Knowledge of the heart: ethical implications of sociological research *with* emotion

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RUNNING HEAD: Ethical implications of research with emotion

Abstract

Emotions have been the subject of social science research for many decades. Predominantly, this research has been orientated around research *on* emotion. While this genre of research focuses on emotion as a topic of inquiry, I propose that research *with* emotion can contribute to a different way of understanding social experience. Due to a different epistemological orientation, different methodological approaches are required with different ethical implications. This paper will define research *with* and *on* emotion, before providing examples of the latter. Based on these examples, this paper explores several ethical implications. The paper concludes with a brief reflection on the benefits of sociological research *with* emotion, against which the many challenges and costs can be assessed.

Knowledge of the heart: ethical implications of sociological research *with* emotion

As the introduction to this special review rightly points out, emotions have been the subject of social science research for many decades. From emotional resilience to emotional labor and positive emotion to emotional energy, this research has largely clustered around Cartesian feeling, Darwinian behavioralism, technical linguistic analysis or the evaluative emphasis of Sartre (Calhoun & Solomon, 1984). In doing so, it has perpetuated the reification of the rational, even as theoretical approaches have sought to reverse the mind-body binary. This form of research is what I refer to as research *on* emotion.

Research *on* emotion focuses on emotion as a topic of inquiry. It seeks to measure or describe aspects of emotion in the same way that researchers have applied a range of well-established methodologies to other topics of sociological inquiry for many decades. Research *on* emotion places the participant in a position of relative passivity, with the researcher charged with creating new knowledge from the data on emotion that is collected. Throughout this special edition, there are numerous examples of such research *on* emotion and I do not need to add more here. Rather, in this paper, I wish to make a distinction by exploring research *with* emotion.

By research *with* emotion, I point to emotion as a different type of knowledge, and in doing so, seek to overtly challenge the authority of the mind-body binary. This approach to emotions research embodies a different way of knowing and because of its different epistemological base, often requires less conventional methodological approaches (with significantly different ethical implications). Research *with* emotion involves an equal relationship of knowledge co-creation between researcher and participants, which challenges traditional notions of researcher objectivity, distance and power. Invariably, it embeds the researcher into the research in such a way that their emotional responses are part of the meaning making process, with all the associated rewards and costs. To distil this distinction into one example, research *on* emotion might detail how crying in certain social contexts can work to underpin emotional resilience, while research *with* emotion would seek to see the social world anew through those tears.

As this paper will demonstrate, the origins of this distinction are not post-structural, rather they lie

in critical-interpretivist and ethnographic traditions (even though examples of research *with* emotion are far less common within sociology). Hence, after clarifying the above definitional distinction further through an explication of the epistemological features of emotional knowledge, I provide two cases of research *with* emotion drawn from my past research work. Based on these examples, I then explore several relevant ethical implications. The paper concludes with a brief reflection on the benefits of sociological research *with* emotion, against which the many challenges and costs can be assessed.

Emotional knowledge and epistemology

I define emotion as a semi-conscious, irrational, social construct that is experienced and shared amongst humans. I take this position largely because I wish to distinguish emotion from affect, which I concur to be the non-conscious, elusive and intense feeling that is continually interacting between human beings following Massumi (2002). I see emotion as the recognizable and subjective subset of affect. Emotional knowledge, then, is a way of understanding human experience through emotive and evocative social connections.

This emotional form of knowledge has not been the subject of substantial interest within the discipline of sociology. No doubt this is due, in part, to the discipline emerging during an epoch when emotion was not just neglected, it was feared and maligned (Boler, 1997). In the light of classical sociological attempts to find a rationale for the titanic social structural shifts beneath the industrial revolution, it is perhaps not surprising that emotion was regarded at best as a distraction. For Marxists, emotion was a form of false consciousness, while for critical theorists their interest limited itself to untangling the rational elements of emotions operating in discourse communities (Habermas, 1972). As sociology has grown, it has also continued to seek to distance itself from the pathologizing of emotion as seen in medicine and psychology, as well as from romantic notions of emotion in art and literature.

However, one field that has been active in exploring emotional knowledge is that of critical-

interpretivist pedagogy. Emerging from Jungian philosophy, a group of scholars have sought to explore how the unconscious and irrational interrelates with the conscious life. It is in this tradition that Hillman (1981) first sought to articulate the features of the 'thought of the heart'. His approach fused the mind and emotion in an encompassing way of knowing that sought to realign life with emotion (post the fractious imposition of rationality in the modern western world). Working from within this tradition, Lupton (1998) has argued that emotion is not only aligned with the processes of human knowing and learning, but is also central to it.

