Exploring the affective dimensions of doing gender and relationships in spaces of learning

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Though often unexplored and undertheorised, emotions are a potent and powerful theme in educational research. Understanding the relationship between gender and emotions involves a deep engagement with other ways of knowing and of being.

When designing and conducting our research in spaces of learning, many of us continue to grapple with questions of gender, subjectivity and emotions. These questions continually change in response to an ever-shifting economic, cultural and political landscape that is creating new, as well as rearticulating old, equity challenges. We ask ourselves: how are our understandings of gender and emotion influencing the way we conduct ourselves as researchers in formal and alternative/informal sites of learning? Furthermore, how can we build on the strong and robust history of education research in this area to respond to these new challenges?

After an evacuation of gender in equity and schooling policy in Australia from the mid-1990s, we are currently experiencing somewhat of a renaissance in a focus on gender in schools – albeit a highly contentious one with familiar conservative backlash politics (especially associated with the Safe Schools program) stifling the equity agenda. Such conditions point to the continued imperative to rethink how we are researching gender, emotions and schooling.

The one-day symposium, Doing gender: relationships, emotions and spaces of learning, held at Deakin University in August 2018 focused on discussing previous and current research on emotions and gender which inform our thinking about young people’s experiences with learning today. The symposium was envisaged not so much as a discussion of our findings but rather a reflection on how the relationship between gender and emotions is being researched in the current climate and specifically what approaches and methodologies are being employed.

The symposium was focused around specific questions:

• How are we approaching the ways in which we research the relationship between gender and emotion in spaces of learning, teaching and management today?
• How might we think through established sociological axes of inequality in designing research which reflects a more cohesive account of contemporary articulations of gender and relationships?
• What are the new questions of gender, subjectivity and emotions for schools in the time of the #MeToo movement? Is it simply same old, same old?
• How can our new theoretical (feminist) toolbox better theorise these new questions?
• What can we learn from where we have been to theorise these new questions of gender, subjectivity and emotions?
• How do certain methods lend themselves to particular types of knowledge, potentially recreating old structures and/or enabling new ones?
• What might be the implications of these questions for both academic knowledge, as well as knowledge which has a public impact in the current political landscape?

In our research in spaces of learning, we need to think about the production of gender – to consider how different versions of masculinity/femininity are produced. The report summarises the major ideas presented on the day according to eight significant areas:

1. Overview: Broad themes and provocations from the day
2. Researching ‘doing gender’ and the role of researcher
3. The past, present, future
4. Digital selfhoods and intimacies
5. Power, legitimisation and safe spaces
6. Neoliberal policies as silencing and anxiety-inducing
7. Schools and sites of learning as relational
8. Concluding thoughts and provocations
1. Overview: Broad themes and provocations from the day

Our symposium focused on recent theoretical developments and what we believe will frame our research in the future. Emotions – whether it be desire, envy, aspiration or fear – arise out of particular investments in particular ideologies and politics. The presenters focused on provocative questions such as: how do we document the ways that power and gender are lived, produced and experienced through our (embodied) sense of self? Through our lived experience, how can we open up spaces to explore the emotional dimensions of gender subjectivities? How do these emotional dimensions relate to the multiple masculinities and multiple femininities we experience and interact with daily?

Central to the focus of the day was thinking critically about subjectivities as positionings and how they contribute both to how we live and to the emotional dimensions in which we live. Paramount to our inquiry was how these emotional dimensions are intertwined with spaces of learning. Within such spaces, we considered how certain emotions are normalised while other emotions may be pathologised.

In investigating how emotions are given specific values depending on context, the symposium scholars drew attention to how there exists a ‘public feeling’ (Berlant 2011) which contributes to the structuring of intersubjectivity and relationality. The presenters, therefore, highlighted the way we are compelled to consider cultural contexts, discourses and power relations and how this shapes research and how we do gender. As researchers, when do we feel empowered/disempowered? As we navigate our research, how is the relationship between responsibility and ethics shifting during times of rapid social change?

