

Comment: How Your Own Becoming Feels

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Abstract

Mascolo (2020) successfully defends a relational, developmental approach to emotions. I draw parallels between his perspective and the enactive approach, in particular with the concept of participatory sense-making. I suggest that the need to understand emotions developmentally reveals a deeper link between affective life and human unfinishedness, namely, that emotions are collectively constituted ways of regulating human becoming.

Keywords

becoming, enaction, individuation, participatory sense-making

Michael Mascolo's (2020) relational approach to emotions is the latest in a series of contributions rejecting the confinement of emotional life to the unshared mental space of each individual. We have been drilled into drawing divisions between emotion and action, each of us overseers of the traffic between the two. The resulting disengagement between private and public spheres keeps members of Western societies connected mostly through contractual modes of interaction in which cost–benefit calculation dominates, and shared growth is rare.

Psychology is in part responsible for promoting this strange view, an outlook at odds with everyday life. We understand emotions in practical terms as occupying not just inner subjective dimensions but being out there, in the kinesthetics of movement, in the intimate resonances of a conversation, the shared outrage at the latest piece of news, or the tense atmosphere of a meeting. Science struggles to capture the subtleties of this practical know-how. It consigns them to intellectualist abstractions and elaborates models that leave out much of the concreteness of affective life.

Whenever we encounter phenomena that seem to stubbornly make us relapse into self-perpetuating debates and frequent “fresh starts,” we should try to “go wide” and extend our investigations in scope, space, and time. And if necessary, cross a disciplinary boundary or two. Mascolo's message is that for truly understanding what emotions are, we need to understand how emotions develop. A theme he explores

convincingly using dynamic skills theory—in a way reminiscent of Margaret Donaldson's (1992) categories for cognitive and emotional modes of caring—to track the developmental changes undergone by the emotion of “anger.”

Why does it make sense to adopt this developmental perspective? Mascolo shows the purchase of a diachronic approach and this should probably suffice. But I believe there are more fundamental reasons. I think that emotional being and emotional becoming are not two processes but one. *To feel an emotion is to experience a moment in our own becoming.*

To see this, we need to take a few steps back. Mascolo characterizes emotions as felt modes of engaging the world. This definition is compatible with the way enactivists talk about moods and emotional episodes (Colombetti, 2014, 2017; Thompson, 2007). The enactive approach has moved from its focus on the conditions of minimal agency, basic affect, and sense-making into problems of sensorimotor development and language (Di Paolo, Cuffari, & De Jaegher, 2018). Despite these advances, the enactive perspective on emotion development has yet to address many of the issues discussed in the target article. Like Mascolo, enactivists question the supposed privacy of emotions and the cognitivist bias that first postulates a separation between feeling and expression, and then makes us wonder how we cognize their indirect link.

If we understand intersubjectivity in terms of participatory sense-making (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007), it becomes clear that all forms of engagement, expressions, utterances, etc., and all forms of affect, emotional episodes, and moods are open to modulation and, in some cases, constitution by the activity of others. The patterns that help sustain a social interaction can create unforeseen joint emotional trajectories. Consider the common experience of a couple going through a rough patch in their relationship, finding themselves repeatedly pulled from uneasy hopeful conversation into escalating quarrel. As is often the case, both participants understand that something needs fixing; both want it resolved. Goals are aligned. So they face a new encounter determined to avoid confrontation, be patient, apologize, and listen to each other. This situation is very vulnerable. Attentive concern about reenacting harmful patterns is one rea-

son for this vulnerability; hermeneutic charity diminishes. A gesture slightly out of place gets amplified and the interaction soon falls again into an antagonistic configuration. Understanding emotions intersubjectively is not only about figuring out how they are learned, but also how they are shaped and constituted by something beyond the sum of individual subjectivities, in this case, by the interactive patterns themselves.

Through the constitutive power of joint enactments, emotions develop beyond individual affectivity. Mascolo hints at this possibility with the example of the little girl who experiences her mother's anger, and through this experience better understands terms like "being mad." What is interesting here is not that these experiences (the mother's actions and expressions) inform an individual agent (the little girl) in a social context. What is interesting is that when mommy is "mad," this makes the child feel a certain way, a feeling that goes together with her growing grasp of the meaning of anger. An emotion has many sides. Feeling the anger of others directly, without cognitive mediation, is itself an emotion that shapes our understanding of anger. It *moves* our bodies into learning or enacting anger-related know-how.

Notice that if we adopt the relational perspective, then it is more than a match between vocabulary, felt experiences, and overt behaviors that is shaped intersubjectively. Not only do I learn about anger by interacting with angry people, but I also shape the development of my capacities to feel, understand, and manage anger in this process. I regulate emotions through interactive skills, involving actual or vicarious others, norms embodied in reenacted voices and injunctions that I address to myself. By developing socially enabled emotional regulation, I can bring to the fore the experience of new feelings. I can become educated into feeling emotions I may not have felt before, or were too fleeting in my experience to deserve a name. Or I may learn their name and their corresponding behaviors and expressions before I truly experience them. I may actually learn to experience them because I have learned about them. New developmental possibilities open up; others close. I can become skillful at empathy as a result of acts of solidarity and forgiving, or I can engage in practices and discourses of systematic empathic de-skilling that brutalize me and make me forget sensitivities I once mastered. I develop differently as a consequence of my emotional skills and acts. The changing structure of emotion affects its own development.

By placing emotions in their relational, developmental, and intersubjective dimensions, we move closer to understanding their ontology. One can always ask: why would modes of engagement need to be felt at all? Since humans are unfinished

creatures (Di Paolo, 2020; Di Paolo et al., 2018), we can propose that emotions are ways of regulating the tensions between processes of individuation, between sedimented history and current situation, and between the powers and constraints that affect our ceaseless becoming as organic, sensorimotor, intersubjective, and linguistic bodies. Here, enaction resonates with the philosophy of Gilbert Simondon (2005). The interiority that emerges through the individuation of our bodies is a space of tensions between individuated organization and preindividual potentialities, and between bodies and milieu. Affectivity is how we attempt, and sometimes fail, to regulate these tensions, a way our bodies feel and affect themselves in their open materiality. Waves of affect are organized into emotions, a *knowing-how-to-become* that we *develop* in contact with others.

From simple checks in everyday activities, through the anxiety of not always coping, to the birth pangs of self-transformation, next time you undergo an emotional episode you may notice yourself becoming yourself.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Comment: Collective Epistemic Emotions and Individualized Learning: A Relational Account

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