

Dispatches from the Emotional Rollercoaster

Rob Boddice

Wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter
Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut, Freie Universität Berlin

“**Y**OU CAN’T MEASURE LOVE,” I said. The consternation among the assembled psychologists, eating lunch in the garden of a Swiss chateau outside Geneva, was palpable. I had, unwittingly, uttered an unorthodox phrase; a heresy that, if it were taken seriously, would make many of the assembled company redundant. The scale of the chasm between us became clear. We were at the International Summer School of the Affective Sciences seemingly with a common purpose: to talk about emotions and emotion research. But it is apparent that when it comes to “emotions,” scientists in different disciplines are scarcely talking about the same things at all.

Of course you can measure love. “Imagine, you see two people, standing in a field on a sunny day, gazing into each other’s eyes, holding hands,” said a bewildered lunchmate. “You can say with confidence that they are in love. And of course you can measure what’s going on in that moment.” Heart rate, blood pressure, all manner of hormone levels, but especially the “love hormone,” oxytocin, and brain activity: emotion scientists can measure all this, and study what’s going on in our bodies and in our heads in real time. My interlocutor was in earnest, and had on his side the methodological inertia of a century

of physiological and psychological research methods that have promised to bring the inside out. Since we all know what love is when we see it, and since we can assess it qualitatively just like that—the two lovers in a field—why not also subject it to functional magnetic resonance imaging and see what is “really” going on in the brain?

The problem, and the sticking point I was trying to articulate when I had brazenly claimed that you can’t measure love, is that whatever measurements come out of this scenario, even the most simplistic reading of the observer of two lovers in a field, are only good for that particular context, and for that particular time. The very image in question is highly specific. It is, implicitly, modern, western, and romantic. In the vast majority of public spaces in the world, it is also implicitly heteronormative. Where the people in question are imagined to be of the same sex, the image is confined to places characterized by specific liberal progressive value systems. And the more tightly we focus on such configurations, the more we see the implicit whiteness of the loving couple in the field. In how many places in the world is this scene imaginable? And where such public displays, heterosexual or otherwise, are not permitted or tolerated, what then for our easy recognition of what love is, what it feels like, how it is practiced?

If this is a problem along the axis of space or culture, then it is compounded along the axis of time. My historicist alarm immediately sounded on hearing this bundle of common sense and accepted truths, as if this were an image of love for the ages. If the casual ethnocentrism weren't troubling enough, the apparent naivete concerning the history of "love" heightened my sense of unease. Gestures—holding hands, for example—are historically specific and subject to historical research. There's no way to know, without contextual information, what the holding of hands means. The same might be said of the gaze. And, of course, romantic love also has a history.¹ People haven't always "fallen" into it. It emerged at a specific historical and cultural juncture, and its prescribed "rules" have changed over time. Looking more broadly at love over time, we find that it is political, social, filial, strategic. If we include other languages in our survey we find that, more often than not, "love" isn't actually love at all. Love is *amor* and *caritas* in Latin. Love is *philia*, *storge*, *agape*, and *eros* (among others) in Greek. C. Stephen Jaeger famously documented the medieval history of "ennobling love," now lost; Nicole Eustace wrote the story of "love" in pre-revolutionary America, when the self was conceived of socially, not individually, and where "matches" were made according to status politics, with affection being a consequence, not a precondition, of marriage. I have tried to chart the history of the "tender emotion(s)," or *tendre*, under which love was subsumed, for at least two centuries of European history.² It would be

1 William Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, Asia, and Japan, 900-1200 CE* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

2 C. Stephen Jaeger, *Ennobling Love: In Search of A Lost Sensibility* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Nicole Eustace, *Passion is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Rob Boddice, *A History of Feelings* (London: Reaktion, 2019), 97-105.

crude and simplistic to say that, at the end of the day, it's all the "love" that we—a word that is already a bundle of assumptions—already know. What I really mean, therefore, by "you can't measure love," is that any measurements you may make of whatever love you identify will be good for that love and that methodology in that time and space. As a science, that sounds a bit limited. Such was my point. Having lunch among the vineyards, under the Alps, the point was missed.

