Work on affect and emotions is both symptomatic of this dynamic and itself an emerging field of theory and ethnographic experiment. Most recently, the development of affect studies in cultural studies (Berlant, 2008, 2011; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010) has established a strong affect studies trajectory in anthropology (Mazzarella, 2009; Stewart, 2007, 2010, 2011).

## Emotion and Affect Studies in the Four Fields

In cultural anthropology, work on the emotions has long been grounded in cultural relativism, interpretive models, and social constructionism. Questions of emotion and attachment have been central to debates on the role of ethnography and the nature of the ethnographer–research subject relation. Fieldwork has been identified as itself an emotional experience that hinges on efforts to approach the experience of others and the variety of forces that shape the broad outlines of a way of life and remain resonant in daily life and conventions. Approaches to cultural expressivity and form have demonstrated the emotional-affective register of meaning emergent in music, sound, poetry, dance, storytelling, and the performativity of everyday life.

Within cultural anthropology, emotions are often described as either the pliant material upon which acculturative and cognitive forces operate, or the energy which animates otherwise lifeless cultural forms. The explicit attention to emotions as analytical objects began with a treatment of emotions as cultural categories, even a master western cultural category, in the effort to advance a cross-cultural understanding of emotion. Emotions have also often been described as an unconscious normative force. Michelle and Renato Rosaldo's work made emotions central to the theory of the situated subject and situated ethnography. This made way for the predominance not only of native ethnography, but also of new models of positioned epistemology, including emotional thinking, embodied

knowledge (Lutz and White, 1986), and a political imperative to draw on personal experiences, proximity, and intimacy in defining and exploring the subjects and objects of fieldwork. The work of documenting named or categorically represented emotions, such as grief, anger, hope, fear, loyalty, and love, expanded into analysis of structures of feeling and the phenomenology of lived states of being including work on nostalgia, utopianism, religious piety, structures of reciprocity, nationalism, belonging, and visceral attachments.

From an evolutionary perspective, physical anthropologists treat nonhuman emotions and affects as critical components of natural selection. Evolutionary theory, including Charles Darwin's *The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals*, argued that emotions are a critical component of natural selection as adaptive responses to social and environmental opportunity and threat. It is theorized that social emotions evolved to motivate adaptive social behaviors. Primate behaviorists have long noted a complex range of physical displays of emotion including fear, grief, happiness, anger, and disgust. Emotions and their expressive body language have been taken to be strong evidence of the lines of human–nonhuman primate evolution.

Physical anthropologists have become increasingly interested in the study of emotions in recent decades. New work in neuroscience, primatology, and cognitive psychology has generated approaches to emotional control, social bonding, romantic love, and empathy among primates. Neuroimaging is now used to investigate evolutionary ancient parts of the brain. Neurobiological theories focus on arousal patterns in which neurochemicals (such as dopamine, noradrenaline, and serotonin) step up or step down the brain's activity level, as visible in body movements, gestures, and postures. Such paleocircuits are neural platforms for bodily expression. It is thought that there are certain activities in brain areas related to attention and motivation, especially the limbic system, which includes the hypothalamus, cingulate cortex, hippocampi, and other structures. New theories of the science and biology of emotions have generated innovative understandings of the linkages between behavior and emotions. Some also suggest implications for the ethical underpinning of human life and morality as an essential part of primate nature (De Waal, 2003).

Linguistic anthropology addresses the force and effects of language dominance, loss, and revival, the affective ties that enable language socialization, and the emotional registers of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and other hierarchies and identity markers in language and its performance. The production and comprehension of feelings are basic for language acquisition. The role of emotion in language has been addressed as a communication code including phonological, syntactic, and pragmatic as well as semantic elements. Emotions, like language itself, can be seen as having a semiotic system. Somewhat outside the purview of semiotics, utterances can also be seen as having an affective component, or an impact that moves between and across subjects, expressive forms and situations, and language structures. Linguistic anthropologists have taken up questions of the circulation and the transformative qualities of language forms. James Wilce (2009) advanced an analytical attention to 'feelingful language' as an embodied practice that avoids reduction of feelings to the level of discourse.

Paul Kockelman (2011) takes a semiotic approach to theorizing the relationships between ontology, selfhood, and affect, arguing against an analytical separation of these three dimensions.

