

# AFFECTIVE SOCIETIES

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A Social Relational Account of Affect

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## A Social Relational Account of Affect

### Abstract

Sociology usually conceives of emotions as individual, episodic, and categorical phenomena, while at the same time emphasizing their social and cultural construction. In this article, I argue that this view neglects some essential elements of emotions, in particular affects, and how these are vital to our understanding of sociality. Although affect is an established notion in sociology, it has remained conceptually underdeveloped. The article therefore discusses different perspectives on affect from the vibrant field of affect studies that emphasize their relational and bodily character. In a second step, I contrast and reconcile these views with existing theories of affect in sociology and social psychology and consider a number of essential characteristics that can be used to circumscribe affect. Finally, I introduce concepts from relational sociology and concrete examples to specify the relational character of affect and to develop an understanding of affect that is both theoretically and empirically fruitful.

Keywords: affect, emotion, relations, body, sociology

### 1 Introduction

The sociology of emotion has developed perspectives on actors, interactions, and societies that go beyond normative and instrumental-rational accounts. Sociologists have shown that emotions are important for human agency, for social interactions, and for understanding communities and societies. A key factor to understanding the potential of human emotion for social affairs is the conjecture that they are *social* and *cultural* through and through. This means, first, that emotions do not arise arbitrarily across individuals, but rather in more or less systematic ways, for example with regard to dominant power hierarchies or stratification. Second, emotions are closely tied to norms and values, both with regard to the situations in which emotions arise, i.e., how they are experienced, communicated, and reflected-upon, and with regard to the place they have in culture, e.g., whether they are highly valued or despised.

While strongly emphasizing that emotions are socially and culturally constructed, sociologists at the same time understand emotions as individual, intentional, episodic, and categorical phenomena. They usually assume that human *individuals* “have” emotions, i.e. that they experience and express “their” emotions. For example, Thoits (1989: 318) conceives of emotions as

involving cognitive appraisals and changes in physiological or bodily sensations and Hochschild (1979) defines emotion as “as bodily cooperation with an image, a thought, a memory – a cooperation of which the individual is aware” (p. 551). In a similar vein, Kemper (1987: 263) suggests that emotions are “autonomic-motoric-cognitive states”. Sociological concepts of emotion also tend to view emotions as *intentional* because they are directed at or about something. For example, people are ashamed *of* somebody or angry *at* their spouses. This assumption clearly requires mind-related principles of intentionality and representation that are widely attributed to humans.

Moreover, sociology usually conceives of emotions as *episodic*, i.e., time-discrete phenomena. People experience an emotion during a specific timeframe and many emotions are considered to be rather short-lived, lasting seconds or minutes rather than hours or days. Of course, emotions like sadness or guilt may last much longer, but the general idea is that most emotions have more or less clearly defined beginnings and endings. Finally, many sociologists concur with accounts in evolutionary psychology that emotions are distinct “natural kinds” (Griffiths, 2004), i.e., that they can be categorized along clearly defined sets of bodily, cognitive, and phenomenal components (e.g., Turner, 2007). This *categorical* perspective rests on the assumption of a limited number of emotions that have an important survival value.

Given this – admittedly overgeneralized – view of emotions, the social and cultural come into play as forces that either provide or influence the circumstances under which emotions arise, or constitute and shape the ways in which emotions are expressed, regulated, or communicated. In other words, society influences when and how emotions *come into existence* and how emotions are *acted upon*. In this paper, I want to argue that – although this view without doubt has its merits –, it neglects some essential elements of emotions and how these are vital to our understanding of sociality. I suspect that this neglect is due to early sociological conceptions that, although adding an important social and cultural “edge” to emotions, retained a view still close to Darwinian and “natural kinds” approaches, borrowing from them the (limiting) notion that emotions are individual, intentional, episodic, and categorical “entities”. Although this may be an adequate conception of what an *emotion* is, it is unnecessarily restrictive for those elements that many assume to be at the core of emotions, for example subjective feelings or action potentials.

Although feelings are not confined to emotions, but are more or less ubiquitous in our lives, for example as hunger, pain, or elation, some have argued that at the core of an emotion is an *affect* which is often understood as an *evaluative feeling*, i.e. a feeling that conveys a positive or negative phenomenal experience, often with a certain action tendency. In fact, some

sociologists and psychologists have argued that emotions are not “natural kinds”, but rather discursively delineated constellations of affect, situation, and cognitive appraisals (Thoits, 1989; Barrett, 2014). Although the notion of affect is implicated in emotions, it is a broader and more elementary category that is not conceptually restricted in the way emotions are, for example regarding their episodic and categorical character.

Therefore, the concept of affect may open up novel perspectives on how individuals experientially relate to and make sense of the social world. Whereas analyses of emotion usually capitalize on momentary and often exceptionally intense “outbursts” in experience, affect reflects a general, ubiquitous, and bodily “mode of being”. Importantly, it denotes a strong conative or motivational momentum and is therefore critical to action. In the following, I thus want to further probe the usefulness of the concept of affect for sociological analysis, in particular for questions of how individuals are embedded in different social formations. I will do so by first reviewing different understandings of affect. In a first step, I will discuss different conceptions of affect in cultural studies, which on the one hand are a major source of inspiration for how affect can inform sociological inquiry, but on the other hand are hard to operationalize for empirical research. In a second step, I will introduce two perspectives on affect in sociology and social psychology and work out differences and commonalities between these approaches. Third, I will suggest an understanding of “relational affect” that retains many of the theoretical propositions found in cultural studies but is methodologically sound and hence close to the accounts in sociology and social psychology. Finally, I will briefly use this concept to illustrate how individuals are embedded in social formations.