What was a historian doing among so many psychologists in the first place? In recent years I've had these kinds of conversations with neuroscientists, psychiatrists and psychologists. My aim is to break the history of emotions out of its disciplinary fetters and confront the wider world of emotion science or emotion research with its particular knowledge claims. Two decades of concentrated empirical research into the history of emotions has armed historians with broad knowledge claims about what emotions are, how they work, and upon what they are contingent. After many years of going unheeded by the emotion-science world, something has changed. The door to the humanities stands open. The promise is of a truly interdisciplinary sphere of knowledge on human feelings, but in order to fulfil it, first there must be disruption. It is already messy.

In order to understand the current sense of disorder and disquiet among emotion scientists, first we have to understand what has been at stake. Since the 1970s, a small group of scholars—American psychologists and evolutionary biologists, principally—have carved out a theory of emotions that has dominated western thinking on the affective lives of humans. The core claims of these theories, usually presented as

inflexible facts, are as follows: emotions in humans are universal; they are limited in number (the canonical number of “basic” emotions is six, but claims have ranged between three and ten); they are accounted for by the “deep” brain, that is, the structures of the human mind that evolved tens, if not hundreds of thousands of years ago; they are *automatic* psychological and somatic responses to situations; they are represented on the face by expressions that are also automatic and universal across humanity. Often, within this set of axioms, a bone is thrown to cultural influence on emotional coloring or expression. On the whole, however, culture has been presented as nothing more than a gloss or veneer, sitting atop, and not fundamentally altering, biological constants that lie beneath. The better-known names associated with all this are Paul Ekman, Carrol Izard, Sylvan Tomkins, and Antonio Damasio, but the influence of this line of thinking has been profound, both within and beyond the world of science.

Ekman, for example, sought to dominate not only the academic understanding of emotions, but also the policy implications of such an understanding and the public reception of emotion knowledge. His theory of universal affect, as witnessed on the universal human face, allowed him to pioneer and market facial profiling as an important component of security screening in the United States. He made a successful business out of his methodology. Moreover, he was the inspiration for (and consultant behind) the Fox television show *Lie to Me*, starring Tim Roth, whose character Cal Lightman was a dramatic rendering of Ekman himself. Even more influentially, Ekman consulted on the Pixar/Disney film *Inside Out*, which was predicated on the existence of basic emotions (this time only five—“surprise” was left out). At the US box office, it grossed in excess of \$356 million.

It’s the kind of public impact for scholarly work about which most academics wouldn’t even dare to dream. Basic emotions, universality, and automaticity became, in an all-encompassing sense, orthodox. Anthropological research ran in parallel with the rise of emotion science, gainsaying many of its central claims by direct observation and hard-won experience, but to no avail.

Enter Lisa Feldman Barrett. Her work, as a psychologist, radically upset the prevailing paradigm, and caught the attention of historians and anthropologists who finally saw an opening for their influence. Feldman Barrett has seen through Ekman’s methodological holes and, in her own research, summed up in her best-selling book, *How Emotions Are Made*, found no evidence of universality or of basic emotions at all.³ Instead, Feldman Barrett posits a theory of biocultural construction, providing empirical data in support of her claims. The plastic, developing brain learns how to feel in the worldly context in which it is situated. Brain, body, and world are dynamically interrelated, such that the color palette of emotion is as varied as cultural contexts are richly distinct from one another. Moreover, she rejects the notion that discrete emotions are “located” in discrete parts of the brain, pointing to whole-brain engagement in affective experiences. The only law, in Feldman Barrett’s estimation, is the law of infinite variation. The essence of this law jives substantially with the findings of historians and anthropologists. It is a chance to square the disciplinary circle. Feldman Barrett goes so far as to say that “emotion” itself, as a category of analysis, might be rejected, since it implies that there is an objectively

3 Lisa Feldman Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

real thing called *emotion* that only has to be found and studied. Her emphasis on construction totally changes how we might go about understanding how we feel. The assumption that emotion simply exists somewhere in the brain looks increasingly like an obstacle to understanding. Historical research has reached the same position. Far from being a master category with which to understand the affective lives of humans (and other animals), the casual employment of the category “emotion” seems to risk misdirection and anachronism. Unless we are prepared to start our research by challenging our assumptions about what emotions are, we shall likely only confirm those assumptions.

