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Beyond ‘emotional literacy’ in feminist and educational research

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Educational research has a long history of engagement with emotions. Together with feminist research, it has championed the legitimacy of research approaches that not only admit but also analyse researcher reflexivity. The article’s author cautions against subscription to emerging cultural discourses promoting the validity and expression of emotions—distinguishing between a feminist agenda and appropriations of a pseudo-feminist discourse that now permeate neo-liberal governmentality. First, the article analyses the assumptions underlying the ‘emotional literacy’ paradigm, before, secondly, addressing some specifically educational developments related to the shift towards ‘life span’ and ‘lifelong learning’ within university assessment strategies in the form of ‘personal development profiles’. It is argued that we need to attend very closely to the epithet ‘emotional literacy’ as a process of schooling for the production of *discourse about* emotion, rather than the discovery or recognition of some essential inner, individual feelings. Rather than becoming *literate about* emotions, the task is to *analyse the models of writing* emotions in circulation. The article finishes with some more general policy connections that underscore the broader political agendas served by the ‘emotional’ turn.

While initially inspired by feminist debates over reflexivity and the role of emotion within analysis of research practices, this article addresses the broader cultural-historical problematic of the emotionalisation of everyday life. This emotionalisation—inside and outside academic practice—functions alongside (and partly arises as a response to) its binary opposite: scientification. While criteria for research under neo-liberalism are increasingly scientificistic (with notions of ‘evidence’)—even in the human and social sciences—tied into government agendas promoting randomly controlled trials as the ‘gold standard’), emotions have recently acquired enhanced importance in both public and private spheres, perhaps as a counterpart to this relentless technicisation and instrumentalisation. However, I will aim to show that—notwithstanding their cosier image—such new discourses of emotion are no less amenable to exploitation and appropriation, and—precisely because of this—need to be handled with suspicion.

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Taking up Corinne Squire's (2001) analysis of 'the public life of emotions', and in particular her call to attend to the discontinuities and multiple political possibilities set in motion by cultural developments (rather than too swiftly moving either to condemnation or celebration), I want to explore the ambiguities of public as well personal life prefigured by current moves towards 'emotional literacy'—and correspondingly the positions elaborated for individual (gendered, raced, classed ...) subjectivities. A key discontinuity I want to attend to is that between the USA and the UK; for notwithstanding how Britain stands 'shoulder to shoulder' with the USA, the 'emotional literacy' agenda has undergone some subtle shifts in its transatlantic journey.

Despite the seduction of mainstreaming (cf. Rai 2003), I am going to argue that feminist and social researchers should engage only cautiously with the project of 'emotional literacy', as its superficial convergence with a feminist commitment to acknowledge and interrogate emotions leads to quite different political conclusions. This is not, of course, to say that everyone promoting emotional literacy programmes is signed up to these conclusions. Rather, the rise of 'emotional literacy' is itself a symptom of a particular instrumentalisation of affective life that—in spite of the good intentions of some of its advocates—runs against the grain of feminist libertarian and transformative agendas.

At the outset I should clarify that the suspicious or ironising approach I take here to policies and practices around emotion should not, however, be read as hostility to addressing or exploring emotions. My arguments here are generated precisely because such matters are too important to be left to these resources. Rather than merely being opposed to discourses of emotions as practices of subjectification as technologies of the self, following Foucault's (1988) discussion, my analysis is directed towards evaluating consequences of the particular technologies and their administrative practices currently in circulation. In particular I draw upon my disciplinary background in psychology—a key administrative practice of governmentality (Rose, 1985)—to inform my critique. I therefore start by considering the larger context that has given rise to this topicalisation of emotions, before, second, considering 'emotional literacy' more specifically. Having critically evaluated the claims made for this, I move to a more local and (perhaps) parochial domain to explore an example of the permeation of such discourses into higher educational practices. Finally I try to consider what would be involved in moving 'beyond emotional literacy'.

The expanding (gendered) domain of emotions

Emotions now occupy the public stage in an unprecedented way—both explicitly and implicitly. From sleaze to war, from social transfixion with abuse (whether with the abusers or the abused) to the manufactured grip of terror on our lives, fantasies of invasion, destruction and domination seem to guide national and international policies more than current truths. The increasing public attention to the importance and exchange value of emotions can be seen within management—where 'people

skills' are increasingly being recognised as central to the demands of a knowledge-based society that relies on the smooth functioning of interpersonal relationships, rather than on individual skills. Within social policy, debates focus on investment in childcare as a way of modelling the affective conditions for an active and economically self-sufficient citizenry (Jensen & Saint-Martin, 2002). We see the valuation of emotions take a particular form within the discourse of 'lifelong learning'—fusing an educational and developmental model—which is, arguably, a veiled apology for the individualisation and casualisation of labour. Finally, it fits with an infantilisation and emotionalisation of everyday life as part of the 'culture of narcissism' and an increasingly consumer, lifestyle-led culture (Gordo Lopez & Burman, 2004).

These cultural conditions function alongside the proliferation of critiques of objectivity (from a number of different frameworks—humanist, postmodern, constructionist as well as feminist) and the increased status accorded qualitative approaches to research within the social sciences. Within this intellectual domain we have seen attacks on so-called 'discourse determinism' (i.e. critiques that problematise histories of subjectivity on the spurious grounds that they 'deny' subjectivity), and a proliferation of academic debate on embodiment (seen as a key route to 'bring back' emotions).¹ But—in a cultural-political context marked by the rise of evolutionary and biologically determinist frameworks—this warrants the reassertion of abstract, asocial biological models. While a theory of socialised emotions is both possible and desirable—and feminists certainly have a stake in this, we do not get it this way.²

Put in this context, we can begin to evaluate the role of feminism, i.e. as a key protagonist but not entirely responsible for the rise of emotion-related discourses. Indeed these owe more to *feminisation* than feminism, by which I mean changes in the structure of labour such that the conditions traditionally associated with women's work—its casual, part-time and insecure, and low-paid status—have now become extended to many others, with flexitime and home-working as (in some cases) its middle-class forms. The feminisation of labour now concerns (some) men as well as women. Moreover, this has happened alongside a cultural appropriation of women's supposedly natural skills of interpersonal flexibility and conflict resolution in the service of capital.

