

# Emotional foundationalism? Critical remarks on affect and collective emotion in the phenomenological-psychoanalytic account of ethno-national identity

**Gavin Sullivan**

Monash University, Australia

Free University Berlin, Germany

Ethnicities

11(1) 123–130

© The Author(s) 2011

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1468796810388705

etn.sagepub.com



In this critical account of Baldacchino's broad proposal for an emotion-focused phenomenological-psychoanalytic account of ethno-national identity in his article 'The eidetic of belonging', I focus my evaluation on three central features that might, even when treated separately, advance contemporary understanding of group self-conceptions and emotion. The first is that affect (emotion or sentiment) should play a central role in understanding ethno-national identity. The second is that collective emotion should be prominent as a kind of social glue in the formation and maintenance of ethno-national identity (including complex relations between different ethno-national groups). The third is that a psychoanalytic phenomenology of collective emotion addresses limitations that beset conceptions of ethno-national affective subjectivity: particularly, the idea that it is useful to replace representations of irrational and dangerous ethno-national emotion with a new and elaborate theoretical vocabulary of relationships between ego-objects and we-images.

While all three positions can be argued to be present already in the ethno-national identity literature, it is the arguments supporting each feature and an evaluation of the resulting gestalt that will be critically examined to determine

---

**Corresponding author:**

Gavin Sullivan, School of Psychology and Psychiatry, Caulfield Campus, Caulfield East, Melbourne, VIC 3145, Australia

Email: gsullivan34@yahoo.com

whether a conceptual advance (rather than a less than convincing interdisciplinary convergence of ideas) has indeed been achieved. The first highlighted feature of the proposal is addressed by discussing the place for affect in theoretical or critically descriptive accounts in which emotions about one's own and other collectives are *internally related* to the experience of group identity. A central question is whether the emotional foreground of group identity can be emphasized without its equivocation to the background of relations and practices. The second is explored by arguing for the need to assemble detailed reminders of the phenomenology of collective emotion and its limits. The third is evaluated by considering how further coherent insights into ethno-national affective identity can accrue by examining the multiple objects of emotions such as collective pride, without adopting a foundational, non-reflexive account of identity (Brown and Stenner, 2009).

### **The place of affect in understandings of ethno-national identity emotion**

Representations of emotion and affect have been transformed from a marginalized position in the mid-20th century to their current central position in many of the practices, encounters and places constituting personal and public life (Ahmed, 2004; Parkinson et al., 2005; Thrift, 2004). *Pace* Baldacchino, simplistic hydraulic accounts of emotion have been overturned by thorough neuroscientific research. Moreover, social and cultural theorists (e.g., Probyn, 2005) have demonstrated genuine multidisciplinary in their openness to the theories and findings of non-reductive neuroscience. In such a context, when a new theoretical framework such as Baldacchino's implies that emotion can be invoked ubiquitously as an explanation of the dynamics that underpin multitudinous cultural and social phenomena, it is important to overlook the dismissive caricature of contemporary 'neo-hydraulic' psychology to examine further details and provide detailed counter-examples.

In the case of the phenomenological-psychoanalytic account, central importance is given to collective emotion. But what exactly *is* collective emotion? Several possibilities are immediately apparent: (1) people's emotions about the ethno-national collective or collectives they identify with (or which they can be identified as part of) as well as those individuals with whom they do not identify (e.g. we're proud *not* to be like them); (2) emotions that are widely shared and regarded as having collective manifestations even though the object or target of the emotion is not necessarily the same (e.g. people's *individual* thoughts, feelings and memories about 'what makes our nation or ethnic group special', which may have public manifestations or an origin in collective celebrations, moral-emotional climates, or widely shared attachments); and (3) emotions that are demonstrated by collectives (e.g. in public spaces) where reactions are the same (or similar) and the target or object of emotion is the same (e.g. at least one half of the crowd's reaction to a televised game at a public viewing site).

The possible combinations (by no means mapped out or completed by possibilities (1) to (3); cf. Smith et al., 2007) are complex and do not easily fit into even the

most elegant abstraction. For example, while the Cronulla riots in Sydney (a site and source of collective emotion Baldacchino mentions) were engaged in and witnessed first-hand in forms (2) and (3), reactions of shame, disgust and concern were also experienced in forms (1) and (2) by Australians and non-Australians. This includes people's own reactions to what they saw on television along with their imaginings of the reactions of other local and international communities. A crucial question for the phenomenological-psychoanalytic account is what specific claims can be made about one or more of these different forms of collective emotion and their interrelations (i.e. apart from rejecting a foundational role for individual or group shame or guilt as the predominant drivers of the affective economy in many collectives)?