## **2 Affect in Cultural Studies**

Within cultural studies, affect has come to occupy a central place in theorizing and some have referred to this shift as an “affective turn” (Clough, 2007). Affect is widely believed to be a necessary counterpart to language, discourse, and conceptual thought and is valued mainly because it is closely tied to matter and *bodies* of various sorts, as opposed to symbols, language, and thought. Generally, there is a striking variety of different understandings of affect within cultural studies (Leys, 2011; Whetherell, 2012; Seigworth and Gregg, 2010). Because this is not the place to review the literature in its entirety, I resort to two reviews of the field in an attempt at systematizing these understandings. Leys (2011) as well as Seigworth and Gregg (2010) have suggested that there are at least two distinct perspectives on and conceptualizations of affect, one that grounds the understanding of affect in a revisionary ontology, whereas the other perspective is not primarily concerned with ontological issues but rather construes affect

as the capacities of (animal) bodies to act and to affect other bodies. Although these approaches may be seen to reflect opposing ends on a continuum of different understandings of affect, they are nonetheless fruitful in their potential to advance sociological theorizing and research on affect and emotion.

## 2.1 Affect – an ontological perspective

One perspective on affect is strongly inspired by the writings of Spinoza, Bergson, and Deleuze and Guattari. Affect in these works initially has little to do with feelings and emotions, but rather is part of an ontology that centers on processes, relations, and the effects that bodies have on one another. As such, these writings can be considered landmarks of an “ontological turn” in parts of philosophy and the social sciences that, although highly diverse and debated in itself, is characterized by challenging the central position of human beings in most of Western social thought; by the notion that agency should not be understood as intentional action, but rather as “efficacy” that is distributed across assemblages of humans and non-humans; and by the idea that the social and political are constituted and fueled by non-conscious and bodily affect (Joronen & Häkli, 2016).

Within this paradigm, affect is supposed to be an *autonomous* force between bodies that is best expressed not in terms of feelings or experiences, but of intensities of relations that impinge – either by increasing or by diminishing – a body’s potential to act. Affect therefore primarily refers to bodies’ reciprocal capacities “to affect and be affected” (Clough, 2007: 2). Seigworth and Gregg (2010) state that “affect arises in the midst of in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon. Affect is an impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relations as well as the passages [...] of forces or intensities. That is, affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, non-human, part-body and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves” (p. 1).

In a similar vein, Massumi (2002) as one of the key proponents of affect theory conceives of affect first and foremost as intensity, decidedly contrasting it with emotion, which he sees as a form of subjective *content*. He holds that whereas the term “emotion” is reserved for “personalized content”, affect stands for “the continuation”, is “situational” and “trans-situational” and “the invisible glue that holds the world together” (Massumi, 2002: 217). Likewise, Thrift (2004) prefers to not work with notions of “individualized emotions” but instead with concepts of af-

fect that carry the notion of “broad tendencies and lines of force” (ibid., p. 175). And for Blackman (2012), “affect is not a thing but rather refers to processes of life and vitality which circulate and pass between bodies and which are difficult to capture or study in any conventional methodological sense” (p. 4).

Although these are only select fragments of an extensive and complex body of scholarship, they suffice to illustrate the place that affect occupies in an ontology that capitalizes on processes, relations, and efficacies within and between bodies. Importantly, bodies in this ontological framework are not only human bodies, but encompass all kinds of bodies that can affect and be affected, for instance an animal, a table, a book, or a tree. Taking this for granted, it is no surprise that one of the key characteristics of affect in this perspective is that it is *bodily* and often described as non-conscious, pre-discursive, pre-linguistic, and “asocial, but not presocial” (Massumi, 1995: 91).

Because affect in this paradigm is conceived of as a force or relational intensity between potentially very different sorts of bodies, Whetherell (2012: 19ff) notes that affect often seems to be construed as *preceding* the cultural and the discursive and with that various forms of symbolic meaning and signification. In this view, affect is also considered ubiquitous (although subject to various dynamics) among bodies, and not something that has a clear beginning and end, and hence there is no state of affairs that is ever void of affect. Therefore, affect in this paradigmatic perspective is frequently talked about in the singular, not least to demarcate its being distinct from any categorical thinking that dominates standard ontologies and the emotions literature.

