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Locke, Abigail

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Original Citation

Locke, Abigail (2002) Gendered emotion: personal, cultural or discursive? *Feminism & Psychology*, 12 (1). pp. 97-104. ISSN 0959-3535

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Gendered Emotion: Personal, Cultural or Discursive?

Abigail Locke

Nancy J. Chodorow: *The power of feelings. Personal meaning in psychoanalysis, gender and culture*. London: Yale University Press, 1999, xi + 328pp. £17.95. ISBN: 0-300-07959-1 (hbk).

Wendy Langford: *Revolutions of the Heart. Gender, power and the delusions of love*. London: Routledge, 1999, xiii + 168pp. £14.99. ISBN: 0-415-16298-X (pbk).

Locke, A. (2002). Gendered emotion: Personal, cultural or discursive? *Feminism and Psychology*, 12 (1), 97-104.

GENDERED EMOTION

The pursuit of emotion as a topic is one of the most established and long running themes in psychology. From the early behaviourist theories of James-Lange to cognitive explanations, through to the social constructionist and discursive accounts of Harré (e.g. Harré & Gillett, 1994) and Edwards (1999), the basis of emotion eludes us. Notions of emotionality have for feminist researchers taken on another meaning entirely. The physiological essentialist approaches only serve to construct the potential for gender differences in the emotions and as such undermine feminist critiques. Thus feminist approaches must turn away from these absolute “genetically-wired” viewpoints to highlight what emotionality as a socially and gendered construct accomplishes.

There is strong evidence for constructed gendered perceptions of emotionality and in particular, the stereotypical view of female emotionality. In terms of feminist thought, the gender differences that appear in emotionality can be seen as being due to cultural expectations of emotional expression and long-held stereotypical notions of ‘emotional female’ and ‘non-emotional male’. This position proposes that emotionality is culturally coded as feminine whilst rationality is coded as masculine (Lupton, 1998), and masculine identity is bound up with restrictive emotionality (Jansz, 2000). The gendered aspects of emotional experience are clear and the traditional stereotypes of emotional female versus non-emotional male are culturally evident and endorsed (Fischer, 1993; Plant, Hyde, Keltner & Devine, 2000; Lupton, 1998; Lutz, 1990).

The two books under review here are Nancy Chodorow's *The Power of Feelings* (1999) and Wendy Langford's *Revolutions of the Heart* (1999). These books start from the basis of psychoanalysis and 'object relations' theory, although differing in the emphasis they place on these, and attempt to provide a link between these principles and cultural effects. There are two main themes of this review essay and each of these will be tackled in turn. The first is a brief explication and discussion of the roots of emotion, focusing on Chodorow's theory of emotion as inner states, versus my proposition that they are discursive resources. The second picks up Langford's theme of the relation of emotionality, in particular love, to gender and power.

PSYCHIC VERSUS CULTURAL

In *The power of feelings*, the main questions that Chodorow poses are "[c]an you have a cultural psychology that is not culturally deterministic and that can account for the force of personal psychological experience and motivation? Can you have a personal psychology that includes culture? Can you have both culture and psychology, or do you have to choose between them" (p.7). Chodorow argues against cultural relativism and determinism and believes that what the cultural arguments fail to realise is that when looking at feelings, individual experience and agency needs to be addressed and she argues that one major component of this is psychodynamic. Her interest is in how cultural meaning help to constitute psychic life but, for Chodorow, the unconscious realm has as much importance as culture in creating meaning for the individual and she uses clinical case studies to explicate her claims.

Chodorow's main concerns and theoretical stance for the book are presented as looking for a theory of meaning, which comes from both within (intrapsychic) and without (culturally) She takes both sides of the inner-outer argument and claims that she wants to situate herself on the cusp, claiming that we need both inner and outer worlds to think and experience. She looks at the tensions with using such an approach and the long-standing critique of the psychoanalytic method before moving on to her attempts to link psychoanalysis and culture. Whilst doing so she mounts an attack on postmodern and post-structuralist approaches, particularly to emotion. The crux of her argument is to merge the inner psyche with cultural elements and as such, cultural position and gender mix with unconscious drives. Through three main parts of the book examining psychoanalysis, gender and emotion, she concludes that a:

"psychoanalysis that begins with the immediacy of unconscious fantasy and feeling found in the clinical encounter illuminates our understanding of individual subjectivity and potentially transforms all sociocultural thought. It demonstrates that all theories of meaning must incorporate the unconscious realm. At the same time, feminist, anthropological, and other cultural theories require that psychoanalysts take seriously the ways in which cultural meanings intertwine with and help to constitute psychic life" (p.274).

Her conclusion is troubling and she demonstrates a reflexive naivety. In taking account of the role of culture in "helping to constitute psychic life", she ignores its role in constituting her own terms of reference for this discussion, psychoanalysis itself included. Chodorow's use of "found in the clinical encounter" is a gross underestimation of the clinical encounter as a cultural arena of language, social relations and the construction and use of meanings and Chodorow takes psychoanalysis, which is part of her own culture, as if it were a universal, neutral

standpoint. She is inevitably inside culture, in all of the concepts and categories that she uses, everything from psychoanalysis and the unconscious, to agency and the very dichotomy itself, of person-culture, and this is a failure of reflexivity that is surely crucial in a discussion of this kind.

To combat discursive claims as to language constructing a version of patient ideas, Chodorow claims that “[t]he meanings I describe are, finally, articulated in language, but as any analyst or patient knows, this language often only approximates the feeling of inner psychic reality” (p.77) (for a counter-argument to this, see Billig, 1999). This is obviously and rhetorically, a hard claim to counteract and is similar to standard cognitive psychology, and as a discursive theorist, my interest would lie in the construction of these meanings by the ‘patient’ in the therapy sessions. For a psychoanalyst, Chodorow’s conceptualisation may well be a radical argument, but for discursive psychology, it leaves many more questions unanswered than answered.

EMOTIONS: PERSONAL, CULTURAL OR DISCURSIVE?

Writing as a discursive theorist, I find Chodorow’s dismissiveness regarding post-structuralist approaches over simplified and this is best demonstrated in chapter five (p.129) where she focuses on emotions as personal and cultural. Here she focuses on the work of three researchers, Geertz, Rosaldo and Lutz and systematically critiques their arguments. She draws comparisons between anthropology, ethnography and psychoanalysis to examine the anthropology of feelings. Her main critique focuses on Lutz’s approach to emotion as culturally determined and as Chodorow notes “[e]motion here then becomes entirely a matter of discourse and discursive practices” (p. 154). This quote marks out one of the most apparent arguments in the book as to

whether emotion is best conceptualised as a psychological discrete entity versus a cultural and discursive device. For Chodorow, “[e]motions are states, complexes of physically palpable, feeling – imbued, unconscious fantasy meanings, as well as practices” (p.155) and she believes that emotions and feelings are enmeshed within stories and tell their own unconscious stories. I would agree that emotions and feelings are part of narrative and stories, however I take emotion words as being active constructions to perform interactional business, rather than as labels for inner and unconscious states. To claim that there are inner ‘psychic’ realities is to pose a conceptual question that empirically cannot be answered and an example of this is provided on her discussion of the emotion debate of inner versus cultural and discursive.

According to Chodorow, in terms of individual subjectivity, individual meaning comes before cultural and she argues that from ‘earliest infancy, meaning is emotional as well as cognitive...and antedates the acquisition of language” (p76). This stands in direct contrast to Wittgenstein’s (1953) private language game whereby emotion and other ‘inner’ words cannot basically refer to inner states, but must be elements of social exchange within ‘forms of life’. The only way we could learn and use a word for an inner experience is by taking part in the ways it is publicly used.

Chodorow sets up different levels of emotion theory and argues that one level (with researchers such as Lutz and Rosaldo) focus on culturally determined emotions. In direct contrast to this approach, a second level of emotion argument is the ‘natural hardwiring” (p. 164) or “universalistic bioinstinctual determinism” (p. 164) whereby emotions are seen to be uniform across different cultures. Chodorow argues that by

having the theoretical argument set as a biological-cultural dichotomy, it rules out “a third realm, the psychic reality of introjective and projective-transferential shaping, enabled, certainly, by psychobiological capacities and taking into account through the transformations of unconscious fantasy the cultural and interpersonal” (p.164), and she continues that, emotions will be best understood “through analysis of personal psychobiography and individuality” (p. 164). Thus for Chodorow, emotions are highly individualised. This opposes not only cultural and discursive approaches to emotion, but also the cognitive school of emotion, whereby set appraisal components lead to set emotions.

In terms of emotion theory, this is a pivotal argument. Emotions are deemed to be within us, as inner, discrete, mental states and are subjective in that only we-as-persons can know ‘how we really feel’. Conversely, discursive psychology proposes that emotion words are culturally coded, and used rhetorically and indexically (i.e. bound in context) to construct events as problematic or out of the ordinary (Buttny, 1993; Edwards, 1999), and as part of narrative emplotments (Sarbin, 1989), rather than labelling, and derived from, internal states. To claim to measure and theorise about internal emotions, is to claim to measure what is immeasurable and unspecified.

My discussion of Chodorow’s approach to emotion has demonstrated some fundamental problems in the assumptions that she holds. I move now to looking at emotion and its relation to gender and power, focusing on the work of Wendy Langford.

LOVE AND POWER

In *Revolutions of the heart*, Langford provides a fascinating interpretation of love in heterosexual relationships and its relationship to power. She addresses the 'democratisation' thesis (that love in modern day society is seen as equal) head on and uses psychoanalysis as a backdrop theory to her discussions. She examines love in relationships and asks "[i]s power separable from love?" (p.149). Her project 'is inspired by the radical questioning of feminist critiques, pursued through engagement in empirical enquiry, developed using the explanatory power of psychoanalytic theories, and driven by a personal quest to find the 'truth' about love" (p.xiii). Using fifteen accounts from heterosexual women, she claims her book reveals, "exactly how the dynamics of couple relationships are determined by the play of power" (p. xiii).

Langford situates her argument in psychoanalysis and proposes "[t]he development of a 'sociopsychanalytic' account of romantic love" (p.43). Langford's argument moves through seven chapters, each building on the revelations of the last. She conceptualises falling in love as a means of 'romantic transformation' (p.23) where women "'became themselves' through 'losing themselves'" (p. 59). This to Langford is "the unconscious experience of 'refinding' the perfect parent and the perfect self" (p.61). And she continues with "everybody's mummy" (p.64) where the illusion of love turns to disillusionment and she that love turns into a mundane relationship characterised by "gendered dynamics" (p.64) before moving on to "the daughter's submission" (p.89) and "dialectics of love" (p.114).

Langford argues that power in heterosexual relationships is governed by male emotional withdrawal ("abandonment", p.65) and notes the problems in researching power as her female participants claimed to either be equal or most powerful in their

relationships, although their previous accounts had seen them as expressing dissatisfaction with the relationship. As Langford notes:

[t]hus it can be seen that women's feelings of power were rooted in the *very same relational dynamics* about which they complained so consistently, and which appeared as the source of their disappointment and dissatisfaction. On the one hand they were hurt by their partner's emotional abandonment and were resentful that they had become 'responsible for everything'. On the other, the fact that this was the case could lead them to feel strong and capable. It was in this sense that women felt powerful" (p.75, her emphasis).

Langford argues that once emotional withdrawal has taken place by men then women often choose to 'make it work' and as such they turn to 'maternal compensations' (p.78). This Langford argues, is a "gendered pattern [that] appears embedded within, and characterised by, a 'mother-son dynamic'" (p.82) and she argues that a useful theoretical approach to explain what her participants have discussed is Chodorow's 'object relations' theory. Langford proposes that love arises out of a 'failure of identity' (p.83) and that "love's 'failure', like love's 'realisation' is not simply a result, but a *process*" (p.83, her emphasis). Thus for Langford women's power is "maternal power" (p.87).

She discusses "the daughter's submission" whilst looking at how power is negotiated throughout the relationships. She claims that the women did not recognise that men's emotional withdrawal was a way of exercising power and control within the relationship. For the women in her study, they regarded exercising power as "doing something" which may be verbal or physical, rather than emotional withdrawal. She

moves on to the ‘power of the fathers’ whereby the woman’s own responses combined with her partner’s withdrawal, ‘triggers existential anxiety’ (p.112).

Langford’s claims that women did not recognise the ‘real’ power in the relationship demonstrates a strong point of contrast with discursive psychology. Rather than listening to and analysing the women’s accounts of their lives, Langford wants to disagree with them and substitute her superior, theoretical perspective for theirs’ and she works their discourse and experience into her own theoretical frame. This approach is very contrary to discursive psychology, but also analytically insensitive to Langford’s framework of interpretation as a discourse with its own history and uses.

Finally Langford moves on to “dialectics of love” (chapter six, p.114) and “misguided revolutions” (chapter seven, p.141). In chapter six, she produces a premature and disillusioned conclusion of what her research thus far has shown that “[i]n and of itself, love appears productive of relational dynamics which could hardly be more incompatible with the ideal of ‘democratic love’” (p. 115). From this pessimistic conclusion, Langford turns to the psychoanalytic work of Jessica Benjamin who argues that through gendered conditions, the bonds of love have become twisted in our patriarchal society. Finally she concludes that love fails because it is ‘bound to fail’ (p.150).

A DISCURSIVE APPROACH TO EMOTION, GENDER AND POWER

The argument pursued through this essay has been the issue of emotions and feelings as inner, psychic and discrete versus cultural and discursive and I have focused on, and discussed, Chodorow and Langford’s work in relation to discursive psychology,

to explicate the tensions in approaches and issues. A discursive psychological approach has many merits in order to examine the difficult relationship between emotion, gender and power and what both texts here lack is the discursive edge. The psychoanalytic approach embraced by both Chodorow and Langford, derives universalistic claims about the nature of gender, power and emotion, from what is surely a set of materials taken from a highly culturally specific group of people, in Chodorow's case, clinical case studies and for Langford, interviews with women. What both authors share, rather than universalistic truths are perhaps a shared cultural narrative and discourse of emotions and relationships, which both authors are abstracting out from their participants' talk, as something essential, and free of history and language, and I will draw on Langford's work to demonstrate this point.

Langford's data is fascinating and as a discursive theorist, I wanted to take the analysis further and look at her participants' accounts as particular constructions of events to perform certain interactional business. For example, Rose (p.36) describes herself as "falling in love" and thus constructs it as something that is out of her control. Langford treats transparently that Rose is 'really' in love, whereas in discursive terms, Rose may be providing an account for having relations with a man who lived with his partner and their children. Thus her construction of 'fallen in love' may serve to remove her accountability and justify her behaviour, for being in a potentially accountable situation of being 'the other woman'. In addition, although perhaps unsurprising was the amount of emotion discourse deployed by participants in constructing their narratives of being in love.

In addition, Langford contrasts the stark feelings at the beginning of the relationship, when the women initially 'fell in love', to their disillusioned, mundane experiences. What she ignores is that both of these scenarios are constructed as extreme, to stand in interactionally direct contrast to one another. This rhetorical structure has been demonstrated in settings such as Relate sessions (Edwards, 1994), and this leads into a strong criticism Langford's (and to some extent Chodorow's) approach as to how she takes her participants' responses at face value as something that simply happens, rather than as an account offered by (some) women, that is part of *their* own accountability for *their* role in events. Langford's analysis is rather transparent and she uses women's talk as a window on their thoughts and experiences, and as a basis for taking issue with, and theorising about, their thoughts and lives, and even in the case of 'emotional withdrawal', onto the nature of their male partners.

Evidence for the rhetorical deployment of emotion categories was found in Langford's account of 'rational man / emotional woman' (p.95) whereby males would refuse to discuss an issue unless their partner was 'rational' and not 'being emotional'. According to Langford '[a]nalysis suggests, however, that employment of a rational/emotional dichotomy was generally no more than a device whereby men attempted to get their own way' (p. 96). It is disappointing that Langford can regard this dichotomy as a male device, yet seems unaware of the rhetorical uses of emotional devices being deployed throughout her interviews. What Langford in fact has is a collection of women's accounts and thus I could argue that it is a female device to say that it is a male device!

The rhetoric of emotion (Lutz, 1990) suggests a set of roles and here is where the gendered aspects become most apparent, as does the negotiation of power. As Kenneth Gergen has noted: “[e]motion terms are socially and politically loaded” (Gergen, 1999: 108) and emotionality is used as a subtle and indirect means of evaluating a person. Gergen cites examples of common binaries in western society for example, ‘*rational versus emotional*’, ‘*effective versus ineffective*’, and ‘*strong versus weak*’, and notes the imbalance provided in the binaries, arguing that the former term is often privileged over the latter, i.e. it is deemed to be better to be rational rather than emotional. These binaries are often used in depictions of gender with men being associated with the privileged terms. And Lutz suggests a similar point that “qualities that define the emotional, also define women. For this reason, any discourse on emotion is also, at least implicitly, a discourse on gender”. (Lutz, 1990: 151).

Langford’s wish to uncover power in couple relationships is interesting and something that in discursive psychology (e.g. Edwards & Potter, 1992), has been difficult to examine as theoretically, the ‘extra-discursive’ is not open for analysis, and a common critique of it follows these lines. Thus issues such as power, must be oriented to in the talk (by for example, repairs and formulations) and has to be a concept grounded in the analysis rather than introduced as an explanatory rhetorical construct, however as Lutz (1990) has argued, emotion discourse may be a way to examine the issue of power. In discursive terms, being emotional is an accountable issue and a means of blaming the person, often female, for their actions. Avowals (claiming that you are emotional) and ascriptions (claiming that someone else is emotional) of emotionality may be considered as a means of negotiating power. I argue that most commonly, discourses of emotionality may be a means of

constructing power for men over women for example in the Clinton-Lewinsky affair (Locke, 2001a). However, as emotion can be used rhetorically, the negative labelling of emotionality can be reconstructed to perform the opposite scenario (Locke, 2001b).

As the books under discussion here have demonstrated, the relationship between emotion and gender is highly complex, not least due to the differing conceptualisations of what constitutes an emotion. For the two books under review here, emotions are inner states, that may be affected by cultural factors and the arguments provided by both Chodorow and Langford have considerable merit. As the brief discussion of emotion stereotypes showed, there are strong cultural and folk notions of women being more emotional than men and Langford's work in particular has followed these culturally stereotypical lines with her examination of the 'emotionally withdrawn' male. As a new reader of psychoanalysis, this leads me to a point of concern with the theories explicated in these books, and this is the apparent distinction between males and females in terms of expression of emotionality. By providing a theoretical account for gender differences, inadvertently, we provide a means of accounting and justifying the behaviour of the very people we are critical of. The vast literature on emotionality stereotypes has demonstrated that by providing theoretical gender differences, whether as a result of socialisation or biology, these are available as a discursive resource which may be used against, as well as for, women, in particular by and for men, for not expressing their emotions and emotionally withdrawing. If there are issues of power at stake then the question should surely be 'how do we undermine these common sense folk notions of gender and emotionality in order to combat emotion discourse as a way of negotiating power?'

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Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Author address:

Institute of Behavioural Science

Phone: (01332) 592090

University of Derby

Email: a.j.locke@derby.ac.uk

Mickleover

DERBY, DE3 9GX

UK
