

REPORTS

Affective Arrangements in Mental Health Care Settings

Report on the International Conference organized by the Collaborative Research Center 1171 “Affective Societies”, Berlin, September 24–26, 2018

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From Monday 24th to Wednesday 26th of September 2018, the principal investigators of the project “Affective Efforts of Migration” of the SFB 1171 “Affective Societies” hosted the international conference “Affective Arrangements in Mental Health Care Settings” in the Henry Ford Building of the FU Berlin. The psychological anthropologist Anita von Poser (Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology/FU Berlin) and the cultural psychiatrists Thi Minh Tam Ta (consultant psychiatrist at the department of psychiatry and the special outpatient clinic for Vietnamese migrants at the Charité/Berlin) and Eric Hahn (consultant psychiatrist at the department of psychiatry and the unit for schizophrenia at the Charité/Berlin) realized an uncommon but very interesting and in the end successful concept for a conference in collaboration with the philosopher JAN SLABY (Institute of Philosophy/FU Berlin).

Contributors were asked to refer to an article by SLABY *et al* (2017) on “Affective Arrangements” and relate it to their own work. The article constitutes a philosophical approach to metaphysical and practical configurations of reality and specifically of therapeutic affective arrangements. As SLABY argues himself on Tuesday morning, the authors hypothesize that European modernity is based on the foundation of a certain metaphysics and wonder if it would be possible to develop alternatives to this fundamental European modernity by referring to other metaphysical frameworks. For example, they oppose what they call “radical immanence” to dualistic thought grounded in transcendence. Radical immanence relates to “the one substance” in the universe which connects collective dimensions to individual selfhood, inserted into economies of affect and imagination. Affect is defined in a twofold way as constitutive relations

(affectio) or as shifts in power relations by increasing or diminishing powers (affectus). An affective arrangement thus would be the dynamic relatedness of affects which forms, molds and (re)shapes reality. Therapy deals on a cognitive-behavioral level with disempowering affective realities and tries to understand and manipulate affective relations. Affective arrangements in therapy comprise of an array of persons, things, artifacts, spaces, discourses, behaviors, expressions and so on. As fragmentary local practices, they shape social interaction and relatedness, human and non-human agency and attachment. Any kind of teamwork can be understood as an affective arrangement with two parallel tendencies: consolidation and stability versus transformation and flow of reality. From this point of view, psychiatry, of course, also constitutes a distinct affective arrangement as an operative space for therapeutic practices defined by its spatial layout, temporality (routines, rhythms), sociality, and thus, I would argue, also its rituality, performativity and sensorial nature.

The conference explores an understanding of mental health care settings as complex affective arrangements and sites of situated and recurring affectivity shaped by and shaping interrelations and dynamics between actors, materialities, and discourses. Acknowledging these arrangements as evident in and beyond mental health care settings enables a new perspective on actors’ affects as inherently relational phenomena and emphasizes a relational and interaction-based lens on mental illness. Applying an interdisciplinary perspective yields new impulses for therapeutic interventions by exploring, analyzing and deliberately modulating components of a given arrangement. The organizers declare as an aim of this conference to entwine phenomenological approaches

from philosophy, cultural psychiatry and psychotherapy, as well as psychological anthropology, to shed light on the benefits of adopting these theoretical concepts in mental health care practices. Regular contributions take up to one hour including discussion, which I personally experience as too long and tiring. However, the very open and friendly atmosphere (especially provided by the student staff) and the delicious Vietnamese food as a special affective arrangement do more than conciliate! By the way, the choice of catering refers to the project's focus on the mental health of persons with diverse Vietnamese backgrounds living in Berlin.

Monday evening, the conference begins with a keynote by Laurence J. Kirmayer (Division of Social and Transcultural Psychiatry, McGill University, Montreal, Canada) on affective arrangements in mental health care settings. Kirmayer asks what kind of a science we want for psychiatry, answering right away: a bio-psycho-social one. Due to my own scientific focus, but also to the topic of the conference, I would like to add: and a spiritual-sensory-emotional one. Kirmayer argues that brain functions as the base of mental health are encultured (phylogenetic, co-evolutionary, developmental, biographical) and that culture with its systems of knowledge, rules, concepts, and practices plays a major role for our (mental) well-being. He introduces the interdisciplinary approach of cultural neurophenomenology with its two parallel foci of pathoplasticity and pathogenesis as socio-cultural phenomena. Taking into consideration affective arrangements at their intersection, we could deepen our understanding of how affect is patterned, channeled, and modulated. Cultural influences on affect and emotion would determine experience, would regulate patterns of expression, and would provide a context for interaction and social meaning.