## 2.2 Affect – a bodily capacity perspective

The second widespread understanding of affect in a much stronger way draws on the psychology and neuroscience of *emotion*, in particular on the works of Sylvan Tomkins. Many authors have attributed the influence of Tomkins’s approach on affect studies to an essay by Sedgwick and Frank (1995). Tomkins argued that affect should be seen as a separate and basic system of human functioning that operates independently of drives and cognitions and is firmly anchored in human biology and evolutionary adaptation. Inspired by Darwin’s works, Tomkins suggested that “affects are comprised of correlated sets of responses involving the facial muscles, the viscera, the respiratory system, the skeleton, autonomic blood flow changes, and vocalizations that act together to produce an analogue of the particular gradient or intensity of stimulation impinging on the organism” (Demos, 1995: 19). These orchestrated responses, then, *are* the affect, and “not an expression of something else” (ibid.). Moreover, Tomkins held that there is

an evolutionary stable set of eight orchestrated responses that have evolved to signal urgency and to initiate action, called “affect programs” (Tomkins and McCarter, 1964: 120). This is why affect in Tomkins’s perspective, much like in the views expressed in the “ontological” approach, is generated outside conscious awareness and is primarily a bodily response towards some event or object.

Tomkins’s conception of affect stridently made its way into cultural studies and promoted an understanding of affect that is closer to feeling and emotion and hence to human bodies and their role in thought, cognition, perception, and behavior. Affect here is understood as an indirect “form of thinking” or a “different kind of intelligence about the world” (Thrift, 2008: 175). Likewise, Blackman holds that “affect refers to those registers of experience which cannot be easily seen and which might variously be described as non-cognitive, trans-subjective, non-conscious, non-representational, incorporeal and immaterial” (Blackman, 2012: 4). And Brennan equally emphasizes the human body when she states that affect “is the physiological shift accompanying a judgment” (Brennan, 2004: 5).

The term affect, as it is presently used across cultural studies and sometimes within the same theories, thus seems to have at least two different referents. On the one hand, it is used to denote a force or an intensity of relations or something that circulates between different sorts of bodies, on the other hand it denotes modes or states of human bodies and the feelings and capacities that go along with these modes. Although this usage of the term is somewhat imprecise, both views are not entirely incompatible and can be made fruitful for sociological analysis not least because they have reputable counterparts in social theorizing: The focus on relationality is essential to relational approaches to sociality (e.g., Donati, 2012; Crossley, 2012) and the emphasis on feelings and human bodies is critical to established sociological and social psychological notions of affect (e.g., Heise, 1979). In the following section, I will first discuss these sociological and social psychological notions of affect and then proceed to infuse them with understandings of affect in cultural studies and a relational approach to sociality.

### **3 Sociological and Social Psychological Models of Affect**

Although the individual, intentional, episodic, and categorical perspective on emotion is still dominant, and emotion and affect are often treated synonymously, sociologists as well social psychologists have for some time developed original theories of affect that go beyond the limitations of the discrete emotions approach.



### 3.1 Psychological Constructionism

Probably the most prominent concept of affect in social psychology is part of Russell's and Feldman-Barrett's (1999) "psychological constructionist" theory, strongly inspired by Wundt and James. In their view, affect or "core affect", "refers to the most elementary consciously accessible affective feelings [...] that need not be directed at anything" (Russell and Barrett, 1999: 806). Examples of affect include tension, pleasure, or elation. Affect is thought to be "free-floating", like ebbs and flows across time, and a person is presumed to always be in some affective state. Affect varies in *intensity*, it can be hardly consciously perceived in low intensities, but can likewise overwhelm conscious experience when highly intense. Although affect is assumed to be free floating, it is *caused* by something, although these causes need not be consciously perceived. Despite the view that affect need not be consciously directed at anything, it can become directed at something, for example as part of an emotion or when attributed to some entity (Russell and Barrett, 1999: 806).

Importantly, affect is considered "a basic kind of psychological *meaning*" (Barrett and Bliss-Moreau, 2009: 172, emphasis added), it is a "psychological primitive" that is "crucial to the conscious experience of the world around us" (Barrett and Bliss-Moreau, 2009: 172). Affect and changes in affect "are often experienced as a property of an object, in much the same way as color" is. (Barrett and Bliss-Moreau, 2009: 172) There is some consensus that affect can best be described or represented as combinations of basic experiences of pleasure or displeasure and some degree of arousal. This view stands in notable contrast to "basic emotion" theories arguing – along the lines of Tomkins – that universal "affect programs" correspond to a fixed set of basic or primary emotions. Psychological constructionism denies the existence of this fixed correspondence and instead argues that *conceptual acts* differentiate core affect into discrete emotions (Barrett, 2014). This view also opposes "appraisal theories" of emotion elicitation (e.g., Scherer, 2005) that place stronger emphasis on cognitions in generating and differentiating discrete emotions. Historically, psychological constructionism is related to longstanding debates in psychology on the role of cognition in generating emotion. In this debate, Zajonc (1980) had forcefully argued that *affect*, which he considered a positive or negative valence or quality, can be generated without the involvement of (higher) cognitive processes, but that cognitions are indeed necessary for fully blown emotions.

### 3.2 Affect Control Theory

In sociology, the term affect is most prominent in Heise's (1979) *Affect Control Theory* (ACT) and the works inspired by this theory. Affect in this account does not differ substantially from

the views of psychological constructionism (see Rogers et al., 2014). However, affect in sociology is often conceived of as the more inclusive category than emotion. Smith-Lovin (1995), for example, holds that “*Affect* is the most general term; it refers to any evaluative (positive or negative) orientation toward an object. It encompasses emotions such as contentment and anger, attitudes such as liking and disliking, and connotative meanings in general” (Smith-Lovin, 1995: 118f). In ACT, more specifically, affect is thought to be “a general mode of consciousness” (MacKinnon, 1994: 123), it “registers our reactions to objects and events around us”, “accompanies our anticipation of future events and our memory of past ones”, and “marks the establishment and dissolution of our most intimate and intense social relationships” (MacKinnon, 1994: 9). Furthermore, affect is supposed to be a “dynamic principle of human motivation” and an “important basis of human intersubjectivity” (ibid.).