All this is a far cry from the long-standing feminist involvement in discourses of emotion, through consciousness-raising and discussions of feminist pedagogy (e.g. Culley & Portuges, 1985), with emotion portrayed as a critical resource to galvanise analysis and action; and with its assertion of the centrality of individual intimate experience to the organisation and reproduction of power inequalities, based on gender, 'race', class and sexuality. But while these feminist commitments intersect with the domain of therapeutics (in the crudest sense that they share an understanding that thwarted emotions give rise to distress, and that analysing emotions can be transformative), they are not equivalent. Moreover, both leave the theory of emotions at issue rather crucially unspecified (thus allowing for political ambiguities).

The manufacture of acquiescence: from ‘emotional intelligence’ to ‘emotional literacy’

It’s a rather similar story with ‘emotional literacy’. While originating earlier (accounts vary), the term has gained wide currency through Daniel Goleman’s (1995 [1996 in the UK]) journalistic book, *Emotional intelligence*, with its provocative subtitle *Why it can matter more than IQ*. Apparently a warrant for putting emotions back on to the societal agenda, the book promotes ‘emotional intelligence’ as an index or measure that, it claims, matters more for individual success and social harmony than received measures of intelligence.³ Catchy as it may sound, there is little that unites the heterogeneous features of ‘emotional intelligence’ into a testable measure (even if one believes in such things). And indeed we should recall that the whole notion—and its success—harks back to the (tainted but still discursively available) notion of IQ itself, in the sense of confirming its legitimacy at the same time as claiming to surpass or supplement it. Both notions involve the positing of an individual (stable) personality trait that is assumed to be unevenly distributed across a population (thereby available for various forms of manipulation and trade within a capitalist economy⁴).

Just to give a flavour of its reception within the world of academic psychology, in Gerald Matthews *et al.*’s (2002) evaluation, at best the book serves ‘a cheerleading function, helping to whip up support for potentially (though not always actually) useful interventions focused on a heterogeneous collection of emotional, cognitive and behavioural skills’ (p. 544), while at worst the limited basis for emotional intelligence (EI) renders it ‘little more than a dating-agency list of desirable qualities’ (p. 531). Still more reprovingly, Sternberg highlights how the emotional intelligence movement is ‘often crass, profit-driven and socially and scientifically irresponsible’ (2002, p. xii). Such politically loaded commentaries are noteworthy from orthodox cognitive psychologists (who are likely to be most worried about the implied slur on their discipline through ‘bad science’). But precisely because of this, their forms of argument are of general, and certainly of political, interest.

Notwithstanding its truly irritating style, it is impossible to read Goleman’s book without getting at least slightly drawn in—in the same way that a self-help book or a makeover programme invites a reading of ironic distance that also simultaneously gets a little part of you asking yourself, ‘am I like this?’ or ‘could I do this?’ As Megan Boler (1999) has pointed out, it is hard to disagree with the general call for us all to be nicer to each other, or with the desirability of qualities associated with emotional intelligence: ‘abilities such as being able to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustrations; to control impulse and delay gratification; to regulate one’s moods and keep distress from swamping the ability to think; to empathize and to hope’ (Goleman, 1996 p. 43). This is good cognitive behavioural therapy, although significantly for the cognitivists it is far from being cognitive enough.⁵

While ‘emotional intelligence’ figures as a set of competences that can, by way of compensation, be taught as skills (and this move is a key bone of contention for the cognitive critics), the shift to emotional literacy as a social practice of training

programmes for the young comes in the final section of the book. Emotional literacy, then, is the implementation of strategies promoting 'emotional intelligence'. The book as a whole is awash with tale after tale of escalating youth gun-related violence, with emotional intelligence put forward as a guardian of democracy and sustainer of (good) 'character' through its redemptive technology.

Boler (1999, p. 94) attends to moral panic around childhood as a way of blaming individuals and neglecting the social origins of problems, arguing:

As with the mental hygiene movement early in this century, individual children are blamed for 'poor skills and impulse-control'. The pervasiveness of the individualism is startling: Even communication, which, of all skills seems most obviously to occur in a social context, is portrayed as rooted solely in the individual.

Along with the rampant individualism that she identifies, evident also in the rise and rise of other child-related syndromes—such as attention deficit hyperactive disorder—associated with educational pressures on schools and families alongside decreasing time and confidence to engage with children (see, for example, Rowe, 2005; Timimi, 2005), we should note the role of the focus on children as another strategy for political abstraction, with the discourse of 'windows of opportunity' (the title of Part Four of the book dealing with 'families', 'trauma' and 'temperament') mobilising the classic modern imagery of childhood—a retroactively constructed life stage formulated as futurity such that culture and history are erased: the child *as* window (meaning: a window onto the lost, beautiful soul, alongside the long-standing motif of the child as pure, flexible potential) (Burman, 2003a).

Irrespective of the doubtful bases for its claims, the notion has captured the attention of educators, business and social policy makers worldwide. Indeed it is precisely this attention that has not only prompted critical review from these cognitive psychologists (providing helpful arguments that I draw on here), but also—significantly—fuels their desire to tidy up this so far rather unreliable notion into something more robust. In this sense 'emotional literacy' is only in its early stages, and we can expect to see more sophisticated and less easily dismissable versions emerging soon. Moreover, this also indicates a key shift in the relations between academic production and consumption (not unlike the original demand for IQ perhaps): for it is the popularity of EI and EL that is driving the research agenda.