At the core of this epistemological shift to rediscover and revalue emotional ways of knowing is a sensitivity to the centrality of emotion in the emergence of transformative knowledge (Willis, 2004). It is by dissolving the existing rational frameworks that constrain knowledge and change, while also disrupting the reason-emotion binary, that these scholars argue that mythopoetic learning can occur (Davison, 2008). As Leonard and Willis (2008) explain, *mythopoesis* is an attempt to understand human experience through the stories (myths) that we make (poesis), an important component of which are the emotions that give these stories power and allow us to 'get a feel' for the experiences of others. In the words of Dirkx (2008: 71):

> Emotion-laden experiences, therefore, are not necessarily symptomatic of problems, pathologies, or a dysfunctional psyche. Rather, they can play an integral role in the process of knowing more deeply both our worlds and ourselves.

It is also this sensitivity to emotion and the aesthetic that connects to the critical tradition (Holland and Garman, 1992). It is also here that emotional knowledge touches most closely on the concerns of sociology.

Boler (1997; 1999) has put forward the most detailed argument for the coming together of emotion, pedagogy and sociology. She defines emotion as constructed and located within social and historical contexts, which are open for use in exploring power relations. For Boler, emotion can not

only uncover structural injustice, but also develop a site for political resistance. The coming together of sociological orientations and the emotive can allow people to learn how to articulate their feelings as expressions of what is important, as well as catalyze transformation by imagining expectations that exceed those offered to them. By focusing emotional knowing on the collective, looking for a semiotics of empathy and using emotion to connect individuals to their social contexts, Boler shows that people can move beyond disadvantage, guilt and powerlessness to cultivate democracy. As such, these insights can address criticisms that critical sociological approaches struggle to motivate and sustain social change unless they involve the head, the hand and the heart (Prosser, 2008). Conversely, they can also be accessed in times of institutional reform to look at emotion as a lens through which to view dramatic social change (van veen and Lasky, 2005).

However, embracing emotional knowing does not come without its epistemological challenges, including a need to ground it within ontological foundations. While such efforts play an important definitional role, give credibility to the research approach and provide a series of methodological guidelines, there is also a risk that philosophical constraints may apply a bounded rationality to emotional knowing. As Conquergood (1991) warns, the mind over body binary rules in academic work and we must be wary of the rational re-exerting epistemological superiority over emotive and sensual knowing. Too often the demands of the academy kill off (Finley, 2003) emotive, aesthetic and creative knowing. Hence, we must heed Hendry's (2007) warning that personal accounts should not be reduced down to simply a printed transcript or analyzed object – to do this is a violation of the sacredness of humanity. While the academy has historically been preoccupied with objectifying, measuring, reducing and documenting, those dedicated to researching with emotion must not forget a long heritage of speaking, hearing and feeling as a means of knowing. We need to develop a new epistemology of feeling.

Researching emotion – ethical considerations

There are important ethical issues associated with all forms of emotions research. Due to the very nature of these studies, they are in sensitive areas, with the likelihood to touch powerful feelings and the potential to cause harm. Still further, there is the challenge of designing a viable research method that will be granted approval by university and other relevant ethical bodies. However, the adaptation or expansion of existing ethical strategies recommended by Human Resource Ethics Committees (HRECs) would seem entirely appropriate for studies of emotion. Communication with HRECs prior to (and frequently after) ethics applications are submitted would be beneficial. Detailed preparation and presentation of research instruments and protocols would help HRECs to envision and assess any ethical risks. Careful planning of emotional protection, mandatory notification and withdrawal arrangements for participants would reassure HRECs of the responsibility of the approach being taken. The pre-establishment of relevant, reliable and rigorous post-interview debriefing and post-study counseling arrangements would be vital. It is also likely that HRECs would welcome provisions for verification of the content of data with participants both soon after collection and after preliminary analysis. With the use of strategies such as these, meeting the ethical demands of HRECs in all forms of emotions research should not prove insurmountable.

However, once we have made the epistemological shift to research *with* emotion, there are new ethical responsibilities, which include protecting the autonomy and integrity with which meaning is created and ensuring that research is a productive use of participants' time and efforts. Particular attention should be given to how data collection and analysis is conducted. For instance, it is more likely that an open discussion where participants are asked to recount an emotive event will provide richer emotional knowledge than a semi-structured interview or set survey protocol. My past research with teachers working in highly demanding (and emotive) contexts (Prosser, 2008), which involved poverty, trauma on a daily basis, drew on such an approach. What follows is an example of a verbatim response using such an approach:

Brenton: *Can you recount a time when you felt strongly about your work as a teacher?*

Teacher: *There have been times when I have felt kind of burnt out, and... I felt it strongly.*

At the end of last year, I finished with the group of students, I had had them for five years in my care group, worked quite hard with them all, throughout those five years, and a few of them dropped their bundle just at the end, just before they were sitting exams, or just before they had to hand up final assignments, and it was to do with stuff that was going on in their life, but in their personal and family life, but it made me feel a bit disillusioned...