On Tuesday, after a warm welcome by the psychological anthropologist Birgitt Röttger-Rössler (Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology/FU Berlin) and an introduction by the organizers, JAN SLABY discusses his philosophy on affective arrangements as displayed above. He is followed by another contribution of Laurence J. Kirmayer on the cultural-historical perspective on affective arrangements in therapeutic settings. Kirmayer explores the relationship of emotion, mood, cog-

nitition, and action and asks how arrangements would affect, in fact, affect. To him, social arrangements are universally represented in symbolic healing as mechanisms of affective and sensory transformation beyond the cognitive aspect of performance. Thi Minh Tam Ta and Eric Hahn offer an insightful contribution about their experiences and efforts of applying affective arrangements in therapeutic settings with Vietnamese migrants in Berlin. Besides the interesting technique to design the therapeutic space according to Vietnamese traditions and habits, it is the speakers' focus on "deep listening" as therapeutic practice which strikes me here. Where mindfulness practices were usually applied to patients as a technique towards recovery, it is used here as a diagnostic tool empowered by an ambience which would leave the patient relaxed enough to share his/her affective issues.

The last three speakers of the day are the clinician Markus Pawelzik (EOS-Clinic/Münster), the social anthropologist Helene Basu (Institute of Ethnology/Münster), as well as the psychological anthropologist and psychoanalyst Douglas W. Hollan (Department of Anthropology/UCLA, USA). Pawelzik's contribution remains highly contested, as he acknowledges the effectiveness of affective arrangements as cultural practices on biological functions relevant for the therapy process, but denies cultural aspects of the body itself. He reduces it to cellular bio-chemistry instead of taking culture and environment into consideration. Helene Basu refers to a central aspect of affective arrangements in therapy: the human speech. Relating to her fieldwork at Muslim shrines and their intersection with mental health practices in India, she explores soundscapes as affective arrangements where certain techniques (such as prayer or song), quiet environments, or speech would trigger, control and/or manipulate human emotion. Basu underlines the importance of an interactional and participatory framework which includes ratified speakers, listeners, and bystanders as embodied social action and affective positioning through acts of speaking and listening. In his evening keynote, Douglas W. Hollan rounds up the insightful and controversial discussions of that day by directing our attention towards the aspect of empathy as a central aspect of affective arrangements in mental health care settings. His main argument touches

on the question of how people can become affectively attuned to their environment. Processes of internalization, interactional aspects and enactment are topics which deserve deeper exploration in future research.

The contributions on Wednesday underline the global and transnational aspect of affective arrangements: psychological anthropologist Allen Tran (Department of Anthropology, Bucknell University, Pennsylvania, USA) engages affective arrangements and family caretakers in Vietnamese psychiatric clinics. Anthropologist Julia Vorhöf (Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology/University of Göttingen) explores dysfunctional relationships as a key challenge for therapy in Uganda, and anthropologist Daniel White (Japanology/FU Berlin) turns our attention to technological care markets as affective arrangements of industry and wellbeing in contemporary Japan. My personal highlight of the day is the contribution by three younger scholars within the project: Edda Heyken, Jörg-Christian Lanca and Thi Main Huong Nguyen report their field research experiences, highlighting sensory ethnographic practice and person-centered ethnography as affective arrangements. They describe their method of “walking with [Vietnamese] patients” through parks or comparably soothing environments in silence. At some point, some detail (the shape of a tree, animals, playing kids, a certain situation) would attract a patient’s attention and remind him/her of former experiences which s/he would then share with their company. I personally perceive this as an amazing approach to not only receive information and data, but to respectfully treat our informants, share time with them and have them guiding us as researchers. We are thus not only talking about affective arrangements in mental health care settings, but in research settings on mental health care.

The final “Wrap-Up Discussion” with Helene Basu, Douglas W. Hollan, Laurence J. Kirmayer, Nasima Selim (Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology/FU Berlin), JAN Slaby and Thi Minh

Tam Ta, moderated by organizer Anita von Poser, reveals another aspect of interest not explicitly touched in most of the conference papers: the interrelatedness of affective arrangements with political structures and economic questions regarding future care markets. The discussion also reveals the necessity to not only understand how patients contribute to their experiences, perceptions, and imagination to affective arrangements, but also how transformations of affective arrangements in mental health care settings have an impact on post-therapeutic daily life. Anthropologist Edda Heyken summarizes the impact and importance of this conference in such a precise way, that I will simply quote her here:

“The potential pivot point for well-being resides within mental health care settings, where the relational affects can be acknowledged and treated with an increasing awareness. This opens up new pathways for clinicians, patients, and anthropologists to act and reflect on the dimensions of resonance and dissonance of affective arrangements. [...] The political dimension of affect eventually implied the question of how affective arrangements can be applied in a concrete way. As the discussants concluded, first we need to elaborate on what particular individuals and collectives perceive, embody, improvise, and enact within a given affective arrangement before we can understand the complex dynamics and entanglements between different arrangements” (Personal Communication).

I have nothing to add but the fact that at the time of the conference, AGEM was already planning another international conference on the “Aesthetics of Healing” in Münster (Westfalen)/Germany, May 24–26, 2019, engaging a similar approach and further developing the discussion on affective and sensory aspects of (mental) health care (see upcoming CURARE editions).

Literatur

- SLABY, JAN; MÜHLHOFF, RAINER & WÜSCHNER, PHILLIP 2017. Affective Arrangements. *Emotion Review*: 1–10. DOI: 10.1177/1754073917722214.