It seems that the individualism of form (1) is not central even though emphasizing phenomenological experience foregrounds the experiencing ego or subject's complex relationship to broader social groups and an even more complex relationship to emotional objects or targets. However, sensitivity to feelings and sensations that become fully fledged emotions when they are experienced and identified within symbolic and discursive systems does not necessarily require a self-contradictory stance in which emotions are discussed in unemotional ways. For example, Branscombe and Doosje (2004) confront this issue when they note that 'because collective guilt is a psychological experience, it need not involve *actually being guilty* in any sense of the word' (2004: 3). Collective guilt therefore appears to be just one of many peculiar collective sentiments that have an uncertain status (e.g. ineffable, intangible, ontologically emergent) because sometimes there seems to be an underlying collective feeling *and* it does not occur because the individual feels personally responsible for crimes against others (and hence cannot be managed, for example, by a personal apology). Such details are not adequately discussed by Baldacchino although there is clearly the potential to do so.

At best, then, collective guilt and many other similar phenomena could be described and analysed in terms of what Anderson (2009) calls an 'affective atmosphere'. However, before examining the details and relevance of Anderson's proposal and the possibility of including both affect and emotion in a coherent account of collective emotion, the differences between emotion and affect that are not clear in Baldacchino's account need to be clarified. The emphasis on affect is typically described as part of the 'affective turn' that has superseded the 'linguistic turn' in social and cultural theory. It seems reasonable to claim that this debate is yet to have an impact on mainstream emotion theory and research in the human sciences and, for that reason, it is still located at the leading edge of theorizing in psychology (e.g. Brown and Stenner (2009) describe how a Spinozian account of affect is one part of a reflexive and non-foundational psychosocial approach). It is also fair to say that mainstream emotion researchers and theorists are still struggling with (or more simply, continuing to avoid) the implications of the turn to language as presented for over 30 years in the form of Wittgensteinian and neo-Wittgensteinian philosophy, social constructionism and robust theoretical and empirical versions of discursive psychology.

A common way of distinguishing between affect and emotion is to argue that the former has a broader focus on the supra- or pre-personal and trans-personal features of emotion. Thrift's (2004) picture of emotion, for example, is in stark contrast to many emotion accounts that emphasize affect only when it is ultimately conscious and present as an effect in its superficial and specifically individual and embodied emotional forms. Addressing affect studies, Thrift writes:

It is extremely important to note that none of these approaches could be described as based on a notion of human individuals coming together in community. Rather, in line with my earlier work, each cleaves to an 'inhuman' or 'transhuman' framework in which individuals are generally understood as effects of the events to which their body parts (broadly understood) respond and in which they participate. (2004: 59)

On this view, developmental psychology about national and ethnic identity could be rethought as the progression (or failure) of bodies to shift and transform from one form of relationality to other multiple, complex forms. However, it seems more useful to consider how affective atmospheres could be used to understand how the 'singular affective qualities that are atmospheres – homely, serene, erotic' that might form around ethno-national identities are 'quasiautonomous'; that is, even 'if atmospheres proceed from and are created by bodies, they are not, however, reducible to them' (Thrift, 2004: 4).

But what the affective turn, therefore, gains in terms of depth – meaning the potential to reference 'deep and often unconscious organismic processes' (Brown and Stenner, 2009: 111) – it potentially loses in terms of coherence, conceptual rigour and specificity. Other discourses of feelings, senses, climates and moods are also appropriate, although there is a danger that such expressions can stretch notions of affect beyond their useful limits (i.e. that particular collective sentiments can be seen to have effects everywhere, even when not immediately apparent). Further detail is needed to chart specific collective emotions, their relations to each other, and the limits of their respective inter- and extra-emotional influences. For example, Massumi (1995) argues that that collective affects become real when they have a greater impact on an economy than what are typically posited as the underlying economic factors:

The ability of affect to produce an economic effect more swiftly and surely than economics itself means that affect is itself a real condition, an intrinsic variable of the late-capitalist system, as infrastructural as a factory. Actually, it is beyond infrastructural, it is everywhere, in effect. Its ability to come second-hand, to switch domains and produce effects across them all, gives it a meta-factorial ubiquity. It is beyond infrastructural. It is transversal. (1995: 106–7)

It will be crucial to see where specific collective emotions (in whichever exact form) have these real effects (i.e. even though economists continue to describe very

specific examples, such as the effect of national pride from hosting a FIFA World Cup in a country such as South Africa, as an intangible benefit).