I want to draw attention to nine key (contestable) features of the emotional intelligence/literacy enterprise, as it is currently formulated. I will dwell on these as they form the implicit frame for subsequent debates around emotional literacy:

- the portrayal of emotions in the form of competence and/or skill;⁶
- the links asserted with brain structure and functioning;⁷
- the links asserted between 'emotional intelligence', self-esteem and mental health (indeed this pervades all the emotional literacy literature)—which further individualises and privatises history and social relations;⁸
- the link between individual emotional and social harmony, i.e. the privileging of a law and order agenda;⁹
- the slippage between individual achievement and social/economic prosperity;¹⁰

- the role of therapy. Goleman treats emotional intelligence as equivalent to mental health—with disorders of emotional intelligence seen as expressed in anxiety, depression and anger. Thus far he meets a therapeutic agenda (but see later).¹¹

Now here we get a little beyond the obvious:

- the suppression of variation (in emotional response),¹² which endorses conformity and consensus¹³ and denies actual struggle/conflicts of interests;¹⁴
- the presumption of stability (in the form of regularity or similarities of contexts). This covertly reinforces existing structures of (class and ‘race’) privilege (not only because dominant cultural norms are presumed, but because the arena for expression of performance of emotions is assumed to be of a stable, predictable form that runs counter to the position of many marginalised, and especially migrant people);¹⁵
- via its formulation as a text (albeit of highly questionable status¹⁶) it ushers in a standardisation and normalisation of emotional functioning—that truly marks it out as a technology of the self, in the modern rational form that Nikolas Rose (1985) discussed—as an instrument of classification and evaluation of individuals according to an abstract set of scores and easily administrable measures.

Notwithstanding these concerns, and to highlight the pervasive and enduring impact of ‘emotional intelligence’ within psychology, it is worth noting that the 2006 catalogue for Norton books includes a text by entitled *Emotional intelligence in couples therapy* (Atkinson, 2005) which offers a ‘step-by-step approach to working with couples that facilitates relationship change by promoting increased levels of neural integration in each partner’. Note that the purported ‘integration’ not only happens at the neurological level, but is also ‘individual’. Together with the companion CD-ROM ‘workbook’ we are offered a relationship therapy that is not only standardised in its norms of administration, but also of training. ‘Couples therapy’ becomes a treatment of individual errant neurophysiologies, and both therapists and clients are further rendered into individualised subjects. The blurb describes it as ‘a tour de force of scientific sophistication and clinical wisdom’. Indeed.

Emphasising the increasing circulation and legitimacy of this concept, the February 2006 issue of *The Psychologist* (magazine of the British Psychological Society, the sole professional psychology organisation in the UK) contains no less than five advertisements for emotional literacy related courses and materials. Nestling alongside university course information and substantive articles, these private testing companies feature an ‘executive coaching programme’; offering certification for ‘you to use 2 EI questionnaires including a 360’ and ‘enables you to effectively develop EI skills in yourself or your clients’, or a psychometrics training workshop for ‘Bar-On EQ-I’ in the form of a two-day workshop on ‘Emotional Intelligence’. The old gender chestnut, one step on from *Men are from Mars, women are from Venus*, duly makes an appearance with ‘Are men better than women? Emotional Intelligence varies with gender’ claiming that ‘over 100,000 assessments make EQ-i (TM) the world’s leading measure of EI’. Most bizarre is the back cover of the magazine depicting a scowling young man pulling at his own tie, with the

'equation' 'IQ:137/EQ:0' superimposed in the upper left hand quadrant, alongside an unattributed claim: 'Beyond traditional measures of personality & models of competence to the core aspects of human motivation and performance'. Significantly, these private 'courses' are concerned largely with occupational-related contexts: clearly, the demand for 'core human motivations' to be harnessed for better productivity is growing.

The UK scene—emotional literacy as social inclusion

In spite of its controversial status, outside the disciplinary sphere of psychology 'emotional literacy' has also taken on a more therapeutic hue. For while the uptake of emotional intelligence may have been rapid, and nakedly commercial, especially in the USA (but also as we have seen, increasingly in the UK), emotional literacy initially seemed to offer British educators and therapists a new role in New Labour. 'Social inclusion' offered the overarching rationale onto which the broader project of the promotion of emotional well-being could be piggybacked, via the discourse of emotional literacy. So despite some broader psychotherapeutic aspirations (beyond Goleman's conception, which clearly only extends as far as cognitive behaviour therapy¹⁷), social agendas are accorded as much weight as individual ones in both Peter Sharp's (2001) *Nurturing emotional literacy—a practical guide for teachers, parents and those in the caring professions* and the organisation Antidote. Significantly, emotional literacy largely eclipses that other edifice of New Labour speak—social capital—which at least was explicitly an *interpersonal* measure (of resilience, and often class privilege). Rather, notwithstanding the claims to social and organisational applications, the discourse of skills and competence returns political analysis to the level of individual acquisition and expression, and action to a matter of training.

Sharp's account is noteworthy for its humanist, personal growth flavour (note the 'nurturing' of the title), whilst still retaining many of the same claims (albeit drawing on a wider corpus of 'evidence' than Goleman alone). The opening sentence of the book offers a definition which, while less explicitly cognitive (indeed he is Tavistock Clinic trained and the text is saturated in a psychotherapeutic discourse of self-exploration and self-expression), focuses on 'success': 'Emotional literacy may be defined as the ability to recognise, understand, handle, and appropriately express emotions. Put more simply, it means using your emotions to help yourself and others succeed' (p. 1). So what is success and how is it measured? How can this measure of well-being and positive functioning fit with the big bad world of commercial exploitation and the ruthlessness of the market? Perhaps Sharp and Antidote want to model a different world through promoting different subjectivities (rather as feminists have also envisaged; cf. Dinnerstein [1976] and [Chodorow, 1978]). But tying these to conventional markers of success (as they are not qualified otherwise) compromises the enterprise from the start.

