

The Emerald Handbook of the Sociology of Emotions for a Post-Pandemic World

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The Emerald Handbook of the Sociology of Emotions for a Post-Pandemic World: Imagined Emotions and Emotional Futures

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Foreword

The SARS-Cov-2 (Covid-19) global pandemic spawned a vast breadth of research – within biomedical science, social sciences and the humanities. Indeed, in the early months of the health emergency, we social science researchers were sometimes castigated for too readily jumping on the coronavirus bandwagon, in an academic dash to bring our particular and disparate insights to bear.

Now, however, with the benefit of time to reflect upon the human and economic cost of the past few years, and the class, ethnic and gender inequalities that the pandemic brought into razor-sharp focus, it is more than timely to reflect on what we may learn from the pandemic. In this Handbook on the sociology of emotions in a post-pandemic world, the editors Paul R. Ward and Kristen Foley have rallied an impressive range of scholars from across the social sciences, to reflect and explore the affective interactions between humans and the wee virus that has caused so much devastation. The chapters in this volume document these multiple interactions. Yet this Handbook will also serve to provide a far broader and lasting perspective on the state of the art of what has come to be known as the ‘sociology of emotions’. Some chapters present empirical data from the pandemic years, while others synthesise sociological perspective to develop theoretical understanding of emotion.

Ward and Foley’s introduction provides a detailed guide to the chapters that follow, so rather than recapitulate their fine words, I shall use these few prefatory pages to offer some more general reflections on the field, and how the collective trauma of the SARS-Cov-2 pandemic can refine our understanding of what emotions can do.

I’d suggest that foundationally what emotions do is link human bodies to their environment. Emotions are not the only means by which this happens, of course: human bodies interact physically, psychologically, socially and culturally with the world every moment of the day. But the corporeal intensity of emotions may drive powerful shifts in what bodies can do.

However, it would be mistaken to assume that this link between body and environment is a one-way communication, with emotions treated simply as ‘felt thoughts’ that remind those experiencing them how to respond to events in the social and natural world (for instance, to the victory or loss of a sporting event or election). The communication between body and environment is two-way: emotions also help to produce this social and natural world, and locate humans within it. As Jasper (1998, p. 398) has argued

Emotions pervade all social life, social movements included. . . . Not only are emotions part of our responses to events, but they also – in the form of deep affective attachments – shape the goals of our actions. . . . Without them, there might be no social action at all.

In other words, emotions assemble human bodies with the rest of the material and social environment. This perspective on emotion articulates with the recent shifts within sociology that have been described as an ‘affective turn’ (Leys, 2011). But while psychologists frequently use the terms ‘emotion’ and ‘affect’ interchangeably, affect theorists differentiate the two, often applying Deleuze’s (1988, p. 123) Spinozist and more-than-human conception of affect as ‘a capacity to affect or be affected’. Affects are ‘becomings’ that augment or diminish the capacities of bodies, say Deleuze and Guattari (1988, p. 256), while Clough (2004, p. 15) argues that affects have the power to switch bodies ‘from one mode to another in terms of attention, arousal, interest, receptivity, stimulation, attentiveness, action, reaction, and inaction’. Affects may be physical, psychological, sociocultural, political or economic, as well as emotional. Consequently, while all emotions are affects, not all affects are emotions.

This assessment suggests a sociological project to look at how emotions affect bodies, but also what they do within collectivities, social processes and social institutions, and the interactivity (in both material and interpretive registers) between human bodies and other physical, social and abstract entities in their physical and social environment.

Chapters in this Handbook variously illustrate how emotional affects during the pandemic produced broader outcomes not limited to individual bodies. Citizens’ behaviour may have reflected their *trust* in epidemiological or other experts, or alternatively, in social media anti-vaccination messages (Foley et al., this volume); anger was the basis for protests against lockdowns and social distancing (Whittenbury, this volume).

However, while Durkheim (1976, p. 218) might have described protest movements against pandemic inequalities or civil unrest over lockdowns simply as a ‘collective effervescence’, from the perspective of the model of affect just outlined, the contribution of emotion such as anger, grief or joy to such public manifestations must be acknowledged as part of a wider flow of affect. Alongside emotions, this flow encompasses reasoned argument, law, ideology, social organisation, rights and physical coercion. Within this flow of affect what bodies can feel is a key element of what they can ‘do’ (Jasper, 1998).