Since the late 1990s, we are witness to the emotional turn – or the affective turn – in the social sciences. Affective politics draws on work by scholars including Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, Arlie Hochschild and Erica McWilliam, who invite us to ask: “how do emotions work to align some subjects with some others and against other others? How do emotions move between bodies?” (Ahmed 2004a, p. 118). In conducting ourselves as critical and reflective researchers, we consider how both gender and the politics of gender are emotional fields. In contemplating how students form themselves as subjects, our normative beliefs about gender matter – and, more importantly, our feelings about gender matter.

An overarching theme of the day was the importance of deciphering the interworkings of what Ahmed (2004a, p. 117) calls ‘affective economies’ where “emotions are not simply “within” or “without” but that they “create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds.” As we seek to understand how gender subjectivities are constructed in schooling and spaces of learning, we need to consider the ways in which the broader issues of the affective economy are lived. Ahmed (2004a, p. 119) writes:

In such affective economies, emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments. Rather than seeing emotions as psychological dispositions, we need to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective.

Our efforts are more focused on understanding the affective economies concerning gender and education. In examining the intersection between gender, sexualities, subjectivities and schooling, feminist scholarship has focused on experience and sought to give historical attention to the seemingly hidden realms of feelings to unsettle the reason/emotion, public/private divisions (e.g. “making the personal political” or “the person is the political”). In pondering the ongoing process of doing emotion in educational research, what do these divisions mean for interpersonal relations and intimate life? And what does this mean in terms of our understanding of the ways intersectional categories bind us to certain ways of being and how this binding occurs through emotions and everyday interactions? These questions are important because, as educational researchers, we place continual significance on recognising and reflecting upon ‘recuperative gender’ politics (e.g. recuperative masculinity), emphasising the strong emotional investment that we have in our gender – an investment as gendered beings.

Researching emotions is important because emotions are important. We see how young people learn what it feels like to be cared for and care for others and we see how this is a pleasurable and value-constituting activity. In terms of formal schooling, emotions are an essential part of the ethical care performed by teachers and school leaders. Subjectivities, discourses and power relations shape what is thinkable and knowable about subject positions, and so an understanding of emotions is integral to deciphering how young people come to make affective investments.
2. Researching ‘doing gender’ and the role of researcher

As an important starting point, all research is the study of bodies moving through contexts and – through this process – the body may take on different traits or be influenced by discourses, power relations, etc. And yet in our work as academics who experience emotions, our affective experiences as researchers are rarely acknowledged in the scholarship. For example, ethics applications which fit with institutional standards of neoliberalism and New Public Management often fail to capture the difficult decisions researchers face and how research plans alter and adapt. Furthermore, there can often be discomfort concerning gender and emotion. Education – as a site of work – often brings emotions into conflict. Importantly, how do we translate feminist ideas, as well as an ethics of care, for those working in education and educational research? In terms of our reflective practice in relation to our research, how do we handle emotions? How do we represent them?

In exploring doing gender and the role of the researcher, we draw attention to the relationship between theory and methodology, and the importance of praxis when navigating emotions and affect. Our field of research is established and maintained through asymmetrical power relations which – can – stratify conceptions of respect, care and ethical inclusion. Adding complexity, how researchers adapt in the moment can often be related to one’s sense of, or past experiences of, doing gender. As researchers, we listen to narratives that are both deeply felt memories, as well as desires, which may be echoed collectively. Attention to such narratives compels us to reflect on how our bodies and emotions are constituted in relation to conceptions of normativity, and how this may influence how we process and negotiate the research environment.

At the workshop, two sets of questions framed the wider discussion of the role of the researchers:

1. To what extent do we reflect on our unconscious desires as researchers when we are working in the research space? What are we looking for in the young people that we are working with and what does this say about us?
2. In what ways are we being empathetic researchers? Specifically, how is being an empathetic and aware citizen of the world overlapping with being a considerate and ethical researcher?

3. The past, present, future

During the symposium, a common theme explored was the role of time in understanding the affective dimensions of doing gender and relationships in spaces of learning. Scholars articulated how, in their research, they found emotions as ‘charged’ and ‘shaped’ over time as gender emerged and re-emerged in spaces of learning. We theorise gender as attached to bodies, attached to spaces, infused with history and not fixed or individualised. For educational research, we need to focus on deciphering the emergence from social/relational places that shape, and are shaped by, interactions between bodies which are gendered, racialised, sexualised and (dis)abled. Identity axis of difference within these spaces may either constrain or enable depending on the situation.