As the incoming president of the Association for Psychological Science, and as one of the founders, in 2009, of the journal *Emotion Review*, Feldman Barrett wields considerable power over the discipline of psychology. Combining influential academic publication with a slick presence in the popular press and social media, her Interdisciplinary Affective Science Laboratory has radically upset the orthodoxy. Ekman, along with Dacher Keltner, Professor of Psychology at Berkeley, has indicated, via an official response of the Paul Ekman Group to Feldman Barrett’s work, that Feldman Barrett is misleading the public, getting the science wrong, missing the point, and ignoring important data.⁴ Bearing in mind that the Paul Ekman Group is a private company selling training tools and workshops to individuals and businesses, selling Ekman’s science as an *application*, readily accessible to all, we should take his denunciation of Feldman Barrett’s challenges as the perception of a serious threat.

4 Paul Ekman and Dacher Keltner. “Darwin’s Claim of Universals in Facial Expression Not Challenged.” Paul Ekman Group, March 2014. <https://www.paulekman.com/tag/lisa-feldman-barrett>

June 2018 saw the inaugural conference of the North American Chapter of the History of Emotions (NACHE) at George Mason University, Virginia. It was the brainchild of Peter Stearns, who has more claim to the title of father of the history of emotions than any other living scholar. Since the mid-1980s, Stearns has created an impressive body of work, with a particular focus on the history of modern American emotions, and he is responsible for one of the field’s defining theoretical tools: “emotionology.” In a seminal piece in the *American Historical Review* in 1985, written together with Carol Z. Stearns, emotionology was introduced as a way of understanding the situational contingency of emotional style.⁵ People emote according to sets of feeling rules that limit the possibilities for what kind of things can be expressed and in what manner. This was developed by William Reddy, who postulated that such prescriptions do not merely limit what can be expressed. They must be in a dynamic relationship with feeling itself, such that inward feeling and outward expression are both tied to a cultural context of possibilities.⁶

At that meeting I launched my book, *The History of Emotions*, on an interdisciplinary panel chaired by Stearns.⁷ I witnessed first-hand the implications of the schism in the emotion-science community. Commenting on my book were Reddy and the Georgetown psychologist and neuroscientist Abigail Marsh. Reddy, for his part, dwelt at length on the recent work of Ruth Leys, whose book *The Ascent of Affect*

5 Peter N. Stearns and Carol Z. Stearns. “Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards,” *American Historical Review* 90 (1985): 813-36.

6 William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 104-11.

7 Rob Boddice, *The History of Emotions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).

had been published only a couple of months before mine. It is a searing critical demolition of the emotion-science orthodoxy of Ekman, Tomkins, et al, pointing out the enormous magnitude of methodological flaws, and the tremendous damage done to emotion enquiry by limiting the scope of emotion research to that which was assumed to be hard-wired, built in, basic, automatic. Given that my own work sympathizes with all of this, Marsh doubtless felt somewhat embattled, especially by our trumpeting of Feldman Barrett's research and by my claim that historians' knowledge claims have just as much merit as science as anything coming out of psychological laboratory work.

What Marsh presented, then, was the bald claim that science is a neutral recorder of objective data. Scientists do not forge knowledge claims, but report findings. Emotion knowledge is *found*, not *made*. What I was doing, according to the charge, was attempting to persuade via *charisma*. All of this took me by surprise. Decades of work in science and technology studies (STS) has thoroughly exposed the culture of scientific work, its political dynamics and the situationality of its guiding assumptions. *Scientist*, coined by William Whewell in 1834, is literally someone who *makes* (the suffix *-ist*) *knowledge (scientia)*, just like an artist makes art. Practices of objectivity, cultivated in earnest from the late nineteenth century, served to distance the person who made science from the activity of its making, and from its accompanying affects. All of this was brilliantly historicized and analyzed by Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison in their 2007 book *Objectivity*.⁸ There is no such thing as "neutral" knowledge. Among historians, this claim is hardly radical; it is lore.