I have been interested in how such broader consequences of emotions and other affects flow through the social world (Fox, 2013, 2015). Deleuze and Guattari (1988, p. 400) described affects as ‘projectiles’ that produce a chain reaction of further affects: as one emotion produces capacities to do, desire or feel, these capacities in turn create subsequent affective flows. Among the many affects that link human bodies to their social and natural environments, emotions may be very important in producing changes in states of bodies, collectivities of bodies and social organisations. For example, watching a film about inequalities in mortality due to Sars-Cov-2 might

variously generate anger toward government; elicit donations to a health charity or political cause; or turn viewers into campaigners. All of which in turn will lead to further affects, *ad infinitum*.

My own study of the emotions and affects surrounding the London Olympics and Paralympics of 2012 (Fox, 2013) traced a flow that began with the ecstatic responses to the award of the Games in 2005 through to the legacy that transformed derelict swathes of land in east London into first the Olympic Park and now a vibrant and desirable hub for housing, shopping and businesses. Along the way it boosted national pride; improved perceptions of people with disabilities; established the political career of then London Mayor Boris Johnson; brought great economic wealth to property developers and altered the demographic of that part of London as city workers bought up newly-built apartments and houses. It also entertained and lifted the spirits of those attending the Games, or watching on TV.

Other studies have demonstrated how such flows of emotions and affects not only shape an individual response to something in the environment but also contribute to politics and protest, social movements (Bensimon, 2012) and social change (Ahmed, 2004, p. 42; Jasper, 1998; Summers-Effler, 2002).

This recognition undermines any sense that emotions (as part of affective flows) are exclusively private, embodied phenomena. These studies suggest that emotions play an important role within the flow of affect that produces cultures, politics and the unfolding sweep of history. Consequently, sociology needs to attend to emotions seriously.

For a long time, emotions were reason's poor relation, sociologically. But acknowledging them as part of the affectivity that produces the social world reinstates their significance. Reason and emotion are no longer opposed or contradictory, as in many sociological analyses (Leys, 2011), but components together within the broad flow that drives a multiplicity of social processes, from political change to mob violence. Areas ripe for exploration include the interplay of emotion and reason in religion, faith and rituals; the emotions that sustain social continuity associated with national commemorations and celebrations such as May Day, Thanksgiving and monarchs' jubilees; and the part sentiment plays in the movements of stock and commodity markets.

This perspective also suggests that – as affects – emotions cut across dualisms that have been dear to sociology's heart. First, by connecting bodies with the social and physical environment, they elide the distinction between nature and culture that defined humanism (Haraway, 1992, p. 150); established the privilege of white, male, able-bodied humans from the Global North (Braidotti, 2019, p. 159) and enabled the emergence of the 'social sciences' as an area of scholarship distinct from 'natural science'. Similarly, they dissolve associated dualisms such as human/non-human, animate/inanimate, mind/matter.

Second, emotions transcend a micro/macro divide: as just noted, emotions and other affects can link the private inner worlds of humans to the public worlds of politics, economics social institutions, social groups and movements and even nations. Fear, anger and grief may translate into votes that shape a nation's economy, diminish or increase social inequalities and civil rights, or even go to war.

Finally, they dissolve a favoured dualism of sociology: agency/structure. In place of structures, systems or mechanisms at work ‘beneath the surface’ of social life, emotions and other affects are the means that establish the endless cascade of events that produce the world and human history. Instead of a plucky human agent struggling against the top-down power of an oppressive social structure, power and resistance flow affectively through the quotidian, more-than-human assemblages that unfold ceaselessly around bodies, actions, interactions and events (Fox & Alldred, 2018).

For all these reasons, we need to attend closely to emotions and what they do. So I have no doubt that this Handbook will make a valuable contribution to this task, as we seek to learn from the distress and economic turmoil caused by the SARS-Cov-2 pandemic and its aftermath. It rightfully deserves a place on the bookshelves of academic libraries and social scientists, and upon reading lists for all those who wish to make sense of the complex ways in which the affects and emotions of everyday life produce and reproduce the social world around us.

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