Well it made me think "Gee, we've worked so hard here, we're really achieving", because when the department asks you to do the annual report, it's all about SACE results, retention, and I started to feel like the kind of work we were doing, it wasn't being reflected in the measurable outcomes that the department was asking us for. It was in other ways that we were measuring. Yeah, so I started to feel a little disillusioned because we'd been working so hard... And I guess it was the end of a five-year period of that care group, and I was starting to think "Gee, it is actually pretty hard, can I sustain another bout of time?"...

But [in the holidays] I caught up with some of those kids from my care group, and they all managed to find really successful kind of outcomes. Some of them went to TAFE; a couple did go to uni, even though it wasn't perhaps the course that they wanted but it turned out quite well, and one of the girls I had, who just ran into me in the mall, came and gave me a big hug, and said thanks. I said "What for?", and she said, "Between Year 9 and 11 I was suicidal, and seeing you there every day kept me alive. Now I have a job and I am going somewhere".

This account brought tears to my eyes when I first heard it, as it still does now. Clearly, research *with* emotion relies on our empathy and our ability to be vulnerable ourselves as we support others to know emotively (Tillmann-Healy and Kiesinger, 2001). It is unimaginable that a researcher can engage with examples such as the above, while distancing themselves from their emotions (Sciarra, 1999). Rather, researchers should expect to connect both cognitively and emotionally with participants and to rely on their emotional reactions as part of the research process (Gilbert, 2001). This raises question of the individual capacity of the researcher to engage in research *with* emotion. This form of research can be shocking, demanding and life derailing, the lives of researchers do not stop during interviews and they cannot leave their past experiences at the interview room door. There is the very real possibility of harm being caused to researchers unless they are adequately pre-prepared for the unique demands of research *with* emotion and adequately counseled during and after their research (Rager, 2005). It is also important for researchers to consider self-care strategies

such as journaling, co-researching, external peer debriefing and regular exercise. An associated issue that also needs to be considered is what happens at the end of the research study. The relationships forged through this research can be intense and interdependent, the justice of exiting these relationships at the end of the study (with valuable data in hand) is questionable. In this case, my contact with the teacher continued for several years after the research project, but has now faded away naturally due to my moving to a new city (and the demands of having a young family). However, for at least a year post-project, there was regular contact, initiated by both sides, that discussed this teacher's emotional journey within a social institution located in one of Australia's lowest socio-economic areas.

Another specific feature of my research is that our focus is sociological. The discipline of sociology has within it a tradition of seeing the world anew by adopting the view of minority groups. In this case, my consideration of the minority was through the experiences of the mainstream teacher working in a minority context. This approach lessened ethical concerns and demands. However, if this same approach was adopted to explore the emotional knowledge of marginalized individuals directly, then the usual ethical issues of working with minority groups are amplified significantly. The potential harm to these participants, as individuals and collectively, must be carefully weighed and justified against the benefits of the study before HREC approval.

Another aspect of taking a sociological approach emerges from the disciplinary interest in collectives and cultures. Sociological research *with* emotion will often work with groups in different forms. An important ethical responsibility is to carefully consider group dynamics and how to prevent causing harm to participants within study groups. For instance, the recount of an emotive event in a focus group could elicit a range of negative emotional responses from others, some towards the speaker. Alternatively, the presentation of negative and emotive perspectives of one cultural group by a member of another, can have harmful effects both in the study, but also potentially in relations between groups beyond the study. Similar considerations should also be applied to the potential impact of the final reporting of studies.

Ethical implications of research 'with' emotion

In this part of the paper, I use another example from my past research to illustrate some of the ethical challenges associated with research *with* emotion. By way of background, I commenced my doctoral studies with a group (but not a topic) in mind. I had been involved for several years as a leader on a respite program for young adolescents from disadvantaged backgrounds and wanted this experience to inform my research. All the young people in the program had been referred by social workers and many (due to their past behavior) either had been institutionalized in the past or were on the verge of being interned within youth training centers. To explore the possible areas of inquiry in this site, I established a small pilot study where I interviewed the leaders in the program to ask them to recount their views and past experiences. The organization that oversaw the program had its own HREC and supported the pilot study, so ethical approval did not prove to be a problem. I did not set out to conduct research *with* emotion, but the accounts that were shared by my colleagues along with my existing relationships with them, resulted in eliciting knowledge that could not be properly understood without the emotional.