Archaeological theories of state formation rely on evidence of violence and conflict. They are also attuned to the levels of intensity of historical events and therefore to the study of affect as a register of historical force. With a strong base in the analysis of materials, archaeologists have also launched a powerful critique of radical constructionism; forms of agency and identity are not treated as ciphers through which other social and cultural forces are inscribed, but remain concretely embodied in practices, environments, and strategies of living. Recent theories of prehistorical affective structures and the production of emotions have critiqued naturalized frameworks for feelings and the theoretical shorthands that framework has enabled. One strand of this work calls for much more detailed and precise studies of individual and variable selves, questions of intentionality, and attention to embodied emotional experiences (Meskell, 1996; Tarlow, 2000). Another strand of contemporary archaeological theories of affect and emotion locates them in the material infrastructure of social spaces (e.g., architecture, lighting, and sensuous qualities) and movement (the corporeal staging of particular channels of experience). This work begins with the insight of new materialism that the sensuous quality of things and bodily presence are both, and coconstitutively, productive of perceptions, experiences, and atmospheres (Harris and Sørensen, 2010; Tilley, 1996).

### Affect Studies in Anthropology

Emotion studies in anthropology tended to be grounded in questions of culture and cognition and to refer to named states such as anger, grief, love, or shame, which were experienced by subjects and charged with the judgments and norms of a social-political-cultural-representational order. That is, in emotion studies feelings are part of a cultural-political apparatus. Affect studies suspends the assumption of a cultural whole, taking a step back to questions of the intensities and felt impacts of a broad assemblage of circulating forces, which remain disparate though, at times, articulated. Affect studies takes as its object these intensities and impacts and their circulations and articulations. Often strongly influenced by the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and a line of philosophical influence including the work of William James, Nietzsche, and Spinoza, affect studies define affect as the capacity to affect and to be affected. Where emotions are presumed to be a form of social construction – named, value-laden states of being closely tied to a politics of representation – affect is a domain, register, or machinery of intensity, speed, rhythm, and emergent form. It is the force that moves bodies of all kinds – human bodies, bodies of thought, institutions, populations, or bodies of force – into and out of states of being. Affect is not ontologically distinct from or secondary to cognition or meaning. Affect theory assumes not that an abstracted order of meaning creates worlds by instantiating and reproducing itself, or that the mind and its states of consciousness get the world right or wrong, but rather that the processes of emergence or becoming are complex compositions assembled out of bodies, materialities, scenes, events, and the substantial micropolitics

of force fields saturating everything from institutions to collective moods.

The objects of affect theory are simultaneously very abstract and very concrete. They are relational, in motion, and about transversal, transduction, and resonance. An affective event is an increase or decrease in the ability of the body to act. Brian Massumi (2002) theorizes it as the sensation produced in the encounter of bodies and forces and as the tipping point between the potential and the actual – the energy of something moving into being. Its objects are things in the process of becoming something else or forms that are emerging and dissipating.

Affect studies in anthropology pulls into alignment with Foucaultian and Nietzschean articulations of the intimate relations between knowledge and power. These theories focused intellectual projects on the conditions of the emergence of forms built into the conduct of life. The coming into being of forms in the details of daily life moves beyond the oppositions of fabricated/real, structure/agency. Structure takes place as singular events saturated with everyday sensibilities. Politics is not reducible to a communal consciousness or a neatly conceptualized ideology but takes place as intensities of all kinds and in various registers. Agency is not the clear and intentional act of a subject but an energetics. The anthropological objects of affect studies now include, for example, the pressure points of life, the structures of impact and attention being laid down in microbiopolitics, new sensory registers, and the systematic engineering of affect.

Capitalism, in affect studies, is itself a set of constantly performing relays and junctions that are laying down new affective fields of potentiality and closure. Nigel Thrift's (2004, 2011) work carefully outlines the swollen role of affect in the complex dynamics of contemporary capitalism and concomitant shifts in forms of knowledge and experience. In affect studies, systems of power are not flat sets of beliefs and effects but layered, irregularly matched, distinctive capacities that become possible and perhaps only partially legible. Power as system can be seen as the composition of dense loops between TV, cinema, philosophy, neurophysiology, and everyday life that constitute a neuropolitics (Connolly, 2002). This perspective requires new forms of critique and new modes of ethnographic attention. Latour (2005) and other nonrepresentational theorists replace evaluative judgment with an ethical-political attunement that tries to instill generosity toward a world by attending to its infrasensible knowledges.