It is not always clear, however, whether ACT makes a sharp distinction between affect and emotion, for example when Morgan and Heise (1988) state that “unpleasant feelings and any sense of potent pleasure are understood readily as purely affective experiences; these are ‘emotions’” (p. 29). In ACT, affective orientations towards the world (e.g., towards people, objects, ideas) are rather dubbed “sentiments” which refer to “the culturally shared, fundamental [affective] meanings that we associate with particular social labels” (Robinson et al., 2006: 186) and to the culturally established “affective associations evoked by concepts” (MacKinnon, 1994: 22). They are “transsituational, generalized affective responses to specific symbols in a culture” and “more socially constructed and enduring than simple emotional responses” (Robinson et al., 2006: 182). In contrast, “transient” sentiments denote the situative and dynamic transformations of the more stable and rigid sentiments (ibid.). A similar understanding of sentiments can also be found in affect-based variants of social exchange theory, where sentiments refer to “enduring affective states or feelings about one or more social objects” (Lawler, 2001: 325f).

Hence, similar to psychological constructionism, affect in ACT yields different temporal dynamics and can be a longer lasting orientation as well as a short-lived phenomenon. Importantly, ACT also concurs with psychological constructionism in arguing that affect can be described along a number of dimensions (valence/arousal or evaluation/potency/activity). However, sentiments are often theorized as involving higher cognitions, gestures, and conceptualizations (Gordon, 1981: 565) and ACT typically emphasizes the symbolic and conceptual representation of sentiments and affective meaning. Nevertheless, recent developments point out the importance of embodied, sensorimotor representations for sentiments as well as their dynamic and probabilistic nature (Schröder et al., forthcoming).

## 4 Features of Affect

Looking at these different understandings of affect, it seems fair to say that there is some resemblance between the “bodily capacity” view in cultural studies and perspectives on affect in sociology and social psychology. Both concur that affect is a general, ubiquitous, and primarily bodily mode of being or world-directedness that has some evaluative and experiential qualities, bears certain action tendencies, and is in principle independent from language, conceptual thought, and declarative knowledge in establishing meaning. The bodily capacity view in turn shares with the ontology perspective the fundamental notion that affect is relational, i.e. that it is not confined to individual bodies but part of the intensities of relations and resonances between bodies. Both differ, however, in the degree of their ontological premises and a number of further assumptions. Whereas the term affect denotes the forces between all sorts of bodies with little reference to feelings and emotions in the ontology account, it is used to refer to precisely these shifts in feelings and experiences in the capacity account. The term affect therefore either refers to a-personal, situational, and trans-situational dynamics and forces that constitute bodies and alter their potential to act, or it signifies processes within and certain modes of animal bodies and their physiological activity.

One way of clarifying this fuzziness in the use of terminology might be in going back to Spinoza’s distinction between *affectus* and *affectio*. Seyfert (2012) has taken up this distinction and notes that *affectus* (affect) circumscribes the capability of bodies to affect and be affected, whereas *affectio* (affection) refers to the traces of bodies upon one another. In this view, “*affectio* is the index of (changing) affective capabilities” and “certain affections are at the same time modal states of a body [...]” (Seyfert, 2012: 32). My aim in what follows is to further clarify these terms and concepts to arrive at a theoretically fruitful and empirically feasible notion of affect that may advance current theorizing and research. I proceed by discussing important issues frequently used to characterize what affect is and how it (supposedly) differs from other, more conventional concepts, in particular emotion.

### 4.1 Body

Probably the most frequently mentioned characteristic of affect, both in cultural studies as well as in sociology and social psychology, is its *bodily* or *embodied* nature. This aligns with what some have called a “material turn” in cultural studies and marks a shift away from the explanatory value of language and discourse, mental states, and conceptual knowledge towards more “basic” bodily capacities, like the senses, perception, or affect. On the one hand, this dichotomy

is of course entirely futile, as decades of discussion in psychology, philosophy, and neuroscience have shown. Language, mental states, and conceptual thought are as much bodily phenomena as perception or affect are. Preaching that affect is bodily or embodied is thus meaningless unless one can further qualify how, exactly, which kinds of bodies affect and are affected.

To some extent, this has been attempted by Tomkins in his idea of affect programs, including the assumption that different categories of affect (and emotion) are realized through dedicated physiological processes. Yet, a range of research linked to the psychological constructionist paradigm suggests that affect and emotion are most likely not generated by such dedicated systems, but instead within more general brain networks, involving basic psychological operations characteristic for both, affective and non-affective processing (Lindquist et al., 2012).