Like Goleman, emotional literacy is equated with mental health, with these portrayed as features produced by and around the individual (p. 15 and Fig 2.1),

while it is also presented as a set of skills, competencies and elements (p. 25) reiterating (p. 103) the link between emotional literacy and self-esteem, and citing the Hay Group and Goleman's (suspect) claims that 'EQ not IQ predicts top performance'. As a training text, the assumptions are laid out loud and clear, including the public order and prosperity priority: 'Failure to pursue the goal of nurturing emotional literacy will result ultimately in poorer productivity and social exclusion' (2001 p. 4). Links are made with a social agenda, with Table 4.1 (p. 46) titled 'Emotional Literacy encompasses' listing such individual concerns as 'learning and achievement' and 'spiritual, moral, social and cultural development' alongside 'equal opportunities, health promotion, citizenship, behaviour and discipline, social inclusion and crime and disorder'.

Sharp's account is also noteworthy for the way—even more than Goleman—all references to gender, race and class are washed away. What remains is the classical humanist subject, devoid of any such attributes. The testing technology of emotional intelligence is modulated, in this treatment, into a set of personally growthful maxims and exercises for self-awareness, with personal trajectories being elaborated. He even includes his own (second version) of the 'Life Map: my journey along life's journey' (p. 21), presumably to inspire the reader to complete the blank version helpfully provided in the appendix. But, expressed as an individual, linear, progressive journey, the models of individual-social relations, and indeed the available explanations for the social problems encountered by individuals, are even more restricted.

Among his sources and supports Sharp cites Antidote, the organisation founded by James Park in the late 1990s, whose definitions blur the cognitive-affective divide via notions of 'understanding' and imply a wide range of arenas of application through the term 'practice':

Emotional literacy is the practice of interacting with others in a way that builds understanding of our emotions, then using this understanding to shape our actions.
[\(http://www.antidote.org.uk/\)](http://www.antidote.org.uk/)

Here—unlike Sharp—collective understanding is topicalised as much as individual, although how this collective debate is to be conducted remains unspecified:

Emotional literacy is the practice of thinking individually and collectively about how emotions shape our actions, and using emotional understanding to enrich our thinking.
[\(<http://www.antidote.org.uk/html/emotionalliteracy.htm>\)](http://www.antidote.org.uk/html/emotionalliteracy.htm)

Nevertheless, the instrumentalisation of emotional literacy is foregrounded in claiming the state potential of emotional literacy:

By attending to the development of our emotional and social skills, we ensure an improvement in the nation's emotional wealth and social capital. (<http://www.antidote.org.uk/html/thepotential>)

And a whole list of 'potentials' of emotional literacy are identified that bizarrely combine the individual, interpersonal and societal, ranging (to pluck a few examples) from 'more satisfying relationships' and 'an increase in confidence, security and contentment' to 'increased contribution to the social sphere',

'decreased costs for the Justice System, the Care System, the Social Security System, the Health Service'.

So a more psychodynamic agenda is no less signed up to capitalising on emotions than a cognitivist one, while both Sharp and Antidote are keen to bring the good news for management and local government. But as a tool to promote social inclusion we see the usual sequelae of psychologisation, in the form of stripping the context away from the subject with all the usual risks of victim-blaming, and—having been left out of the picture—state support and intervention are allowed to re-enter only as and how they like. Moreover, talking of 'risk', what we can see are the classic hallmarks of the risk society—with individuals bearing its markers, not only now on their bodies but also in their minds, with the societal imperative to assess and clean up errant interiorities.

The last treatment I want to consider is Susie Orbach's (2001) *Towards emotional literacy*—a compilation of her *Guardian* columns published during the 1990s (and I should point out that I selected the title of this article before I was aware of the existence of this book!). Its topics range from the temptation of addictions (of various kinds) to the separation pangs of parting from one's au pair (in a nice piece of unconscious intertextuality with the gender and emotional labour literatures). As well as her status as a feminist pioneer in the field of psychotherapy (from her early work on *Fat is a feminist issue*, and (with Luise Eichenbaum) *Understanding women*)—which probably accounts for why it is that Virago is the publisher of *Towards emotional literacy*—Orbach's position as Britain's most famous psychotherapist (since it became clear she was the late Princess Diana's therapist) makes her account noteworthy. Notwithstanding her enthusiastic promotion of Antidote, Orbach's treatment struggles to be different. She is sensitive to readings of emotional literacy as a distraction from political literacy ('Emotional literacy is in no way a substitute for a political programme' [2001, p. 5] and 'there is a real difference between bringing emotional literacy *to* the political agenda and substituting emotions *for* a political agenda ... emotional literacy increases political literacy ...' [p. 85, original emphasis]), arguing instead that the first leads to the second.

Her approach (which broadly is an advertisement for therapy generally) is apparently quite far from a cognitivist instrumentalist account. As befits a more conversational (if sermonising) columnist style rather than the pedagogical technologies (of, say, Sharp's tables, figures and self-completion tests), it is a much more muted account, apparently highlighting flexibility and multiplicity of response. There is no mention of 'success', as in Sharp's and Antidote's treatments, but the whole book reeks of class privilege and is arguably addressed to the already successful—the chattering classes who (let's face it) can afford to be psychotherapeutically emotionally literate precisely because they already have enough (social and political) capital.