We recognise that emotions are tied to movements, ideologies, and personal histories. In considering history, many felt it was important to note that some emotions have been pathologised in certain contexts as well as associated with deficit views of gender. Intersectionality compels us to think critically about notions of gender and equity as a progress narrative. Doing gender in our lives involves a historical sensibility; furthermore, we believe doing gender research involves a historical sensibility. Therefore, what does doing gender mean for the social production of memory, and vice versa? And, as a provocation, is doing gender always an affective assemblage or is it ‘made in the moment’?
4. Digital selfhoods and intimacies

The symposium highlighted how *doing gender* has become encased in digital culture where our social relations of gender are now mapped digitally. The prevalence of the digital has transformed meaning while meaning has, in turn, transformed the digital. We are witness to the virtual and real as constantly interacting and tapping into our emotions. How is the digital changing how we relate to each other? How does the digital influence how we feel about ourselves, our emotions and our relationship to others? And as materiality, technology and subjectivities intersect, how does this influence how we research?

Emotions arise out of particular investments in particular ideologies. The emotions of shame, envy, aspiration, fear, etc influence our work. In reflecting on the relationship between gender and emotions in terms of technology, we are compelled to consider what new approaches and methodologies are being employed. How we research young people’s lived experience and depictions amidst social media saturation can give rise to certain emotions which, in turn, structure interpersonal relationships. The digital, specifically social media, can be labelled as toxic but it also enables a new politics of truth where new online spaces function as an important way of speaking back (e.g. #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter).

Furthermore, in terms of formal schooling and spaces of learning, the whole apparatus of pedagogy is being transformed and altered, and this is arguably interwoven with how the self is produced. As pedagogic relations and selfhood transform – often in relation to extended audiences and networks – this may influence how friendship and intimacies are framed, lived, realised and discussed. The reframing of intimacies compels us to reflect on the ways in which subjects constitute themselves. For example, drawing on theories of new materialism, those interested in doing gender and emotions ask, ‘what does this thing do… what produces this thing? What does this all mean for *doing gender*?’

5. Power, legitimisation and safe spaces

Integral to the discussion of current research on emotions and gender which inform our thinking about young people’s experiences with learning today were discussions of power, legitimisation and safe spaces. This led to deliberation over who has the power to legitimise certain emotions in certain spaces. Who may ‘own’ emotions in spaces of learning? And what does this mean for those who do not have power? How does this influence their sense of vulnerability?

Emotions – and specifically the showing of emotions – has historically been tied to notions of femininity. In considering feelings of vulnerability, how does one process these feelings? What conflicts arise when power is exercised over others? Over one’s own emotion? Emotional power is ever present and always negotiated around issues of intersectionality and inequality. This is important when we consider how feeling a sense of power and status is central to who we are and is essential to how we research topics like bullying and marginalisation, gender and trauma, racism, etc.

How we *do gender and relationships* compels us to think critically about the complex relationship between pleasure, pain, insecurity and the pursuit of power. There exists a reciprocal relationship between emotions and safe spaces. Drawing on Ahmed (2004ab), how do affective relations define what constitutes a safe space? How do intensities of attachment create, undermine and re-create safe spaces? How do such intensities define what constitutes vulnerability? How do emotions work to align individuals with communities or bodily space with social space through the intensity of attachment?
6. Neoliberal policies as silencing and anxiety-inducing

It is interesting to consider how gender is at the fore in the public sphere while simultaneously disappearing from parts of the public sphere. What does that mean for how we are doing gender in our research? The presenters at the symposium felt there is a need for awareness regarding how gender and gender issues are positioned in public pedagogies and the public sphere.

There was also interest in pervasive neoliberal policy rhetoric is structuring our lives. Scholars focused on how our understandings of gender and emotions involve pushing back against individual and competitive notions present in policy rhetoric. It is important to consider how we consider our own emotion in relation to the current educational restructuring (e.g. the marginalisation of public education, the commodification of educational labour). How do we articulate emotions when they are being measured and quantified in every aspect of our daily experiences? How does this influence our emotional labour and emotional work (what was called “the heart bit”)? How can we embrace our unregulated emotions and, more importantly, how would this alter how we may come to understand the social?