This poses some difficulties for the ontology perspective given that it assumes affect to be a relational force or intensity between bodies of different sorts. If we stick to this notion of affect, I suspect that we learn little about how actors are embedded in and make sense of the social world, simply because the term is too general to be of any explanatory or descriptive value. Instead, and in line with the capacity view and sociological as well as social psychological conceptions, I suggest to use the term affect to denote certain modes or states of animal bodies that constitute a body's capacity to act. Note that I would argue that all kinds of bodies do have the potential to *affect* other bodies. But I hold that to be *affected* in the sense proposed here is a feature of animal bodies. This means that other bodies may well be “affected” in other ways, but one of the defining criteria of animals, including humans, might be their potential to be affected in the specific ways outlined below.

## 4.2 Intentionality

The assumption that the term affect applies to bodies of various sorts is also reflected in some scholars' suggestion that a defining feature of affect is that it is non-intentional, i.e. that it lacks a specific kind of world-directedness or “aboutness” (e.g., Leys, 2011). Although this is less explicit in sociological and social psychological accounts, they, too, embrace the possibility that affect does not bear the same intentional qualities as emotion does. This view is most likely endorsed to defend the specificity of affect and to further distinguish it from emotion. However, descriptions of affect as non-intentional harbor a limited view of intentionality as based on (propositional) representations and mental contents, such as beliefs. More appropriately, in my

view, others have suggested genuinely bodily or affective forms of intentionality that capitalize of human or animal bodies (e.g., Slaby, 2008).

Affect in this view can be conceived of as an elementary and valenced bodily stance towards the world, similar to what Ratcliffe (2008) calls an “existential feeling”. This bodily stance, in which the body is not so much implicated as a material body but as a medium of experience – a “feeling body” –, is not necessarily focused on a specific object, but rather reflects one’s entire world-directedness. These affectively intentional bodily feelings may be aligned towards objects, situations, or actions in the world and perceived as qualities of these entities and processes. In these cases, it is also possible that this „feeling towards“ (Goldie, 2002) becomes categorized and culturally labeled as well as experienced and expressed as an emotion (Barrett, 2014).

In contrast to this kind of affective intentionality, the intentional character of categorical and discrete emotions is much more based on mental contents and representations. For example, the fear of a dog requires some mental representation of a prototypical dog and the potentially dangerous behaviors of dogs. In contrast, affective intentionality emphasizes the entire situation in which the feeling body is implicated, including sensory perceptions like sounds and smells, possibilities for action, and various other bodily states.

#### 4.3 Ubiquity and continuity

In line with the view that affect is constituted by a feeling body, there is a widely shared assumption that affect is an ubiquitous and continuous mode of being. I assume that individuals are *always* in some mode or state of affect, and that this mode “colors” the ways in which people think, act, and how they relate to the world. I assume that the human body is usually affected by multiple interoceptive and exteroceptive input and mental contents (e.g., imaginations, representations) that bring about steady fluctuations in affect, for example regarding valence or intensity. Affect can therefore be ever so subtle so that it goes almost unrecognized, but nevertheless colors our thoughts, perceptions, and actions, or it can be very intense, being at the very center of attention and bodily experience. This continuity of affect is a key feature that distinguishes affect from emotion and, as discussed later on, is important to understand how actors are embedded in social formations.

#### 4.4 Meaning

Another alleged characteristic of affect is that it is non-signifying and non-discursive, and that bodies that affect and are affected are beyond “social sense-making”, as Whetherell (2012) criticizes. This conjecture seems hardly plausible given the concurrent assumption that affect

is an intensity that impinges on a body's potential to act. If affect can impinge on this potential, how else can it do so than by conveying something that is *meaningful* to a body? This does not necessarily mean that it is meaningful in any discursive, linguistic, or propositional way, but may be so in an *analogue* way, in a way that dampens or amplifies other information and colors our every thought and perception. Hence, in line with existing approaches, I contend that affect conveys meaning, it is indeed a specific form of meaning-making. Meaning in this sense does not require conceptual representation or propositional thought, but may well derive from embodied, sensorimotor processes and structures (Shapiro, 2011). It is debatable and a matter of empirical investigation, whether and how affect can be comprehensively described along different dimensions, for instance pleasant vs. unpleasant or arousing vs. calming, as claimed by some accounts.

#### 4.5 Language and discourse

Another issue concerns the alleged separation of discourse and affect. Some authors seem to suggest that affect is distinct from discourse and language and that this is indeed one of the things that render the affect paradigm novel and interesting. This view is summarized (and criticized) by Whetherell when she writes that “affect seems to index a realm beyond talk, words and texts, beyond epistemic regimes, and beyond conscious representation and cognition” (2012: 19). Certainly, affect in many accounts is portrayed as a counterpart to language and discourse. However, I would argue that both, the potential to affect and the capacity to be affected are intimately tied to discourse. First, discourse itself can be thought of as a body. Discourse need not be text and language, but can also be images, symbols, objects with the capability to affect and to cause fluctuations in affect beyond representational logics. Riley (2005), for example, develops an argument for an understanding of “language as affect”, and also Butler (1997) can be read along these lines. Second, discourse impinges on social action, for example in the form of practices, and practices are also always bodily practices.