> *"You run camps? Who for?"*
> *Boys who need a break,*
> *boys whose parents need a break,*
> *or just boys who are broken.*
>
> *"What are they like?"*
> *He's eight,*
> *likes Power Rangers, cricket and footy,*
> *is shy, still has baby fat,*
> *and the sweetest smile you've ever seen.*
> *But he won't shower,*
> *he smothers himself with shit,*
> *so the adults won't be attracted to him*
> *and do what they did last time.*
>
> *He's nine,*
> *shines at eight-ball, exploring and climbing,*
> *is tiny, tough, even nuggetty,*
> *and is a bundle of happy energy.*
> *But his mum doesn't want him,*

he cries and kicks a door down in anger,
so the adults won't forget he exists
and do what they did last time.

He's ten,
plays basketball and handball no-end,
is slow to catch on, yet so lovable.
But he's A.D.D.,
he yells, he fights, he threatens, he taunts,
so the adults won't know he's the weakest
and do what they did last time.

He's eleven,
loves go-karts, bikes and fishing,
is tall and lean, maybe even stringy,
and has freckles and a college hair-cut.
But he loses his temper,
he hits and bites and spits and screams,
so they adults won't know he's afraid
and do what they did last time.

He's twelve,
lives for woodwork, computers and horses,
is short for his age, yet so mature,
and has the round-rimmed glasses of an artist.
But he wants to die,
he scratches his wrists and watches for cars,
so the adults won't be there any more
and do what they did last time.

These are just boys, who are broken,
it breaks me too.
Any more questions?

While I could have attempted to describe the emotions within this account, I felt it would have resulted in a loss of autonomy and integrity of meaning. As is immediately obvious, this account is not only evocative, it also invokes the emotional, the familial, the institutional, the cultural and the sociological.

To explore the ethical issues associated with research *with* emotion requires more than a poem. However, within the scope of a single paper, it can provide a useful tool. An initial question that is raised by this poem is how does research *with* emotion respond to the potential that it may uncover harm or abuse. When a researcher is embedded in a network of relationships, as is necessary for research *with* emotion, responding to such issues is not as simple as picking up the phone and

notifying authorities. While the researcher's responsibility to the child cannot be ignored, neither should it be enacted without consideration of the potential avenues of harm that could result for child, parent or the researcher. This leads to another possible tension when using this form of research with children, namely the relative interests and responsibilities of the adults caring for these children. The emotional capacity of youth needs to be taken into account in the research plan, as does the researcher's responsibilities to those to whom the children return. Parents and teachers may not welcome the consequences of emotionally unsettled children returning to their care.

Another risk of research *with* emotion is that it is not just reporting on what is known, it is co-creating or uncovering new knowledge (either individually or collectively). This new knowledge can prompt emotional crises or trigger past trauma. This knowledge can also shape future behavior or influence existing relationships. Such occurrences cannot be predicted, but must be accounted for in the research protocol and counseling arrangements. In the case of this poem, there is an overt assertion of the oppression in these children's lives, but when emotions research explores this further with the children, what are the consequences? Hence, the researcher must consider if their research will harm in its attempts to heal. Further, if this research opens up new perspectives and identities for the participants (particularly youth) to embrace, to what environments will they return and what supports will be in place to sustain them? Is it ethically just for this research to prompt social change, but potentially increase social injustice? And where does the researcher-participant responsibility extend and end? These are difficult questions which will vary with every study but must be addressed when assessing the potential risk as part of applications for ethical approval of human research studies.

This example also raises questions around who receives the benefit from the research. How are results reported back to individual participants in a form that is neither a hollow caricature nor a heavy revisiting of past experience? How can this be done in a way that benefits each and every one individually? And when research *with* emotion is used in a form to benefit participants collectively, how can this be done in a form that protects emotive power without leaving individual participants

identifiable and vulnerable? It is an important ethical principle that research designs address their key questions, produce appropriate data and provide rigorous knowledge so that the contributions of participants has not been wasted. This principle is all the more pertinent in research *with* emotion to ensure that it does not open up intense feeling without providing tangible benefit.

Concluding remarks

Research *on* emotion has been the focus of the sociology of emotions for several decades and there continues to be refinements to methodology. While important, these changes tend to be incremental and contextual with few new ethical implications. As I have argued in this paper, what has significant ethical implications for the sociology of emotions is an epistemological shift to research *with* emotion. In some ways, this shift mirrors the post-structural interest in affect, while remaining within a critical-interpretivist tradition. However, there is one common ethical question that will pertain to all research approaches in the sociology of emotions: what is the value of the knowledge produced by the emotional research and how does it justify and offset the inevitable costs?

For this paper, the answer is three-fold. Researching with emotion is holistic in its approach and hence it helps us better understand the rational and irrational elements of human agency. It is empathic, which means it can act as a powerful catalyst to equity and social justice for silenced and marginalized groups. And it is also transformative, which can draw our attention to aspects of the changing lives of individuals and how they can converge as a feature in broader social change. Research *with* emotion is always intensely challenging and despite these worthy contributions, they must always come second to the ethical responsibility to protect the subjects in our research.

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