

Feelings and Embodied Subjectivity

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Abstract

Much of Western psychology is disembodied, producing information-processing models of aspects of cognition that could as readily be enabled by silicon and wire as by flesh and blood. This ignores evidence from contemporary neuroscience, and the views of thinkers such as James, Vygotsky and Merleau-Ponty. Drawing on such resources, this chapter explores the primary medium by which the body's influence upon subjectivity becomes manifest: feelings. Embodied subjectivity is co-constituted by feelings that orient and give motivational flavour to the quasi-discursive, narrativised flow of "inner speech", so that all thinking should properly be understood as a kind of "felt thinking". However, it is suggested that within this felt thinking a feelingful, affect laden mode of engagement nevertheless remains the "default" mode of being in the world, and various situations and experiences where this default mode necessarily predominates are identified.

Introduction

Some account of embodied subjectivity seems to be an indispensable component of any ecologically valid psychology – as opposed, say, to sociology or philosophy, where it might be seen as merely desirable. Despite this, many psychologies do not address subjectivity and still fewer address its embodiment. Accordingly, this chapter starts from the position that subjectivity is always embodied subjectivity, and that this embodiment is not a mere background condition of possibility. Rather, subjectivity is embodied in its very character, and it is in large part through the medium of our bodies that it is socially and materially constituted.

Most obviously, embodiment constitutes subjectivity through the sense data and action potentials it enables: we see the things we see, and imagine the activities we might pursue, upon the basis of the possibilities that our human sensory systems and bodies provide. However, whilst it is fundamental this influence is also relatively static, and so this chapter will focus mainly upon the ways in which embodiment is also a variable, dynamic, ever-present constituent of subjectivity. Bodily states,

experienced phenomenologically in the form of feelings, are the primary medium whereby this variable influence is produced.

For the most part, feelings have not fared well within psychology. They have been associated with the feminine, with qualitative and interpretive approaches and so-called “soft” science. They have variously been dismissed as epiphenomena, reduced to discursive constructions, made subordinate to cognitive processes, decried as irrational, or ignored because they defy objective measurement. At least amongst social psychologists, some of this treatment might flow from the assumption that feelings are individualist, essentialist or reductionist in character. Yet conceptual arguments and empirical evidence for the socialisation of feelings can be found in neuroscience [p.233] (Damasio, 1994); anthropology (Shweder, 2004); social theory (Bourdieu, 1977; Elias, 1978; Young, 1990); sociology (Charlesworth, 1999; Hochschild, 1983) and psychology (Benson, 2001; Ginsburg & Harrington, 1996; Ratner, 2000; Shotter, 1993b). Such work demonstrates that feelings are relationally situated and occasioned, that they can be cultivated, modified and transformed through social practices, and that they are modally aligned with cultural or subcultural norms according to factors such as social class, gender, or occupation.

There are three parts to this chapter. First, the character and origins of various kinds of feelings will be described. Second, the relationship between feelings and the inner speech that we usually imagine to be the most prominent component of subjectivity will be discussed. Finally, it will be suggested that feelings have a kind of nuanced primacy in subjectivity such that they are the ‘default’ mode of our being in the world, and to illustrate this some situations where it seems that feelings necessarily must predominate will be described.

What Feelings Are

Although in everyday conversation the terms are typically used interchangeably, feelings are not the same as emotions. Feelings are phenomenological experiences reflective of the momentary state of our body-brain system as it mediates and enables the flow of our being in the world. However, feelings are not simply private mental events, in the manner of cognitions: their body-relatedness may also give them a

visible aspect, such that how we feel is often a matter of public display. This is not to claim that the complexities and vagaries of our experiential states can be simply or unproblematically ‘read off’ our bodies, but rather to acknowledge that when we look at another person it is frequently both apparent and relevant that they are feeling *something*, even if neither we nor they can adequately name or describe it.