### **Detailed reminders of the phenomenology of collective emotion**

In Baldacchino's psychoanalytic-phenomenological account, unqualified intensity is a central feature of affect because it forms a dimension along which the 'circuit of belonging' or feelings of solidarity are manifest in reactions with implications for ethno-national identity. For this reason it appears that collective emotions that are not reducible to individual experience (or its body) appear to provide a new grounding for an account that, I shall argue, has some of the problematic features of older ones. For example, intensity is revealed to be a complex state in which the resulting feeling or emotion has an object and particular features, ostensibly captured by love (positivity, attraction) and hate (negativity, avoidance/withdrawal). Moreover, a self, subject, or ego must be invoked because intense feelings are often internally related to inner-outer pictures of experience (which then need to have boundaries or folds), strong feelings are described and expressed in terms of persistent notions of personal depth or the intensity and strength of feelings function as criteria for commitment to an identity.

This is not to reject the idea that collectives of bodies in encounters can generate affects, sensations, reactions, alignments and feelings that might become corporeal and personal candidates for particular emotions in a given symbolic order. However, it is problematic when a reaction positions an individual in relation to others in such a way that the emotional foreground and emotional or non-emotional background of social practices, processes, structures or forms of life are equivocated. In contrast, Woodward (2000) shows how shame is a social emotion that 'is not only interiorized psychologically, but also circulates widely in contemporary culture' (2000: 212–13). It is shaming practices as well as propensities to shame that occur against the background of broader relationships and inequalities. Scheff's (2002) work on shame is described in support of the psychoanalytic-phenomenological account because talking about shame could alleviate its other manifestations (e.g. rage), a point that Baldacchino suggests is progressive because identity affects can change while identity *qua* formal collective property remains the same.

Baldacchino's point that the origin of those feelings has not been explained is a good one, but much more is required than the assembly of connections to similar narratives to provide a convincing argument that the collective emotions *must* be their foundation. Non-emotional *and* emotional practices (economic activities, media representations, public spaces) afford flows of propensities toward emotions and regulation of other feelings. In addition to the earlier passing reference to collective guilt, it is worth making similar points about collective pride because this is very much the territory of affective ethno-national identity that needs a conceptual surview. For example, just as personal responsibility (and personal reparation) is not intrinsic to experiencing the feeling of collective guilt, collective

pride can also circulate between people in ways that can feel inclusive as they simultaneously create new boundaries and zones of exclusion (Sullivan, 2007). This can explain the ambivalence, the guilty pleasure of the middle-class, pro-multicultural and educated citizen towards the enjoyment of national victories (and the nagging feeling that someone, somewhere is excluded or offended by exuberant celebrations). There is also affect, dimly acknowledged, such as an uncomfortable feeling of being in a place where one does not belong or interactions with someone who is too different or 'other' (e.g. reversals of power and feeling 'out of one's depth'). In such instances, a phenomenologically adequate account should mean that one can be surprised by one's own reactions and experience mixed emotions that are complex and difficult to articulate (e.g. such as harbouring an attraction towards the very object of hatred and devaluation). An overarching distinction between love and hate, therefore, does little to promote understanding of complex ambivalence of the type that might be introduced here as collective mixed emotions (i.e. the type of analysis that is found in very good contemporary psychosocial and psychoanalytic analyses).

### **Ego-objects, we-images and the non-foundational approach**

One of the central implications of a recent book by Brown and Stenner (2009) is that psychology can provide coherent insights about topics such as ethno-national identity without producing a further foundational and non-reflexive account. In other words, it may be possible to avoid grounding identity in something essential, something new. Whether incorporating psychoanalytical and phenomenological perspectives adds value to contemporary accounts without attempting to restore an updated unconscious foundation to ethno-national identity cannot be adequately addressed here. However, even though few of the theorists who rethink emotion in affective, relational and embodied forms currently favour the extensive inclusion of psychoanalytic concepts (e.g. Anderson, 2009; Brown and Stenner, 2009; Massumi, 1995; Thrift, 2004), Hook's response to Baldacchino's article demonstrates that there are important insights to be gathered from recent psychodynamic analyses. But I want to argue further that the appeal of a position such as Brown and Stenner's (2009) is that it encourages a change in ontological perspective so that emotions can emerge in a complex, self-organizing fashion, between bodies in social practices without looking for a new foundation (e.g. in the body, affect, psychoanalytic processes, social relations or some complex abstract nexus of all these).

