

Emotional foundationalism? Critical remarks on affect and collective emotion in the phenomenological-psychoanalytic account of ethno-national identity

Gavin Sullivan

Monash University, Australia
Free University Berlin, Germany

Ethnicities
11(1) 123–130
© The Author(s) 2011
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1468796810388705
etn.sagepub.com


In this critical account of Baldacchino's broad proposal for an emotion-focused phenomenological-psychoanalytic account of ethno-national identity in his article 'The eidetic of belonging', I focus my evaluation on three central features that might, even when treated separately, advance contemporary understanding of group self-conceptions and emotion. The first is that affect (emotion or sentiment) should play a central role in understanding ethno-national identity. The second is that collective emotion should be prominent as a kind of social glue in the formation and maintenance of ethno-national identity (including complex relations between different ethno-national groups). The third is that a psychoanalytic phenomenology of collective emotion addresses limitations that beset conceptions of ethno-national affective subjectivity: particularly, the idea that it is useful to replace representations of irrational and dangerous ethno-national emotion with a new and elaborate theoretical vocabulary of relationships between ego-objects and we-images.

While all three positions can be argued to be present already in the ethno-national identity literature, it is the arguments supporting each feature and an evaluation of the resulting gestalt that will be critically examined to determine

Corresponding author:

Gavin Sullivan, School of Psychology and Psychiatry, Caulfield Campus, Caulfield East, Melbourne, VIC 3145, Australia
Email: gsullivan34@yahoo.com

whether a conceptual advance (rather than a less than convincing interdisciplinary convergence of ideas) has indeed been achieved. The first highlighted feature of the proposal is addressed by discussing the place for affect in theoretical or critically descriptive accounts in which emotions about one's own and other collectives are *internally related* to the experience of group identity. A central question is whether the emotional foreground of group identity can be emphasized without its equivocation to the background of relations and practices. The second is explored by arguing for the need to assemble detailed reminders of the phenomenology of collective emotion and its limits. The third is evaluated by considering how further coherent insights into ethno-national affective identity can accrue by examining the multiple objects of emotions such as collective pride, without adopting a foundational, non-reflexive account of identity (Brown and Stenner, 2009).

The place of affect in understandings of ethno-national identity emotion

Representations of emotion and affect have been transformed from a marginalized position in the mid-20th century to their current central position in many of the practices, encounters and places constituting personal and public life (Ahmed, 2004; Parkinson et al., 2005; Thrift, 2004). *Pace* Baldacchino, simplistic hydraulic accounts of emotion have been overturned by thorough neuroscientific research. Moreover, social and cultural theorists (e.g., Probyn, 2005) have demonstrated genuine multidisciplinary in their openness to the theories and findings of non-reductive neuroscience. In such a context, when a new theoretical framework such as Baldacchino's implies that emotion can be invoked ubiquitously as an explanation of the dynamics that underpin multitudinous cultural and social phenomena, it is important to overlook the dismissive caricature of contemporary 'neo-hydraulic' psychology to examine further details and provide detailed counter-examples.

In the case of the phenomenological-psychoanalytic account, central importance is given to collective emotion. But what exactly *is* collective emotion? Several possibilities are immediately apparent: (1) people's emotions about the ethno-national collective or collectives they identify with (or which they can be identified as part of) as well as those individuals with whom they do not identify (e.g. we're proud *not* to be like them); (2) emotions that are widely shared and regarded as having collective manifestations even though the object or target of the emotion is not necessarily the same (e.g. people's *individual* thoughts, feelings and memories about 'what makes our nation or ethnic group special', which may have public manifestations or an origin in collective celebrations, moral-emotional climates, or widely shared attachments); and (3) emotions that are demonstrated by collectives (e.g. in public spaces) where reactions are the same (or similar) and the target or object of emotion is the same (e.g. at least one half of the crowd's reaction to a televised game at a public viewing site).

The possible combinations (by no means mapped out or completed by possibilities (1) to (3); cf. Smith et al., 2007) are complex and do not easily fit into even the