Although there is much confusion surrounding the definition of emotion (see for example Griffiths, 1998) on most accounts emotions are understood to be relatively complex events composed from elements of narrative, knowledge and intention, as well as the feelings which experientially constitute their somatic aspect. By contrast, there is a sense in which feelings are somewhat simpler because they consist solely of the phenomenological manner in which the lived body suffuses our momentary experience. Moreover, there is also a sense in which feelings are more basic than even the basic emotions proposed by psychologists such as Ekman (1992) or neuroscientists such as Panksepp (1998). Evidence for this comes from comparative linguistics which shows that all human languages contain a word or concept that refers to feelings, whereas this is not the case for emotion: feelings are ‘linguistic primes’, whereas emotions are not (Shweder, 2004).

So feelings include the somatic aspect of emotions, but they also include many other sensations: for example, those associated with hunger, thirst, pain, fatigue, indigestion, having an itch, being caressed or being tickled. In addition, there are also more subtle and fleeting feelings, those that typically arise in social interaction, discussion, deliberation and decision-making. These are the feelings associated with half-formed desires, inarticulate refusals, the sense that we don’t wholly agree with what has been said but for the moment can’t quite explain why. In English, at least, we have few [p.234] names for these feelings. John Shotter (1993a) calls them “knowing of the third kind” and in everyday life the umbrella term “gut feeling” is common. But not only are these feelings rarely named, their properties (such as location, intensity, duration and character) are infrequently described. William James characterised them in terms of their meaning, claiming that: “We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold*” (James, 1892).

So, feelings are not homogenous. Nevertheless, whether arising as the somatic component of an emotion, as the signal for or accompaniment of homeodynamic change, or evoked fleetingly in discussion and social interaction, what they have in common is their body-relatedness: in every case, feelings imbue subjectivity with a character reflective of our embodied being in the world.

Feelings and Inner Speech

When we reflect upon our experience it is often inner speech, the unspoken, truncated commentary upon our own and others' activity, which appears most prominent. Consequently, the relationship between feelings and inner speech will now be discussed, focusing first on Vygotsky, then Merleau-Ponty, and finally some current neuroscience.

Vygotsky (1962) offers a systematic account of how inner speech acquires its content. It begins as ordinary speech, spoken in the relations between people and the conversations we are part of. It next becomes outer speech, where we repeat aloud to ourselves things that were previously said in conversation. Finally, it becomes the abbreviated, condensed and unspoken inner speech that accompanies and guides our actions. So there is a movement from social interaction, through speaking aloud to ourselves, to inner speech which, despite its solitary location, has thoroughly social origins.

Although inner speech is unspoken, and although its character is transformed by being abbreviated and stripped of predicatives, Vygotsky nevertheless distinguishes relatively sharply between inner speech and thought. Toward the end of "Thought and Language" he says that "Thought itself is engendered by motivation, i.e. by our desires and needs, our interests and emotions. Behind every thought there is an affective-volitional tendency, which holds the answer to the last 'why' in the analysis of thinking." (Vygotsky, 1962 p.150). In other words, thought itself consists primarily of feelings, which provide us with a ceaseless flow of sensation and desire. Feelings are the primary stuff of subjectivity, the core stuff that inner speech completes in order that we can represent our needs and wishes to ourselves or others.

Whilst it is usefully systematic, commentators have observed that this analysis is somewhat dualistic. Indeed, there is a pervasive tendency towards dualism throughout Vygotsky's work, evident in his writings on art as well as his psychology. Vygotsky tends to sharply distinguish the linguistic from the affective, and having made this distinction his analyses then prioritise language, paying far less attention to affect and feelings (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991). This dualism may problematise theorising, since it understates how subjectivity is embodied. It also fails to reflect our usual experience since, phenomenologically, there is usually no sharp contrast between our [p.235] inner voice and our feelings. Whilst they sometimes do contradict each other (for example, when we have to "talk ourselves into" doing something) typically they are mutually reinforcing.

In contrast to Vygotsky, Merleau-Ponty, (1962/2002) treats language and the body as thoroughly conjoined. In Merleau-Ponty's analysis our embodied being in the world provides a kind of unity of sensation and perception, which is the primordial basis of subjectivity and which lends structure to our world. This unity means that what we perceive is inhabited by the feelingful meaning that it holds for us: "The light of a candle changes its appearance for a child when, after a burn, it stops attracting the child's hand and becomes quite literally repulsive. Vision is already inhabited by a meaning (sens) which gives it a function in the spectacle of the world and in our existence" (ibid, p.60). Language is similarly an embodied capability and, in its spontaneous speaking, feelingful in character, so that speech and thought "are interwoven, the sense being held within the word, and the word being the external existence of the sense" (ibid, p.211). The words that make up a language are articulatory or acoustic styles, capable of being spoken as one possible use of our bodies and bearing not only a conceptual but also an emotional or gestural sense, such that each language is one possible way of 'singing' the world. Thus, for Merleau-Ponty inner speech is *already* feelingful: rather than being the separate vehicle whereby feelings are identified and 'completed', by the time that they are sensible for us words *already* have a kind of unity with feelings, with which they conjoin to make embodied meanings. In the acquisition of language it is not that words are simply laminated onto pre-existing feelings, which remain untransmuted: rather, the acquisition is transformative, serving both to fix the feeling into the symbolic realm and, simultaneously, to endow the word with its feelingful character.

In this analysis we can see how Merleau-Ponty's philosophical approach is dialectical, a stance that might enable him to avoid the dualism which inhabits Vygotsky's analysis. For him, the embodied and the linguistic exist in a dialectical relationship of mutual completion, such that each overlays and interpenetrates the other. Our world is a multi-dimensional one simultaneously composed of nature, or the *visible*, and the largely *invisible* but wholly perceptible meanings of culture, added by language (Burkitt, 2003; Merleau-Ponty, 1968). Feelings and inner speech are mutually constitutive, rather than distinctively separated, such that complexes of feelings and words fuse together dialectically to produce distinctive new moments of embodied meaning. Despite these strengths, however, it is nevertheless the case that Merleau-Ponty's writings sometimes lack systematicity and precision such that "literary language often appears at the very moment the reader seeks conceptual precision" (Moran, 2000 p. 431). Hence, there is some value in merging his dialectical approach with Vygotsky's more systematic analysis, in order to develop and clarify them both.

First, then, inner speech serves to fix the flux of feelings within which we live, acting to "complete" (Vygotsky) or "accomplish" and subtly transform (Merleau-Ponty) them. This allows us to represent to ourselves and to others our experiences and needs, to properly *know* what it is we are thinking and feeling, and so in this way it serves its metacognitive function. Second, inner speech itself may provoke feelings (which, given [p.236] the already feelingful character of inner speech, we might characterise as 'feelings about feelings'). Sometimes this is in conjunction with memories, as with Proust's teacake; sometimes it is in conjunction with contemporaneous social experience; and sometimes it is to do with the future (Damasio, 1994). Third, and despite the present focus on the dynamics of subjectivity which might make this appear a somewhat solipsistic analysis, both feelings and inner speech arise within, and are constitutive of, developing trajectories of social interaction; and these developing social trajectories are, in turn, constitutive of the modes of subjectivity which emerge. There is also, in other words, a dialectical relation between the outer and the inner, between emergent subjectivity and ongoing social relations, between activity and experience. And fourth, as the term dialectic suggests, the mutual lines of influence from feelings to inner speech and vice versa can produce something qualitatively new. We can extend Vygotsky's systematic line of development so that

the movement from conversation through outer speech to inner speech includes a fourth stage: a transformational movement from inner speech to feeling itself. In this transformation, inner speech can entirely shed its initial linguistic character, and we can gradually come to rely instead on feelings, which carry the meaning that inner speech previously relayed. Conceptual linkages, analytical strategies, or deconstructive ploys are transformed and generalised, so that instead of logical, discursive or conceptual structures they become structures of feeling. What were previously logical sequences now become feelings of “and”; what were discursive objections become feelings of “but”; what were previously expressions of puzzlement become feelings of “why”; and so on.

So by reading Vygotsky through Merleau-Ponty we can see how subjectivity can contain dialectical movements from inner speech to feelings and back again. Each can provoke or complete the other, each can call out the other - and functionally, each can come to stand for the other. The relationship between feelings and inner speech is fluid and mobile, such that, as Ratner (2000) puts it, all thinking is actually *felt thinking*.

We can extend this analysis yet further by showing how it resonates with some current work in neuroscience, and to enable this a very brief summary of Damasio's (1999) theory of consciousness will now be presented. This theory is derived from clinical work with brain injured people; from experimental work; and from contemporary neuroanatomical knowledge concerning the location, structure and functions of various brain systems.

In Damasio's theory humans have two forms of consciousness which usually (i.e. in non-pathological states) exist together, and phenomenologically are intertwined relatively seamlessly: core consciousness and extended consciousness. Core consciousness is something we share with other animals, it is an immediate, “automatic” awareness of our embodied state in the moment-by-moment flow of being in the world. It is fundamentally non-verbal, consisting of embodied feelings and sensory perceptions, and it is primary in the sense that it is a necessary precondition for extended consciousness. In neural terms, core consciousness is a second-order map. This in turn rests upon a first order map that Damasio calls the

proto-self, a dynamic representation of the body and its current state constantly updated in real time and rooted, evolutionarily, in the machinery of homeodynamics. Changes to the proto-self may be caused either by internal body-brain changes or by external influences impinging upon the person. In both cases, these changes generate a second-order map, the contents of which are the experience of the body-brain system being changed. So [p.237] core consciousness is not the proto-self – it is the product of successive changes in the proto-self, and its content is the *difference* between the proto-self in first one state and then a subsequent one.

In mature humans, each pulse of core consciousness then activates other areas of the brain in networks of spreading neural activation: this produces extended consciousness. Unlike core consciousness, extended consciousness is primarily symbolic, narrative and discursive. It uses the unique human capacity for memory and symbolic representation, most obviously through inner speech, to generate webs of meaning and understanding within which to locate the continual flux of information core consciousness supplies. In extended consciousness, stimuli first registered in core consciousness rapidly gain their full meaning and significance: for example, black marks on a white background become words on paper that carry a particular instruction or idea. This happens (almost) immediately as you process either incoming external stimuli or internal changes in your body-brain system: each generates a new pulse of core-consciousness which very quickly produces a richly detailed, fully human understanding of whatever has just occurred. Extended consciousness, then, requires extensive memory resources and the capacity for symbolic representation in order to produce the uniquely human capacity for reflection, questioning, analysis and understanding.

So, changes to the body-brain system cause pulses of core consciousness, which then generate meanings in extended consciousness. But because the meanings generated in extended consciousness are themselves dependent upon neural events, the body-brain changes that enable them can subsequently be registered in core consciousness, where they may induce feelings. Thus, there are feedback loops between the feeling states of core consciousness and the symbolic interpretations of extended consciousness, such that each can call out the other; each can reinforce or elaborate the other; and on occasion, one can be out of phase or at odds with the other. In short, in Damasio's

theory of consciousness the relationship between the feelings of core consciousness and the inner speech of extended consciousness mirrors that of Merleau-Ponty. The rapid and multiple feedback loops between core and extended consciousness lend embodied meaning to symbolic forms, at the same time as they allow us to symbolise and reflect upon the feelings we experience. Whilst distinctions *can* be drawn between feelings and inner speech, so that sometimes there are occasions when these experiences are obviously of a different order (extreme pain, for example, is clearly not a matter of words), for the most part these distinctions are unstable and difficult to draw or maintain. Feelings and inner speech tend to merge into each other because inner speech can call out, complete or *become* feelings, at the same time as feelings provoke or give valence, force and embodied meaning to our linguistic formulations.

The Default Mode of Subjectivity

To summarise so far: we can extend Vygotsky's systematic analysis of the acquisition of inner speech, integrating it with Merleau-Ponty's dialectical approach to develop a less dualistic, more fluid, more dynamic view of the relation between inner speech and feelings. The view of subjectivity that emerges is one that mirrors Damasio's theory of consciousness, which posits a similarly dialectical relationship between these components of subjectivity. However, within this relationship Damasio's theory also [p.238] gives primacy to feelings, in two senses. First, core consciousness, which produces feelings, can exist without extended consciousness, but not vice versa. And second, the desires and motivational states that impel our actions are bound up much more closely with the feelings within core consciousness than with extended consciousness.

So, whilst inner speech does indeed serve the metacognitive function of guiding or channelling our plans and decisions, this suggests two things. First inner speech only guides our actions when (usually fleetingly) prior feeling states have already emerged and created the requirement for such guidance. And second, that the influence of inner speech is mediated by and predominantly dependent upon the further feelings it calls out, which motivate and orient us towards the world in ways conducive with the intentional stance we have already adopted.