That aim is not so different from the spirit of Wittgenstein's (1953) description of correct judgements of the occurrence of emotion as comprising rules that could form a system: 'What is most difficult here is to put this indefiniteness, correctly and unfalsified, into words' (1953: 227). As noted, although the affective turn may appear to have thoroughly superseded the linguistic turn, Wittgenstein's body of work is not evoked here as a conservative authority in the face of radical endeavours, but rather to remind us to challenge utterances that exceed the bounds of

sense *and* to become aware of unexamined ‘pictures’ woven tightly into the nomenclature of ostensibly innovative theories. If this account seems unnecessarily abstract then it is possible to imagine extending Wittgenstein’s remark about emotion to descriptions of the formation of correct judgements of the emotional climate, mood or atmosphere of one’s own or another ethnic or national group (i.e. how can we provide a complete account without ‘falsifying’ what we set out to examine). Moreover, rather than examine how people must imagine the reality of one or more ethno-national communities with which they have an affective (or other) allegiance, we might follow what has been described as Wittgenstein’s ‘third philosophical period’ (Moyal-Sharrock, 2004) and instead ask on what grounds could someone reasonably deny that their community and its feelings were real? And in such cases, might any identified feeling also be linked to ‘technologies that are allowing us both to “see” affect and to produce affective bodily capacities beyond the body’s organic-physiological constraints’ (Clough, 2007: 2).

Some final points will flesh out my earlier remarks about Baldacchino’s new theory resembling older ones. The model (or picture) underpinning the phenomenological-psychoanalytic account presents collective emotion as the transcendent outcome of the possible relationships between ego-object (e.g. the ‘I’ in ‘I am deeply ashamed of and reject Australian racism’) and the ‘we-image’ (the formal object of collective sentiment). The subject here is both epiphenomenal and the mental object of consciousness, rather like the ‘myself’ in ‘I pride myself on disowning all forms of nationalism’, and it seems that it can potentially be experienced as needing to be defended or evoking fear (e.g. ‘we pride ourselves on always winning or being competitive in international sporting competitions’). In this regard, it is clearly a more complex representation than theories in which the occurrence of ‘real group level emotions’ must be mediated by a uni-dimensional personal identification ‘variable’ (see Smith et al., 2007). While it is also possible to speak of the experiences and sensitivities of having an ‘extended self’ that confronts an unflattering ‘we-image’ generated by an opposing group, the same danger appears when replacing descriptions of what collectives actually do to organize themselves (or a genuine feeling of spontaneous apolitical, national unity) with the representation of the collective that seem to be real. For reality can intrude in specific and contingent forms: a national team may fail dismally; protestors can reveal ugly truths to an international audience; externalized anger against migrants is eventually rejected by the larger community; feelings of euphoria fade; and a nation’s socioemotional resources are depleted as its economic strength declines. There must be room in any account to experience a reality that seems to demand a change in one’s we-image or realize the genuine risk of isolation. Intrusions of reality here could also include powerfully emotional instances of genuine recognition of an ethnic minority by a majority group. While Baldacchino’s aim to bring together many diverse theories and arguments is laudable, the resulting theoretical model bypasses rather than transforms much of the similar conceptual and empirical work that has already been carried out in the human sciences.



## Acknowledgement

Thanks are extended to the Languages of Emotion Cluster in the Free University, Berlin, Germany, for the Guest Professorship that supported the writing of this commentary.

## References

- Ahmed S (2004) *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Anderson B (2009) Affective atmospheres. *Emotion, Space and Society* 2(2): 77–136.
- Branscombe N, Doosje B (eds) (2004) *Collective Guilt: International Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown SD and Stenner P (2009) *Psychology without Foundations: History, Philosophy and Psychosocial Theory*. London: SAGE.
- Clough P (2007) The affective turn: Introduction. In: Clough P, Halley J (eds) *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1–34.
- Hook D (2011) *Ethnicities Psychoanalytic contributions to the political analysis of affect and identification*.
- Massumi B (1995) The autonomy of affect. *Cultural Critique* 31: 83–109.
- Moyal-Sharrock D (ed.) (2004) *The Third Wittgenstein: The Post-Investigation Works*. London: Ashgate.
- Parkinson B, Fischer A, Manstead ASR (eds) (2005) *Emotion in Social Relations: Cultural, Group, and Interpersonal Processes*. New York: Psychology Press.
- Probyn E (2005) *Blush: Faces of Shame*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press.
- Scheff TJ (2002) Working class emotions and relationships: Secondary analysis of classic texts by Sennett and Cobb, and Willis. In: Phillips H, McKinnon H, Scheff TJ (eds) *Toward a Sociological Imagination: Bridging Specialized Fields*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 263–292.
- Smith ER, Seger CR and Mackie DM (2007) Can emotions be truly group level? Evidence regarding four conceptual criteria. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 93(3): 431–446.
- Sullivan GB (2007) A critical psychology of pride. *International Journal of Critical Psychology* 21: 166–189.
- Thrift N (2004) Intensities of feeling: Towards a spatial politics of affect. *Geografiska Annaler* 86(1): 57–78.
- Woodward K (2000) Traumatic shame: Toni Morrison, televisual culture, and the cultural politics of the emotions. *Cultural Critique* 46: 210–240.
- Wittgenstein L (1953) *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell.