

Book review

Emotions and Social Relations, Ian Burkitt. SAGE, London (2014). 198 pp., bibliography and index. \$45.00 Paper, ISBN: 978-1-4462- 0930-1

The book is organized into seven chapters that cover a breadth of approaches towards the study of emotions, as Burkitt works to move beyond both a highly individual and isolated conceptualization of emotion and one of emotion as a disembodied or impersonal experience. He works to establish an aesthetic approach to emotions—an approach designed to capture the complexity of feeling, emotion and other bodily perceptions participating in the creation and meaning of our experiences of the world in which we live. He constructs this approach through a relational understanding of emotions, whereby we come to understand particular experiences of specific emotions as the result of an understanding that is constructed from a reference point beyond ourselves; our experiences gain meaning through the ways in which we stand in relation to others and other things.

Burkitt explores how emotions are created through our relationships with others and are shaped by patterns of social relationships—our historical and social contexts and interactions with others. He begins by positioning himself within social psychology and distinguishing himself from the burgeoning field of affect in cultural studies. He defines his use of ‘emotion,’ emphasizing that he does not distinguish between emotions, feelings, and affect, but instead sees emotions as complexes. He argues that the study of emotions requires first an understanding of the social relations in which the emotions are produced.

Chapters two and three present in-depth discussions of literature from history, anthropology, and philosophy to build a strong foundation to support his assertion that emotions are indeed specific to person, time, and place. In chapter two, Burkitt examines textual representations of ‘love’, and a current-day anecdote of an aggressive emotional experience. Experiences interpreted as ‘love’ are demonstrated to be particular to the time and place in which they are experienced, while the experience of ‘aggressiveness’ is particular to the personal history of the individual. In chapter three, Burkitt introduces his aesthetic approach to emotions, drawing on 19th century pragmatists. He argues that bodily experience is not merely a reaction to an emotional state, but instead is part of the emotional experience. Similarly, articulations of or during an experience (made publicly or privately in our thoughts) are part of the complex making up emotions—and cannot be considered as detached from the experience.

Chapters four and five then tackle approaches to emotion that fixate upon the physical and discursive, respectively. Burkitt acknowledges the usefulness of these approaches, but as limited in scope as they fail to engage with social relations. In chapter four, Burkitt examines the physical-chemical processes of the brain and the potential for universal emotions. Focussing on Damasio's work, which brings together mind and body within neuroscientific approaches to emotions, Burkitt asserts that explanations are isolated at the scale of the individual thereby ignoring the particularities introduced by relationships and socio-cultural histories and contexts. In chapter five he develops the argument

that emotion is a component of all thought, including rationality. Furthermore, he argues, following the pragmatists, that the 'self' itself is created in dialogue with others, and because emotions are part of the complex making up our interactions with others and created through those interactions, our very sense and presentation of self is an emotional, relational phenomenon.

Chapters six and seven are then devoted to presenting empirical findings through an application of his aesthetic approach. In chapter six, Burkitt challenges the influential work on emotional labour by Arlie Hochschild, criticizing how she places emotion in the private sphere and ignores the social-historical construction of emotions. Presenting his own empirical work on British nurses, Burkitt demonstrates that it is not the situation itself that generates emotion, but our relationship with its circumstances, including the people present, which contributes to the complex emotional experience. Here Burkitt also briefly explores the importance of place. Finally, the seventh chapter discusses emotion embedded within power relations. Examining the pre-Iraq war protests of 2003 in the UK, Burkitt considers how institutional attempts to govern through the generation of emotion failed due to the unpredictable nature of emotions in a large population. He analyzes newspaper reports of a demonstration in London that included a significant proportion of quotes from protesters. He argues that there was not, as other theories would suggest, a united collective response. Here he considers how cultural studies have approached affect and emotions as collective experiences, particularly drawing on Sara Ahmed's work, where he suggests emotion becomes an intangible, elusive entity. Burkitt further criticizes the application of a Foucaultian understanding of power, where social technologies influence human behaviour because the individual behind this transmission of, and resistance to, power is lost. Burkitt asserts that the approach to emotions rooted in social relations, emphasizing as it does the personal histories of individuals and their particular circumstances that help to create the emotional experience, assures that a collective experience cannot be unfailingly manufactured. There is always the potential for multiple emotional experiences because of the particularity of the patterns of social relationships. The book closes with an epilogue in which Burkitt eloquently reinforces the deeply social nature of emotional experiences.

Burkitt's book is an important contribution in its unflinching assertion for the importance for the social embeddedness of emotion. He argues that we cannot understand emotion without consideration of the particular cultural context in which it is experienced, nor without considering the personal and social history of the individual. Without negating the chemical-physiological experiences investigated by neuroscientists, nor the complexities of linguistic representations, Burkitt presents a strong line of evidence for viewing emotion as a complex in which it is necessary to extend understanding from the scale of the individual to incorporate wider social relations.

Burkitt works to demonstrate that many lines of investigation perpetuate an insular or disembodied conceptualization of emotion, and his empirical evidence for the importance of social relations is clearly presented. The relational aesthetic approach provides a concrete grounding for understanding the emotional complex as the medium through which we come to understand the circumstances around us and the forces impinging upon us. However, in this book Burkitt rejects a non-representational affect and collapses the concepts of emotion, feeling and affect into a single, 'emotional complex'. This complex contributes to the bodily experiences used to interpret emotional

meaning and through which we come to understand our world. While an approach that marries together complex social and biological dimensions is an important contribution to the understanding of emotion, Burkitt's current presentation may limit the ways in which discussions of affect and the potentiality of non-human influences on emotional experiences could contribute to a relational understanding of emotion and affect. Burkitt only briefly mentions the potential importance of place, but geographies have explored emotions and affect in ways that are contextualized within the particularities of place and time. Geographers may be able to contribute to a reconciliation between Burkitt's rejection of an immaterial understanding of affect with the reality of embodied experiences in ways that negate the strict separation of emotion, feeling, and affect ([Anderson, 2009; Colls, 2012](#)). Geographers can draw on Burkitt's approach to bring together affect and emotion, but in turn fold in an understanding of spatial relations that may provide a conceptual arena to work with non-human and perhaps even the immaterial facets of affect that are currently omitted from Burkitt's relational aesthetic approach.

References

- [Anderson, B., 2009. Affective atmospheres. *Emot. Soc. Space* 2, 77-81.](#)
[Colls, R., 2012. Feminism, bodily difference and non-representational geographies. *Trans. Inst. Br. Geogr.* 37, 430-445.](#)