Marsh's own work on fear, altruism and psychopathy hinges, in part, on facial affect methodology and, in part, on neuroscience that locates emotions, especially fear, in certain parts of the brain.⁹ It depends, therefore, upon the prevailing orthodoxy. Being flanked by a couple of Feldman Barrett boosters probably felt like a stitch up. But if our collective attempt to wed science to culture, to put emotions in the world, as it were, was discountenanced, then more specific ire was reserved for some perceived implications of Feldman Barrett's work.

One of Feldman Barrett's central claims is that the language we use to conceptualize emotions is, in turn, formative of the experience of those emotions. Feeling and experience are directly connected to conceptual understandings of what feeling and experience are. This conceit, which Feldman Barrett explores via neuroscientific data and imaging, appeals to historians and anthropologists because it allows us to imagine affective worlds that are completely different from our own, in a time or a place where "emotions" do not exist. If Feldman Barrett is right, then the possibilities for exploring the cultural variability of lived experience opens up. Where people have conceived of their affective lives through *pathos*, *passion*, *affectus*, *sentiment*, *Gefühl*, and so on, they must, ipso facto, have experienced their affective lives in accord with these concepts. It would be reductive and misleading to apply an objective and universal standard of "emotion" to all of this.

Critics, Marsh among them, have pointed out one of the insidious consequences of taking this view too far. If language—the conceptual framework of affective life—is so important, then non-human animals

8 Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

9 Abigail Marsh, *The Fear Factor: How One Emotion Connects Altruists, Psychopaths, and Everyone In-Between* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

must have no emotions at all, since they have no emotion words. Comparative psychologists reel at the thought of the rise of such neo-Cartesian thinking, and the looming spectre of the animal machine. This was thrown into the mix at the NACHE conference, willy-nilly, as a sort of death blow to the kind of emotion science being pedalled by Feldman Barrett et al., and touted by the likes of Reddy and me. The charge is based on a fundamental misunderstanding. Only a fool would argue that animals don't have an affective life. But the gap between humans who use linguistic conceptual constructions that we can access and understand, and animals that do not, represents a serious ontological and epistemological problem. If I am reluctant to talk of "emotions" among humans in times and in languages where the category "emotion" did not exist, then imagine my scepticism about talking of "emotions" in animals. That a dog, for example, has affective experiences is obvious to me. That I cannot make sense of a dog's affective experiences through modern concepts in the English language seems to me to be equally obvious. I have a clue that something is happening, from the dog's point of view, but what I can say about a dog's "fear," "jealousy," "love," or "rage" will actually say more about my own experience of those things than the dog's, just as it did for Charles Darwin and his erstwhile disciple, George John Romanes, who were among the first to take such things seriously. The dog's subjective experience eludes me, which is not the same as to say it has no subjective experience. For comparative psychologists, this throws up an intractable problem: how to get at the experience of animals without anthropomorphic projection? It is a problem as old as comparative psychology itself. It rattles nerves because the alternative, apart from Descartes' automaton, has been behaviorism,

now consigned to the dustbin of errant philosophies. Disturbing the orthodox paradigm of emotion research therefore has massive implications for an enormous number of scholars, who, quite understandably, are unlikely to go quietly back to the theoretical and methodological drawing board.

Back in June 2017, at a conference of the Finnish Network for the History of Emotions, I had a hard time selling the idea of rapprochement with the social neurosciences. The psychologists, I was told, don't care about our research, and we don't need them to justify or validate our research in order for it to be important. We're so far apart. There is too much to sacrifice, and all of it on the side of the historians, for us to come together. These sentiments came from Ute Frevert, a major European figure in the history of emotions, and founding Director of the Center for the History of Emotions at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin. I spent five years under that roof. I know where she is coming from. It is simply true that the institutionalization of the history of emotions at that site has actually mitigated against understanding and collaboration. Sharing a roof with scores of psychologists of various stripes has led, in the course of a decade, to no fruitful collaboration. It might be thought of as an opportunity missed, but it is perhaps better seen as evidence of the impenetrability of disciplinary walls and the lack of a shared epistemology. A psychologist colleague in the Netherlands recently told me that, since historians tend to write books, and since the articles they do write tend to appear in general, rather than specialist, journals, our work is as good as invisible to psychologists. The latter, so he told me, think of books as summaries of previously published research,

not as peer-reviewed research in its own right. Our scholarly procedures are alien to each other. And where academic structures are profoundly hierarchical, as in Germany, making interdisciplinary headway is all the more difficult. But is not like this everywhere.