Politics resides not in the rational subject but in the nonsubjective sensuous mimetic potential of the interlocking patterns, thresholds, and triggers of emergent, transversal bodies (Protevi, 2009). From the perspective of affect as a transductive machinery of relay, new political registers place questions of power and force in the contexts of ways of living through situations and the composition of worlds out of whatever is happening, presenting a fuller view of what is at stake for people in everyday life. Violence and conflict are seen not as exceptional moments of crisis, but as integral parts of a social world comprised of fault lines and edges. Social and cultural ties are not presumed by association with abstracted structures, but have to be tracked as moments of affinity and difference emergent in performance. The questions shift away from tracking the effects of the cultural modeling of a given reality to attending to the processes of social and material life: how places, practices,

identities, and forms of cohabitation become lived worlds, how people sense the world they inhabit, how people come to recognize themselves, and their affinities with others and things (Ingold, 2000).

## Emergent Anthropological Practices

Affect studies opens avenues to approach enduring anthropological questions: how to trace the forces that traverse the individual and the collective, and person, place, and thing; how to track and model complex articulations and assemblages; how to describe forms of signification that extend beyond code and representation and beyond individual consciousness; how to attend to sensory impacts and forms of knowledge; how to approach questions of force and intensity in ethnographic accounts; and how to build models of meaning grounded in the emergent practices of situations of the present. Affect studies is closely articulated to emergent efforts to address these questions with new paradigms including nature-culture studies, science studies, new materialism, posthumanism, and public culture.

In ethnography, affect studies is among the efforts to retheorize the anthropological object through more nuanced and prismatic approaches to the angles of persons, performances, bodies, atmospheres, rhythms, environments and social, affective, material, and institutional infrastructures. Attention to affect produces an attunement to the potential or emergent forces in a scene and becomes a means of recognizing the not quite visible yet forceful processes at work in even the most seemingly abject, private, or embodied iterations. For example, in *My Cocaine Museum*, Michael Taussig, describes the structure of feeling of a present moment in Colombia when the agribusiness boom has suddenly just stopped:

... now there is no work at all .... That's all over now. The idea of work work. Only a desperate mother or a small child would still believe there was something to be gained by selling fried fish or iced soya drinks by the roadside, accumulating the pennies. But for the young men *now*, there's more to *life*, and who really believes he'll make it past 25 years of age? ... At fourteen these kids get their first gun. Motorbikes. Automatic weapons. Nikes. Maybe some grenades as well. That's the dream. Except that for some reason it's harder and harder to get ahold of, and drug dreams stagnate in the swamps in the lowest part of the city like Aguablanca, where all drains drain and the reeds grow tall through the bellies of stinking rats and toads. *Aguablanca*. White water. The gangs multiply and the door is shoved in by the tough guys with their crowbar to steal the TV as well as the sneakers of the feet of the sleeping child; the *bazuco* makes you feel so good, your skin ripples, and you feel like floating while the police who otherwise never show and the local death squads hunt down and kill addicts, transvestites, gays – the *desechables*, or “throwaways” – whose bodies are found twisted front to back as when thrown off the back of pickups in the sugar cane fields owned by but twenty-two families, fields that roll like the ocean from one side of the valley to the other as the tide sucks you in with authentic Indian flute music and the moonlit howls of cocaine-sniffing dogs welcome you.

(2004: p. 19)

This kind of affective ethnographic writing requires a supple attention and the capacity to imagine trajectories and follow tendencies. When the object of anthropological analysis is the levels of sense, rhythms, aesthetic forms, and energetics, of what

is emerging or falling apart, ethnography takes as its object the generativity of things, ontologies of multiplicity, planes of expressivity, the ways that a tendency takes on consistency, what is being magnetized in a thrown-together thing, what frictions run its machinery, and what happens when things suddenly stop.