Hence, discourse contributes to the formation of bodies and to their potential to affect and be affected. In this respect, Seyfert (2011) suggests an interesting analogy to Weber's phrase that he (Weber) was “religiously unmusical”. He uses this phrase to suggest that bodies, as a consequence of being subjected to certain social, cultural, and material environments, develop specific susceptibilities to be affected. Latour (2004) similarly argues that bodies can “learn” to be affected in a specific way. I would add that this includes the susceptibility to be affected by different bodies (human and non-human) and in different ways. This is also in line with research inspired by ACT that has shown how actors with different cultural backgrounds attach different

“affective meanings” to various concepts (Heise, 2007). Following Whetherell (2012), I would think of affect as in some sense “patterned”, although with a more dynamic than static impetus.

#### 4.6 Summary

The characteristics of affect discussed so far suggest that affect is a mode of being and a continuous bodily orientation towards the world that has meaningful evaluative qualities. This orientation is achieved not exclusively through linguistic representation and thought, but through basic perceptual and evaluative capabilities of the body. Because affect is ubiquitous and continuous (like perception), it is best thought of not as something episodic, but rather in terms of steady fluctuations along the different dimensions on which affect may be described or in terms of changes in the modes of being and the sensibilities and capacities to act.

Importantly, these fluctuations are caused by and have effects on something. Although they can be caused by thoughts, memories, and other (higher) cognitive processes, they are equally well generated outside conscious awareness. Bodies constantly register information from the world through their perceptual systems and hence constantly shift their affective mode. Most of the time, this happens subtly, without a subject being aware of these shifts. However, as a matter of intensity, context, or relational position, we may become aware of these shifts and also *attribute* certain causes to them. Affect has effects primarily in that it alters body’s capacities to act. This can happen in various ways, through alterations to cognitive and perceptual processing, to the endocrine and hormonal system, or to autonomous and peripheral nervous system activity.

Another important facet is that through what and in which ways bodies are affected is neither universal across animals or species nor uniform across historical episodes – although the very capacity for affect almost certainly is. As decades of research have shown, the human body, in its very *physiology* (not just regarding bodily behaviors, performances, stagings, etc.), is subject to processes of socialization and enculturation. This, of course, includes discourse, norms, values, and practices that all have a say in whether and how a body can be “affectively addressed” by something.

### 5 Affective Relations

From the characteristics discussed so far, a picture of affect emerges that, although related, is substantially different from emotions in its portrayal of how actors are embedded within and constitute social formations. Whereas emotions are episodic, categorical, and culturally labeled ways of feeling, affect is a continuous and bodily mode of being and world-directedness that is

*initially* detached from cultural classifications and categorizations. The view outlined so far might raise concerns that by taking sides with the capacity perspective and sociological as well as social psychological notions, the inherently relational character of affect, as marshaled by the ontology perspective, gets lost on its way. In this final section, I will argue that this is not the case and that the relational character of affect does not necessarily require a revisionary ontology. To further specify the relational qualities of affect, it is useful to first look at some existing understandings of relationality in affect theories and to subsequently discuss alternative views from the literature on relational sociology.

Referring to Foucault’s concept of the *dispositif*, Seyfert (2012) has coined the term *affectif* to denote constellations or formations of affect that reflect its relational character. The term *affectif* refers to “the entirety of all heterogeneous bodies involved in the emergence of an affect” (Seyfert, 2012: 31) as well as “to particular concatenations of bodies and affects” (ibid.: 33). Borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari, Slaby (2016) uses the terms “machinic arrangements” in conjunction with “domains of practice” to express a similar idea. The concept “affective assemblages” (Mulcahy, 2012) is likewise inspired by Deleuze and Guattari and represents the idea that affect is in itself inherently relational. A critical argument informing these perspectives is that affect is framed “in terms of a constitutive relationality between bodies and bodies and objects, in the sense that these dynamic relations are taken to be ontologically prior to the entities related” (Slaby, 2016: 4). This goes hand in hand with the suggestion to see “social qualities as irreducibly co-constituted in relation”, where this co-constitution involves “other social agents and present environmental structures (synchronic relatedness), but also the history of interactions (diachronic relatedness)” (Mühlhoff, 2015: 1004).

It is noteworthy that this literature refrains from engaging with established concepts of relationality that have been a cornerstone of sociological theorizing for decades, as is well reflected in recent debates over the question whether relational sociology indeed constitutes a paradigm shift or is just old wine in new skins. Be that as it may, the present task is not to merely preach relationality, but to more precisely state what relations are, how they constitute bodies (or actors, subjectivities, etc.), and what they have to do with affect.

Part of this task can be achieved by looking at the works of relational sociologists (e.g., Prandini, 2015; Donati, 2012). This camp of scholars, much like affect theorists in cultural studies, criticizes individualism as well as holism and proposes to give “primacy, both ontologically and methodologically, to interactions, social ties (‘relations’), and networks” (Prandini, 2015: 7). Very broadly, relations in this view can be conceived of in two ways (see Crossley, 2013).<sup>i</sup> First, they can be seen as *concrete ties* between actors, where actors usually are human



beings or collective actors, such as governments, organizations, or groups (ibid.), but can likewise comprise objects and non-humans, such as animals, plants, or architecture (McFarlane, 2013). Ties always involve some sort of interaction and can be thought of as a “state of play within an interaction history” (Crossley, 2013: 124). Ties may have different properties and dynamics, involving communication and expectations, exchange and collaboration, conflict, emotional attachments or antagonisms, and usually reflect interdependencies and power relations. Some relational sociologists focus on investigating the patterns and structures of these kinds of ties, often using the techniques of social network analysis, whereas others are more concerned with capturing the cultural and phenomenological dimensions of relations, for example regarding the cultural models, communications, symbols, and expectations they involve (Fuhse, 2015).