Using a discursive register that blurs psychodynamic formulations with everyday language (that incidentally makes it a much less crisp and tidy affair), her definition focuses on bringing into awareness aspects of emotional experience—so that we can note how the phrases 'capacity to register', 'acknowledge', 'recognise' and

‘understanding’ permit both psychodynamic and cognitivist readings. I quote her definition here because hers is also the political position that is probably closest to my own:

Emotional literacy, in its simplest definition, means the capacity to register our emotional responses to the situation we are in and to acknowledge those responses to ourselves so that we recognise the ways in which they influence our thoughts and our actions. It is not about the elevation of emotional responses above all others, nor about the broadcasting of our emotions to those around us. Emotional literacy is the attempt to take responsibility for understanding our personal emotions. (Orbach, 2001, p. 2)

But here still we have a conception of emotions as ‘personal’, while the ‘tak[ing] responsibility for’ them ties the therapeutic into a social (if perhaps social justice?) agenda. Is this a one-way connection between the individual and social?

In form, then, she is clearly close to the arguments put forward in *Beyond the fragments* (Rowbotham *et al.*, 1979) but—in the absence of any account of political mobilisation and action—the book returns us to the domain of the private, intimate and therapeutic. It seems that the implicit slogan ‘emotional literacy begins at home’ is as politically suspect as emotional learning programmes at school—and Walkerdine and Lucey’s (1989) impassioned analysis of the class and gendered oppressions structured by earlier attempts to manufacture democracy in the domestic sphere remains as relevant as ever. Orbach’s exhortation to move ‘towards emotional literacy’ therefore challenges individualism only in so far as her anecdotes evoke some hitherto private and perhaps implicit or unconscious assumptions, while even in doing this it departs so far from the more widespread discourse of emotional literacy that it might best be regarded as a tactical subversion of it. For (in contrast to the other accounts) the therapeutic model she subscribes to centralises questions of relationship rather than what goes on in individual heads. But, through the collective address to ‘we’ and ‘us’ throughout the book, we are inevitably returned either to ‘our’ individual (‘personal’) responses or to some spuriously homogenised collectivity that once again fails to allow for a specificity that challenges the social. Here we see the social inclusion agenda writ both large and small—for the focus is always on altering the individual or smaller social structure to enable inclusion in the wider whole, rather than problematising the boundaries that define that whole. In the end, socialisation remains the implicit goal, such that (we might say) Fortress Ego bolsters Fortress Europe.

Making development personal

I will return at the end to some alternative configurations for these dilemmas. But before then I want to turn to some further extensions of this, in the form of some perhaps rather minor interventions within research and teaching practice; for the discourse of ‘reflexivity’ that circulates widely within social research (albeit in different forms) has now joined that of counselling, ‘lifelong learning’ and ‘continuing professional development’ to become ‘personal development’. Let me take a specific example from my own department. Students taking the M.Sc.

Psychology programme we currently deliver, in addition to their taught programmes and dissertation, have to undertake to present a portfolio of diary accounts following their progress through the course, plus a summative written account that reflects on this process that (after much controversy amongst the staff team) is required, but self-assessed. Analogous to counselling training, and to support them through this process, they are supposed to form Personal Development (PD) groups with accounts invited to include reflection on the process of these groups. In recognition of the 'confidential' material that such accounts may include, the 'personal development profiles' (PDPs) (as they are called) are specified as being read only by two designated staff plus the external examiners (so, if you like, according the contents an even more privatised, quasi-therapeutic character).

Lest digression into this specific example appears merely as an acting out¹⁸ of some beef I have with a particular departmental foible,¹⁹ it is worth noting that, despite considerable resistance from both staff and students, the PD portfolios have continuously attracted praise from successive external examiners (perhaps the fact that these examiners have specialist expertise in counselling is indicative here—although, as we shall see, the project is somewhat different from its role in counselling trainings). Indeed a similar scheme is being extended to the undergraduate population, with proposals for 'personal development programmes' now being rolled out throughout the university sector. Notwithstanding opportunities for subversion,²⁰ such programmes may have less to do with 'personal development' than with a bureaucratic contractualism that reframes (secret or confidential) 'student progress files' to comply with data protection legislation whereby students not only can access their records but (given the 'workload implications' of such a move) they construct them themselves! (And current requirements from the Higher Education Funding Council for England Quality Assurance Agency for supervisory records look like they will be fulfilled in a similar way.)

Such measures run the risk of limiting learning in the name of warding off any possibility of litigation; at best they clearly institute a further technology of surveillance that imposes regulation in the name of self-directed learning or student responsibility.²¹ As the critiques of child-centred pedagogies foretold (Avis, 1991), here student-centred learning meets a more general culture of increasing micro-management that is part of broader technologies of subjectification, rendering power all the more invisible for seeming voluntary and self-directed.

Having indicated how PDPs are more than a specific disciplinary or programme hobbyhorse, I will move on to say something about my perceptions of their effects. Further, I should emphasise that these perceptions are generated from working with generations of master's students negotiating this requirement (and this scheme is now being extended to PhD students), rather than having any direct involvement in evaluating the actual PDP reports. I should also point out that my original view of this requirement was far less hostile and opinionated than it is now, since it appeared initially to offer a feminist-influenced or feminist-friendly mode of auto and institutional critique. Moreover, I am still of the opinion that some unreconstructed positivists—of the sort who find their way onto some of our master's modules—may

find it a useful learning experience. However, unfortunately the worst of these seem to be becoming adept at the therapeutic mode that enables them both to oppress their clients (by, for example, researching with or treating them in coercive contexts) and apparently exonerate themselves by acknowledging that this is what they are doing.²² So much for the relationship between ethics and reflexivity, and thus emotional literacy talks the walk to a particular destination.