Ethnographies of affect have yielded new concepts of ways of living through situations. Affect emerges at the juncture (and disjuncture) of personal experience and public circulation (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010; Mazzarella, 2009). Bodies not only unfold in and inhabit the world through contingent lineages, potentialities, entanglements, and aspirations but they actually acquire their very form through their affective engagements (Ahmed, 2010; Povinelli, 2006; Stewart, 2007, 2010). The entanglements between bodies, discourse, and history are bound up with currents of expectations, landscapes, and histories (Povinelli, 2006); dispositions accumulate (Stewart, 2010); in the charged territory between the potential and the actual, seemingly broken bodies result from a complex constellation of potentialities unfolding over time (Biehl, 2005); precarious ways of living through things that produce prolific strategies and fantasies (Berlant, 2011); affect generates worlds (Stewart, 2010).

Affect is a lens for approaching social worlds and lived experiences as ongoing processes, highlighting partiality, flux, and contingency. It is perhaps particularly well suited to examine the dynamics at work in logics of materiality, cohesion, rupture, or the exhaustion of forces and forms. Cultural anthropologists have used the concept of affective labor to probe the relationships between feelings, work, capitalism and, often times, gender in contemporary life (Hardt, 1999). Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) analyzes the temporality, ethics, and quasi events of affective attachments to probe the ordinariness of isolation and abandonment. William Mazzarella (2009) argues that affect is a necessary moment of any modern institutional practice with aspirations to public efficacy. That is, modernity has always been structurally affective; any social project that is not imposed through force alone must be affective in order to be effective. Lauren Berlant (2011) has elaborated how affective structures shape realities, generating frames in which certain types of possibilities come into being. As work on affect probes the contingent lineages of contact and affinity, gesturing toward moods and collective sensibilities rather than causation, it adds critically important nuance and texture to such traditional frameworks as political economy, structural violence, or biopolitics (Biehl and Locke, 2010). As anthropologists continue to grapple with how to produce theories of large-scale social experience while accounting for the inner worlds and daily lives of individuals, work on affect offers new tools for a simultaneous analysis of both poles (Biehl, 2005; Biehl and Locke, 2010; Das, 2006; Povinelli, 2006).

## Conclusion

The long impasse in anthropology of the categorical opposition between biology and culture has played a role in naturalizing emotions to the extent that they are associated with the body. This has also limited approaches to knowledge, agency, and sociality.

Where thought and knowledge are stereotypically associated with intentionality and logic, and consciousness with agency, body, and emotion are imagined as both untamed and too tamed, outside the order of representation that stands in as a shorthand for culture and society and also beneath recognition as the banal and all-too-well known. Until the relatively recent surge in interest regarding an anthropology of emotions, they were presumed to be universal aspects of the human experience that were both central to an individual's interior world and also transparently intelligible across cultures (Lutz, 1986). Studies of emotion and affect have produced a middle ground between biology and culture, and the individual and the social. Analyses of affective structures have expanded the reach and depth of studies of nationalism, violence, belonging, and affinity on a global scale and across virtual worlds, parsing out the resonances of distinctly dispersed, yet complexly interconnected, modes of life and practice.

Linking to interdisciplinary work in science studies and nonrepresentational theory, affect theory has been used to posit and produce an alignment between theory and the compositional attunement through which people and things venture out into reals. Reals, in this view, are not the kind of thing that an order of representation simply organizes as truth and dominates, but "transversal arrays of qualities or activities which, like musical refrains, give order to materials and situations, human bodies and brains included, as actions undertaken act-back to shape muscles and hone senses" (Anderson and Harrison, 2010: p. 8). This is not the work of imagination on dead matter but a "mattering (that) is about the (contingent and temporary) becoming-determinate (and becoming-indeterminate) of *matter* and *meaning*" (Barad, 2010: p. 254). This is a world built out of difference and repetition (Deleuze, 1994), composed of potentiality and loss (Berlant, 2011), and leaning toward entities that are both present and absent – atmospheres, affects, virtual memories, hauntings, that are themselves moments of endurance (or not), instants of the holding together of the disparate itself (Doel, 2010). This is a world that is not reducible to its representation, or what we know of it (Anderson and Harrison, 2010). One that is potentially a newly capacious object for the distinctive lines of approach of archeological, linguistic, physical, and cultural thought and method.

See also: Anthropological Writing; Materiality and Culture; Personhood, Anthropology of; Senses, Anthropology of The.

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