Second, relations can be conceived of as relative positions in a social space, as described by Bourdieu (1984). Bourdieu’s social space consists of the dimensions of economic and cultural capital, and one’s position is determined by the volume and combination of capital. *Positional relations* then are expressed as some people being wealthier than others or some being more educated than others, but can well be extended to encompass dimensions such as capabilities and practices, bodily characteristics, or status, power, and prestige. More generally, positional relations are also reflected in *subject positions* and their discursive and political formation (Törrönen, 2001).

Both of these ideal types of relations comprise bodily and material aspects as well as symbolic and discursive features. We can now think of actors as embedded into webs of relations of different sorts and of affect as a common quality of these relations. Affect as a continuous, evaluative, and bodily mode of being and world-directedness in this view is not something that is an “effect” of interrelated bodies, but rather is constitutive of both, bodies their relations. A strong thesis would be that there exists no relation without affective qualities and that these qualities constantly make and re-make the bodies involved.<sup>ii</sup> Bodies do not *precede* relations and interactions, but are a result of them and affect is the main facilitator of this “bodily becoming”.

## 5.1 Examples

One example, taken from Archer (2013), would be the teacher-pupil relation. This is a “necessary” relation in the sense that pupils do not exist without teachers and vice versa. Teacher-pupil relations can be described in terms of concrete ties involving interactions, communica-

tions, expectations and the cultural models related to these ties. Certainly, these relations involve language, conceptual thought and discursive elements, but they are equally constituted by teachers and pupils constantly being affected and affecting one another. Teachers “become” teachers not only qua knowledge and educational skills, but also qua affecting pupils in a certain way and qua being affected by pupils. Likewise, the affects of teacher-pupil relations are essential for subjectification and the formation of self-identities. These affects constitute concrete ties as well as positional relations and denote, for example, physical attraction, gender differences, generational gaps, power interdependencies, institutional affordances, etc. The entirety of these affective relations might then well be labeled “affective arrangements”, “machinic assemblages” or *affectif*.

A second example are relations of humans with objects, artworks, or animals. Although they do not belong to the standard repertoire of relational sociology (see McFarlane, 2013, for a critique), they are an integral part of most affect theories in cultural studies. One need only think of ubiquitous consumer electronics, tech gadgets, and specific brands to estimate the affective qualities of human-object relations. Also, much has already been written on the affective qualities of architecture which is of course not only interesting from the point of view of, say, aesthetics, but likewise from a spatial and societal perspective. Furthermore, recent debates on religious feelings and their being offended, for instance through depreciatory works of art, are insightful to understand the affective qualities of human-object relations. Even though in my understanding of affect, these examples first and foremost see the human body as being affected in a certain way, there is no reason for categorically excluding mutual affection, for instance in human-animal relations.

A third example are relations between human and ideational bodies, such as nations. These relations are necessary in the sense that there are no citizens without nation states and vice versa. Also, they are frequently looked at in emotional terms, for instance regarding the culturally conceptualized and politicized notions of national pride and patriotism. We might equally come think of these relations in terms of their affective qualities that underlie these culturally labeled emotional episodes. For example, the affects that are inscribed in the concrete ties of face-to-face encounters during national celebrations, commemorations, or international sports tournaments or those instigated in gatherings of political parties constitute both the bodies involved as well the events, for instance in terms of what some call affective atmospheres (Brennan, 2004). Also, political leaders are frequently described in terms of their ability to produce shifts in affect, for example when even politically uninterested persons report being “moved”

by rhetorical aptitude. Similarly, citizens are affected by national symbols, such as flags, anthems, (invented) traditions, and narratives (indicating, for example, positional relations) and at the same time *constitute* these symbols through their affective meanings. These symbols may shift one person's (but not another's) affective mode momentarily or lastingly and alter one's stance towards the idea of nation and the many things associated with this idea (e.g., people, buildings, politics, etc.), and, importantly, alter citizens' capacities to act.

## 5.2 Configurations

Given the conceptual cornerstones and examples outlined above, we can think of human bodies as constituting and being embedded in social formations not exclusively, but importantly through affective relations with other actors, ideas, or objects. Because human bodies are continuously and simultaneously affected by different entities and themselves continuously affect others, they are part of a “web” or “field” of affect that has both stable and dynamic properties. These webs or fields comprise both concrete ties as well as positional relations and can be longer lasting or relatively brief, exhibiting dynamic fluctuations. For all the examples mentioned above, the practices and patterns of social organization are critical with regard to the argument that affect is central to sociality. Although affect theorists in cultural studies are keen to emphasize emergence, fluidity, heterogeneity, and change in affect and affective relations, the notions of *affectif*, arrangement assemblage nevertheless suggest some relevance of ordered social life.