Each year I have seen students negotiate the PD report with difficulty. And—significantly—the feminist, professionally trained, and experienced researchers struggle the most. They talk of feeling incensed and insulted by the demand to provide an account of their experience of how they have changed, developed (and by implication benefited) from the course. Often the PD groups have not really happened (especially for part-time students), or have been unsatisfactory, which is an added difficulty for them in knowing how to account for this (without implicating or criticising other fellow students—thus revealing the impossibility of providing an account of individual learning that does not involve others). Of course there is no explicit rule specifying that they can only describe their experience in positive terms, but I have yet to hear about a PD report that did not interpret the developmental imperative as a demand to proffer a progressivist account, confirming the continuing rhetorical authority of developmentalism (or what Fendler [2001] calls developmentality). This is not to say that they have not indeed benefited and changed in this process, but the very requirement to confess or proclaim this seems destructive and alienating, in separating them from what they write about and reifying their account of themselves. (Here Lacan's [1977, p. 104] dictum that 'the symbol manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing' is particularly apt.) For the problem lies not only in the requirement to provide such an account, but that the required form often runs counter to the framework for understanding subjectivity that such students have been working with: that is, this account is presumed to be a whole and finite representation of experience.

Unsurprisingly, up to now my advice to the student is to invite a strategy of partial engagement—to tell a story that is just that: a story, a situated, partial version; not the whole story. Or even to tell lots of stories (Burman, 2003b). In so doing and in so far as I am successful, I support candidates to cope with or negotiate this institutional hurdle, that otherwise would prevent them from graduating. For in a further bizarre twist this assignment is required, even if not (really) assessed—because (to add insult to injury) the students' own self-assessed mark does not figure in the final calculations.²³ Nevertheless, as well as being the last obstacle to completion and graduation, it flies in the face of previous assignments that have typically involved rigorous problematisations of precisely the models of analysis that now institutionally demand their submission²⁴ (cf. Burman, 2001a, b).

Now, on the scale of compromises that people have to make in life, it might be argued that this is a small one for the candidate to make; still more, that finding a palatable way to complete this task (including by challenging its very terms, perhaps) offers a useful lesson in institutional strategising. But, unless actively and energetically reframed, it also risks becoming a ritual of subordination bolstering a

practice of soliciting (a closed) public account of individual experience. For it not only invites an obscuring of the conditions of its own generation (in being offered as a narrative of 'personal' development), but (like the emotional literacy project more generally) it also consolidates and further legitimises educational discourses of triumphalism and (notwithstanding the supposed 'group support' element) meritocracy. Indeed the recent renaming of the scheme from 'personal development' to 'personal and professional development' is perhaps indicative of the stakes here.²⁵

Before leaving this example, we should not overlook the work done by the juxtaposition of the words 'personal' and 'development'. Why is 'development' 'personal'? Is 'personal' the same as 'individual'? (Remember Orbach's 'personal emotions' ...) Does 'personal' stand in contradistinction to 'impersonal' or to 'social/ collective' (and the fact that these two sets of terms are metonymically equivalent is surely significant of the limited models of collective action at play). As developmental psychologists (should) well know, the developing subject as a cultural motif is always most easily abstracted from social relations. So while the 'personal' of the 'personal development report' ensures its role as technology of individualisation, rendering development 'personal' also occludes extra-individual analyses of development including, crucially, varieties of economic investments and, in particular, the social and cultural capital transitions and accumulations involved. An atomistic model of the social is thus maintained.²⁶ So until accounts of personal development routinely challenge this, they (despite Orbach's protestations) could be said to substitute an individual text of emotional for political literacy.

Weapons of mass emotion

I will draw to a close by attempting to identify at least three directions to go 'beyond emotional literacy'. Firstly, critical and feminist reworkings of reflexivity have warded off a merely confessional reading of the concept, problematising the ways the appeal to notions of 'experience' can mask authorial privilege and return subjectivity to solipsism, while also critiquing discourses of transparency for their covert reinstatement of culturally masculinist rationalist objectivism. This is a long-standing and ongoing discussion that I can only nod to here (but see Bondi, 1993; Spelman, 1989; Burman, 2006).

But, secondly, important as such methodological commentaries are, beyond these a specific avenue for feminist engagement would be to develop further links between discussions of the intersecting gendered dynamics of 'emotional literacy' and 'emotional labour', in particular elaborating 'global care chain' analyses and discussions of the feminisation and casualisation of labour both to trace the complex intertwinings of new forms of productive and reproductive labour emerging under global neo-liberal capital, and then to connect with emerging discussions of precariousness as an analytical motif. While Yeats (2004) has called for Hochschild's (2000) analysis to be extended to formal state sector arenas of emotional labour, such as nursing, which rely on migrant female labour as much as the informal, private sector of childcare, the feminist activist researchers *Precarias de la Deriva*

(2004) address the ever-extending mobility and insecurity that characterises women's lives in a way that challenges the prevailing oppositions between public/private and production/reproduction—oppositions that (as we have seen) also structure discourses of emotion. Such perspectives vitally challenge the model of settled regularity presupposed by received notions of emotional intelligence, and instead highlight the structural provisionality, mobility or precariousness increasingly required for survival, at the cost of a driving isolation that prevents the possibility of any collective mobilisation. They place the political economy of emotions as central to challenging the increasing structural precariousness of women's lives, saying: 'Affect, its quantities and qualities, is at the center of a chain that connects places, circuits, families, populations ...' (2004, p. 159).

Third—and this has been a main topic here—as well as considering alternative descriptions of emotions, we also need to attend very closely to the epithet 'emotional literacy' as the metaphor that it is, i.e. as a process of schooling the production of *discourse about* emotion, rather than the discovery or recognition of some essential inner, individual feelings that require naming in order either to be better tamed or communicated (although these may happen too). Rather than becoming *literate about* emotions, the task is to *analyse the models of writing* emotions in circulation. Hence what is broadly at stake within the project of emotional literacy is not only the political economy of emotions but also a critical politics of pedagogy that connects practices of literacy—as writing as well as reading, and of writing subjects as well as objects—to broader cultural-historical structures.