At the Division of Social and Transcultural Psychiatry, McGill University, Montreal, for example, a new seminar series on Culture, Mind and Brain aims to bring together a whole array of disciplines engaging critically with the cultural turn in the neurosciences. Here, psychiatrists look left and right, to history and anthropology, and to various stripes of psychology and neuroimaging, to build a critical approach to the brains they encounter in the clinic. Likewise, Columbia University's Affect Studies seminar series in New York (active since 2015) invites people from all across the intellectual map, on the understanding that "interdisciplinary exchange on the question of affect is vital for understanding the many valences of affect studies' vocabulary and concerns."¹⁰ The word "vital" is key, but it demands that we understand what is really at stake for emotion researchers. As emotional manipulation has become an explicit strategic device for politicians and governments throughout the world, it has in turn become more important than ever that people have access to knowledge about their emotions, where they come from, and who or what they serve. While psychologists remain torn between evolutionary transcendentalism and biocultural constructivism, politicians in various parts of the world have expressed great confidence in the potential of constructing emotional regimes or contexts of emotional conformity, in which strains of happiness, anger, and

fear hitherto unknown are becoming the definitive motifs of our age.

It all has an Orwellian ring to it. In the United Arab Emirates, for example, the Ministry of Happiness was established in 2016 to substantially make "happiness" a formal part of the government's agenda. It forms part of a political landscape that has seen everything from the Venezuelan Ministry of Supreme Social Happiness (created 2013), and widely mocked in western mainstream media, to David Cameron's "happiness agenda," launched in 2010 with a mind to measuring wellbeing instead of GDP. All of it, regardless of the political culture of the time and place, is directed not at the free expression of subjective happiness, whatever that is, but at creating conditions of willing conformity to an ideological program. In the UAE, that means training "Happiness and Positivity Officers" at private western consultancy firms that sell strategies for increasing wellbeing, defined along capitalistic lines of innovation, meaningful productivity, and self-worth in the creation of value. As Eva Illouz has noted, psychologists were invited into the corporate realm of management precisely to "find solutions to the problem of discipline and productivity."¹¹ On the ground in the UAE this means "happiness meters" in offices, government-led policies of "positivity," and "happiness patrols" that reward good drivers instead of punishing bad ones. It is surveillance governmentality with a positive spin, which rewards conformity. For those who cannot or do not want to conform, misery abounds. As of June 2017, the UAE remains on Amnesty International's radar as a participant in torture campaigns, domestically and in Yemen. The US State

¹⁰ "Affect Studies," Columbia University, <http://universityseminars.columbia.edu/seminars/affect-studies>, accessed November, 2018.

¹¹ Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 12.

Department Report on Human Rights Practices for 2016 noted the inability of UAE citizens to access free and fair elections, the limitations on their civil liberties (freedom of speech, press, assembly, association), as well as government practices of “arrest without charge, incommunicado detentions, lengthy pretrial detentions, and mistreatment during detention,” combined with evidence of “police and prison guard brutality; government interference with privacy rights, including arrests and detentions for internet postings or commentary; and a lack of judicial independence.”¹² In short, be happy, or else.

This is not to single out the UAE in particular. Wherever an emotion is politicized and directed, be it the mobilization of populist anger in the US or of populist fear in the UK’s Brexit debacle, it is ordinary people who are being emotionally corralled. The context of possibilities for feeling and expressing is carefully constructed and delimited, on the understanding that feelings are mutable and malleable, and that emotional intention is the new political capital.

Historians and anthropologists, as one might expect, are alive to this phenomenon and are well placed to analyze it. The new direction of emotion science, toward an understanding of culture’s entanglement with biology, is primed to help give substance to critique. But, as my ride on the emotional rollercoaster has shown, the science of emotion is far from a settled business. The question, “How do you feel?” has become intellectually and politically charged. Never has it been more important, short of a meaningful consensus across the disciplines, for substantial interdisciplinary collaboration to take place. The object of study in emotion research is up for grabs. A

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¹² Quoted in Boddice, *History of Feelings*, 180.