Concepts such as “affective practices” (Whetherell, 2012) or “politics of affect” (Thrift, 2004) are attempts at linking some notion of culture, discourse, and society with that of affect. I suggest that this theoretical and empirical challenge can only be addressed by adequately combining theories and methodologies from cultural studies and the social sciences. Instead of resorting to rather vague terminology, it might be fruitful to consider some of the established concepts of social science theory and research. For example, economic sociology has provided fundamental insights into the social organization of contemporary capitalism and it would be careless to not use these insights in assessing the affective dimensions of modern capitalism, but to instead gloss over fine-grained differentiations with vague terminology. Similarly, to understand the affective implications of the challenges of multicultural and multiethnic societies, we need to ask how things like identity politics, minority rights, or social inequality constitute different “affective practices” that may or may not resonate with each other. To understand how individuals are embedded in occupational contexts in affective terms, one needs to understand the organizational structures, hierarchies, and politics of firms and corporations and

how they contribute to the formation of the “modern subject”. Finally, ritual theories provide insights into the vivid dynamics of face-to-face encounters and their affective constitution, which typically is contingent on factors such as norms, conflict salience, or established choreographies.

Although these examples might appear as putting notions of “structure” over those of “change” and “dynamics”, this is neither necessary nor intended. Issues of stability and change can be attended to in different ways. I suggest that affect can be patterned in specific ways, although this patterning certainly is more like a constant re-configuration along similar lines. For this patterning, discourse, language, ideologies and their bodily ramifications certainly play a role. I would even argue that it makes sense to also talk about “affect regimes”, similar to how Reddy (2008) talks about “emotion regimes”. This is not to say that discourse and ideologies somehow keep affective fluctuations “fixed”. Rather, it suggests that fluctuations in affect towards select ideas, objects, or acts remain within a specific spectrum. More substantial changes and dynamics in the intensity of affect occur, for example, when people retract from current, familiar, or historically grown constellations of individuals, ideas, and objects and become part of or initiate other constellations, for instance in cases of transnational migration. This, like many other processes – such as rituals, electoral outcomes, political turmoil, or economic crises – changes the constellations themselves, which in turn can produce more intense fluctuations in affect and lead to substantial re-configurations of affect.

## **6 Conclusion**

Affect has become an integral part of many disciplines in the humanities and in cultural studies. Although sociologists and social psychologists alike have incorporated the concept of affect in their theorizing and research even before it consolidated into this paradigm, understandings of affect between the different disciplines had little to no contact. In this contribution, I have argued that understandings of affect dominant in cultural studies can be fruitful to sociological inquiry and may complement or extend existing sociological understandings of both, affect and emotion. I propose to conceive of affect as a fundamental “mode of being” and a continuous bodily orientation towards the world with meaningful evaluative qualities. These modes of being are ubiquitous and do not have clearly identifiable beginnings and endings. They are brought about by interactions with other bodies (human as well as non-human) and are therefore best conceived of as more or less dynamic fluctuations, for instance in intensity and valence.

Furthermore, I have proposed that although these orientations are independent from conceptual thought and propositional, language-like representations, they are specifically animal,

in particular human, ways of being affected – other bodies might well be affected in ways that remain to be explored. I have argued that affect is susceptible to discourse and culture and is hardly ever “pre-discursive”. But because bodies are often affected without conscious awareness and without necessarily involving conceptual thought, “being affected” frequently overrides discursive and normative knowledge and can hence become a factor in shattering established orders.

Although affect refers to bodies and modes of bodies, it cannot meaningfully be conceived of as something an individual body “has”, but rather as a quality of different types of relations through which interrelated bodies are constituted and constantly reshaped. In line with works in relational sociology, relations in this respect are concrete ties between bodies, for instance bodily interactions, communications or expectations, as well as positional relations and subject positions in a social and cultural space. Actors are therefore embedded in webs or fields of relations, which, although in principle dynamic and fluid, do exhibit some sort of order and structure. Because affect and these webs of relations are two sides of the same coin, affect cannot be grasped sound without concepts of ordered social life. I maintain that established and empirically accessible concepts such as networks, institutions, organizations, social fields, or systems are better suited for the task than fuzzy notions of assemblages or arrangements.

Therefore, in juxtaposition with established perspectives on the social and cultural constitution of emotion, affect yields analytical benefits in that it goes beyond categorical, episodic, and culturally labeled notions of evaluative feelings. This is not to say that emotions are unimportant. On the contrary: Affect, as conceptualized here, is one of the building blocks of emotions and emotions can indeed be understood as culturally classified, contextualized, and labeled affect. Affect in some sense constitutes the “raw material” of an emotion, although I hold that it is not as “raw” as some authors suggest. But affect, because it is best conceived of as a ubiquitous and constantly shifting bodily mode rather than an emotional episode, considerably advances our understanding of various social formations and the actors and objects constituting these formations, from networks comprising humans and non-humans, small groups and communities to nation state societies and from dynamic interactions in face-to-face encounters to longer lasting and mediatized attachments.

Last but not least, theorizing in cultural studies is often highly abstract and it has remained opaque to many how the different concepts involved in these theories can be operationalized for research. The understanding of affect proposed in the present paper should be fruitful to empirical research because it is in many ways – though not entirely – compatible with the methodological tools used in sociology and social psychology.

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### Notes

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<sup>i</sup> I am not saying that this is an exhaustive classification and that there are potentially no other types of relations. But these two will do to illustrate the role of affect.

<sup>ii</sup> This in some way reflects Barad's (2007) concept of intra-action.