In short, within the dialectical relationship between feelings and inner speech that constitutes our felt thinking, there is a kind of primacy attached to feelings such that they remain the “default” mode of subjectivity. Their primacy is nuanced because feelings are to variable degrees shaped and channeled by inner speech, which can inflect, situate and contextualize them in ways that are more-or-less transformative of their magnitude, valence or meaning. Moreover, feelings are called out or interpellated by circumstances that include both inner speech and the speech of others, they emerge in lines of situated interaction that in part lend them their character (Ginsburg & Harrington, 1996), and so are constantly open to social influence. Nevertheless, despite the fluid intermingling of social relations, feelings and inner speech which the above analyses suggest, Damasio’s work clearly implies that feelings, of one kind or another, are the default mode of our being in the world.

Apart from Damasio’s theory, there are both general and specific sources of evidence for the claim that feelings are the default mode of subjectivity. Generally, feelings do not need to be taught or acquired, like language does: infants show clear evidence of feeling states long before they are able to speak (indeed, it is difficult to imagine what else a young baby’s experience might consist of). Children with severe intellectual impairments, some of whom have neither expressive nor receptive language, similarly display recognisably human emotional and feeling states, in response to both social stimuli and environmental influences (Hall, 1984). Although to some extent we can propitiate future feeling states (for example, by seeking out evidence to justify feeling angry with someone, a process likely to intensify the anger we feel – see Solomon, 2004) it remains the case that feelings are typically difficult either to produce (we can’t make ourselves fall in love just because we think it’s a good idea) or to prevent (we can’t stop ourselves feeling sad just by wanting to, either: otherwise many clinical psychologists would be unemployed). Indeed, the recognition we give to skilled theatrical performers demonstrates that feelings are extremely difficult even to *fake* convincingly. Empirically, evidence for the generic primacy of feelings comes from Zajonc’s studies (Zajonc, 1984, 2004); from Sperry and Gazzaniga’s work with split-brain patients (Gazzaniga, 1998); from Panksepp’s investigation of basic affect systems (Panksepp, 1998); and from the investigation of neurological phenomena such as anosognosia (Damasio, 1999). And of course most psychodynamic research

also provides evidence for one or another version of affective primacy (Mitchell & Black, 1995).

More specifically, it is possible to describe situations and experiences where it seems that feelings must necessarily predominate in decision making. Since as adults [p.239] much of our day-to-day activity is habitual and automatic, we must consider instances of deliberate choice, decision-making and planning in order to identify circumstances within which feelings are the default mode of deciding, planning and choosing.

However, highlighting these situations does not mean that in other situations subjectivity is not feelingful. Thinking is *always* felt thinking, even when feelings do not hold our attention: indeed, it is difficult to imagine any conscious choice where feelings do not play *some* part. What follows is a list of circumstances where it seems that decision-making must by default be sensitively dependent on feelings; such circumstances might provide appropriate starting points for empirical investigation of some of the claims made in this chapter.

- 1 Open ended social situations, where each decision feeds forward into future decisions and conditions the subsequent possibilities that ensue, such that rational consideration is effectively impossible: Damasio (1994) suggests that this is the case for very many apparently simple decisions in everyday life.
- 2 When feelings during a social interaction are running particularly high: “crimes of passion”, arguments, highly charged situations, many forms of pathological distress.
- 3 Novel social situations where existing rational-discursive forms can’t easily be applied and new forms have not yet evolved, or are unavailable: rapid social upheaval or transformation; crowds in panic situations, such as a fire alarm in a large public building; elements of riots.
- 4 When numerous competing logics or ways of reasoning predicated upon possibly incommensurable assumptions are available, such that there is no one

- ‘rational’ way to decide between them: complex social policy decisions made by governments, strategies formulated by large organizations or businesses.
- 5 Whenever there is a shortage of information by which to evaluate options, making rational consideration difficult.
 - 6 Where there is an organic or developmental inability to reason successfully: people with intellectual impairments, children.
 - 7 When extreme pressure of time and multiple options to consider mean that thorough interrogation and assessment of implications is not possible before a choice has to be made: emergencies, strategic choices in some sports.

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