So my intervention with the call to 'go beyond' emotional literacy is to issue an invitation to feminists and other social researchers to return from the micro-politics of the research encounter (vital as those also are) to analyse new graphologies and geographies of emotions that are acquiring increasing political gravity. There is a key point to note here. In terms of gender, emotional literacy has detached the discourse of emotions away from traditional gendered/feminised domain, and beyond even a discourse of gender-blended androgyny fashionable since the 1970s. In a telling trace, Daniel Goleman dedicates his book to 'Tara, wellspring of emotional wisdom'. Indeed the British literature seems to have done an even better job than him of wiping gender-specificity out of the picture. Thus it seems that emotional literacy has transformed the cultural coordinates of talk about emotions, away from explicit gendered essentialisations (or, for that matter, gendered strategically deployed constructions) and towards a (pseudo) scientific technology. Of course the gendering *is* there—for the law and order anti-violence agenda clearly topicalises the 'antisocial' emotion of anger, as ever putting men's problematic emotions on the policy map. Nevertheless, I don't simply want to advocate reclaiming the domain of emotions for women or feminists. The political consequences of this shift, and a focus on emotions beyond a mere appropriation of 'female intuition' or subaltern survival skills, may be complex.

On the global political scene, emotions are increasingly being mapped out on an ever more extended but less nuanced emotional scale—love, hate, fear—as the new affective economies structured around racisms. Even after Blair was forced to

admit—and the USA some time later—that there never were any weapons of mass destruction, he succeeded not only in remaining in power but also retained popularity because he was (apparently) sincere in his belief. Blair appears to have weathered this by presenting the persona of a flawed, but thereby more credible, figure (mobilising the discourse of: 'after all, we're all human ...') Further, in a bizarre emotionalisation of politics, sincerity of conviction—even when, or precisely because, he was mistaken—becomes the guarantor of principled action. In an era of prevailing disillusionment with the political, conviction remains attractive while—coinciding with the current social and health educational policy focus on the emotional vulnerabilities of white men—male frailty seems to generate indulgence rather than censure.

Not only are our emotions now a new form of political capital to be administered but they thereby become a vital commodity within that market. From the USA, writing just before the election which succeeded in returning Bush to his second term, Hochschild (2003) noted the 'Republican politics of feelings (p. 182) he mobilised, as 'one more natural resource the Republicans are exploiting for their profit' (p. 183). If, as she argues, Bush 'has been in effect, strip-mining the emotional responses of blue-collar men to the problems his own administration is so intent on causing' (p. 182), then educationalists—with whatever skills and attunements that we can muster—surely have much work to do in challenging this new humanist politics of emotions that works to re-centre masculinist and imperial privilege.

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Notes

1. Although this is part of a longer discussion I can't really elaborate here, I want to note that even if these discussions have some point (which I am not sure they do), they lose this when they resort to the murky conceptual morass of the (oft-cited but little specified) domain of the 'bio-psycho-social' (e.g. Shuttleworth, 2002). Adding 'psycho-social' to 'bio' is meant to socialise it, while pre-fixing 'bio' to 'psycho-social' supposedly embeds the framework within a material context (of the body, biology). Recently some critical commentaries are arising from within psychology, arguing that the bio-psycho-social discourse is really bio-bio-bio (Read, 2005).
2. The routes by which we might elaborate such theories are various and fruitful. There is a large geographical and sociological literature that situates emotions within material practices, while

Elias (1994) offers careful historical analyses of the history of manners that complement Foucault's (1980a, b) own discussions of the rise of sexed and gendered identities.

3. Matthews *et al.* (2002) question the viability and utility of the notion of EI as a testable entity since it is not sufficiently distinguished from existing measures of personality and intelligence—which therefore challenges the central claim expressed in the book's subtitle.
4. I am grateful to Paul Duckett for this, and other incisive comments drawn upon below.
5. Of course Matthews *et al.*'s (2002) narrative leads back to seeing what is described as emotional intelligence as 'a property of an emotional executive' (p. 533) and as in particular drawing on selective attention, working memory, decision-making, etc. and with close links with the current topics of metacognition and self-regulation. So in that sense we are back to where we started: a cognitive account.
6. Matthews *et al.* (2002) argue that 'emotional intelligence' is essentially a measure of individual differences (in cognition), which suffers from the same conceptual and methodological problems as the now discredited notion of 'social intelligence', and conflates notions of personality and ability (remember cognitive psychologists believe these are real and distinct entities).
7. Boler's (1999) critique is sensitive to the rampant biologising impetus of EI: 'Unlike an explicit eugenics theory, in the neo-liberal version social class is erased and unmentioned. Instead Goleman's text teems with descriptions of "society falling apart" and "good people" being hurt as a result of individuals' temperaments. However, as with the conservative view of IQ, which roots intelligence in biological heredity, the scientific discourses that authorise this new measurement of the emotional self are centrally founded on neurobiology and the potential for "hard-wired" morality' (p. 65). This is indeed an accurate portrayal of the claims and problems. But if it's any comfort, the cognitive psychologists throw cold water over Goleman's claims for biological hard-wiring in this area. After a long review, they conclude: 'Contrary to claims made in the literature (Goleman, 1995), there is little evidence that neural processes directly control either irrational emotional outbursts or self control' (Matthews *et al.*, 2002, p. 533).
8. However, despite superficial similarity Matthews *et al.* (2002) can see no relationship between EI and the psychological literature on 'coping' or 'emotional adaptivity'. As they point out, 'Whether people cope effectively or ineffectively is often dependent on both the context, and on the criteria chosen to define effectiveness' (p. 538).
9. An elision that Assertiveness Training critiques (e.g. Crawford, 1998) have amply highlighted, and as Boler points out: 'There is no discussion of the fact that rules of middle-class politeness may not serve the cultural context of inner-city children's material lives—not only that, to use middle-class skills of politeness in some contexts could conceivably put one at risk' (Boler, 1999, p. 94).
10. Asserted applications to marital and occupational contexts come in for criticism by Matthews *et al.* (2002), who usefully note how the available literature indicates that 'changing the organisation is more beneficial than changing the worker' (p. 543), and also question the possibility of such 'skills' being amenable to training—since they rely on implicit knowledge the developmental features of which remain unclear.
11. Albeit that Matthews *et al.* (2002) note on p. 540 'to label the patient as "emotionally illiterate" simply does not suggest any additional therapeutic direction'.
12. Not only do Matthews *et al.* (2002) argue that EI adds nothing to existing personality theory but, beyond this, they point out it is dangerously misleading because personality traits (even if one believes in their existence) cannot in themselves be evaluated as either adaptive or maladaptive since each has their strengths and vulnerabilities according to the different contexts encountered, so in their terms 'to describe traits as markers for EI obscures the subtle balance between dispositional costs and benefits' (p. 537).
13. Matthews *et al.* (2002) point out that, as a largely self-report measure, EI is subject to all kinds of biases. But more importantly (for us), they point to other assumptions structured

within the notion of EI, in particular how its consensus-scoring reinforces, rather than prompts a climate for challenging, social norms, so reading as an individual quality what is an effect of social position/relationship.

14. Or as Boler (1999) puts it: 'Children develop survival skills that make sense within their social environment. This is not to say that violence is the only answer, but rather that the social development programmes offer no analysis of how and why children have *intelligently* developed the particular strategies they have' (p. 94, original emphasis).
15. So even the cognitivists say: 'Emotional awareness may reflect not a basic disposition but also the environment to which the person is exposed. Lack of emotional awareness may reflect not emotional illiteracy but the pressures of dealing with an unfamiliar social environment. Emotional intelligence in this sense may be a consequence of a settled life-style rather than a basic social competence' (Matthews *et al.*, 2002, p. 530).
16. Matthews *et al.* (2002) conclude that EI may be neither a competence nor an outcome of some wider basic psychological factors. 'Rather EI (if it is anything at all) may be a transactional construct reflecting the degree of match between the person's competence and skills, and the adaptive demands of the environment to which the person is exposed' (p. 531).
17. Goleman's text is full of descriptions of 'psychotherapy as an emotional tutorial' (p. 213), but the pedagogical features always remain quite structured: 'psychotherapy—that is systematic emotional relearning—stands as a case in point for the way experience can both change emotional patterns and shape the brain' (p. 225). He moves so swiftly from accounts of people with obsessive compulsive disorders (such as compulsive handwashing) to PET scan studies that it rapidly becomes clear that his model of therapy is cognitive behaviour therapy.
18. It has been pointed out to me by colleagues delivering the PDP that my consultations with them over this account also run the risk of equivalent practices of self-monitoring and self-censorship to avoid anticipated collegial or institutional censure!
19. Which, it is true, like a well-trained, self-regulating subject, introduced appraisal systems before there was any institutional obligation to do so.
20. Here I should note how discussions, arising from an earlier version of this article, with colleagues involved in the delivery of support for the PDP module have clarified for me how this can shifted to bring into focus institutional rather than (only) personal pressures—thereby offering an arena to reflect on the personal costs and constraints of such trainings. Also, such accounts provide an indirect route to check upon and reveal other oppressive practices within departments, although arguably any 'disclosures' solicited from this arena (with its quasi-therapeutic and quasi-confidential character) pose considerable ethical dilemmas to take up in any way, whilst also running the risk of extending institutional surveillance.
21. And not only for students of course. For such accounts of 'student experience' also provide an indirect route to check upon and reveal staff practice, including bringing to the fore alleged forms of staff malpractice. However, 'disclosures' solicited from this arena (with its quasi-therapeutic and quasi-confidential character) pose considerable ethical dilemmas as to how to take up in meaningful ways, whilst also presumably such possibilities also do similar work to close down those very disclosures, as with the increasing penetration of legal imperatives to report from therapy (see Bollas & Sundelson, 1995).
22. Rather in the way that confessions of institutional racism currently appear to be functioning within public services (such as the police).
23. Indeed, even notwithstanding their knowledge of this, my impression is that student self-evaluation is probably inversely related to their achievement elsewhere on the course, i.e. the best students rate themselves lowest on this piece of work, and vice versa—perhaps a nice illustration of the pedagogical incitement to modesty ushered in by developmental discourse.
24. Perhaps too (if we admit a more therapeutic mode momentarily), these issues acquire an inflated importance because the PDP is the final piece of work, to be completed after all other course assignments and the dissertation, and as such becomes entangled in other life course

questions arising for the candidate. But even if we acknowledge these, the substantive arguments still remain.

25. Here Jane Callaghan's (2008) analysis of the role of discourses of professionalisation within the racialised gendering of the psychology training process is particularly indicative.
26. I should make clear here that my analysis does not preclude the possibility that this shift of focus on 'personal' to 'professional' development in such PDP schemes might offer scope for critical interrogation of frictions or resistances to a seamless integration of the personal/professional interface. Given current incitements and imperatives towards 'continuous professional development', such courses might conceivably offer resources for better understanding the political and institutional conditions for the forms of students' own learning. Nevertheless, such interventions are necessarily subtle and fragile, available to those receptive and seeking alternative readings and susceptible to being overlooked, while the broader cultural-political agendas remain. Perhaps this is the best we can hope for right now?

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