Scholars at the symposium also highlighted how it was necessary to consider how current educational policies capitalise on provocative language that heightens emotions. Doing gender has become heavily influenced by positive psychology and notions of emotional intelligence. There is a penchant to individualise and psychologise emotions when considering questions of agency and empowerment. Organisational change theorists emphasise how we exist within a constant heightened state of change and anxiety such as class-based emotional registers regarding parent choice and involvement in their children’s education as well as anxieties concerning education markets as exploitative.

Therefore, where are we seeing emotion removed and how is it being removed? How do we function in spaces devoid of emotion? What theories do we have to investigate these spaces? Such questions compel us to think about the relationships between emotions and exploitation, and how we study them.

7. Schools and sites of learning as relational

_How we are and how we are becoming is constructed through our emotions._ As emotions are tightly interwoven with gender and gendered experiences, they are also tied to our relationships. Emotions are linked to relationships with things and relationships with people. Young people go to school primarily because they enjoy the relationships they form and to which they contribute. Therefore, emotions are tied to a sense of connectedness – of belonging – and are therefore integral to schooling and learning.

Schools are emotive environments filled with toxicity, fear, anger, guilt, shame, nostalgia, regret, pleasure, etc. Scholars at the symposium emphasised how schools are sites of convivial co-habitation where subjectivities are produced and regulated through human contact. Thus, arguably, they become charged atmospheres. In considering emotions as embodied, we must also consider how teaching and learning in contemporary times require more physical demands (longer working hours, attention to standards, etc) which influences the ethics of care. Emotions become commodified and performed in relation to conceptions of teaching and learning which are increasingly governed to an accountability agenda. This compels us to ponder the reflective practice of educators in regards to the emotive dimensions of doing their work, where the climate of performativity can produce ongoing tensions.
8. Concluding thoughts and provocations

Our symposium inspired us to think about new questions regarding the nexus of gender, subjectivity and emotions. In considering developments in politics and the digital space, we need to think carefully about how we conduct ourselves as researchers and how certain methods lend themselves to particular types of knowledge. While many provocations came forth on the day, we highlight several below:

- As intersectional researchers, where do we feel empowered/disempowered and what does this mean for the shifting relationship between responsibility and ethics?
- In terms of conveying our research in the public sphere, how do we present our emotions?
- What role does historical sensibility play in doing gender in our research? What does doing gender mean for the social production of memory and vice versa?
- As researchers, how do we account for the power of the digital to influence how we feel about ourselves, our emotions and our relationship to others?
- Who has the power to legitimise certain emotions in certain spaces? How has this come about?
- How do we consider our own inner emotional worlds in relation to the current educational restructuring which exacerbates inequalities? How do we process our unregulated emotions and what does this mean for how we research?

We need to consider how our approach as researchers potentially recreate old structures while simultaneously enabling new ones. We conclude with thinking carefully about doing gender and the importance of doing research on gender and emotions.
A selection of significant theorists on gender, relationships, emotions in spaces of learning

**Sara Ahmed** – explores the sociality of emotions and affective emotion as it manifests in terms of care or love in embodied spaces. ‘Affect’ is more the internalised intensity that shapes and qualifies the emotions, reactions, interaction and participatory atmosphere, rather than being located in individualised bodies.

**Karen Barad** – explores the terms of materiality and signification, focusing on what she calls “the process of mattering” where things come to matter.

**Lauren Berlant** – explores accounts of “public feelings” and the “affective charge of social life.” She highlights the “vulnerability and precariousness” as “magnetising concepts of our time” citing a sense of precariousness and uncertainty in response to war, military and unstable economies. Her notion of cruel optimism catches feelings of precariousness in the face of the attrition of the good life fantasy.

**Megan Boaler** – explores what she considers a false separation of reason and emotion that has defined our thinking about the role emotions play in our lives.

**Rosi Braidotti** – explores the expanding of the theoretical understanding of embodiment, affect and relational structure of subjectivity.

**Rebecca Coleman** – explores ‘a sensory sociology of the future.’ Argues that to study the intangibility of the future is to consider the current and ongoing elaboration of interdisciplinary theories and methodologies we use to engage.

**Melissa Gregg and Greg Seigworth** – explores how scholars working with affect need to pay attention to all the minuscule or molecular events of the everyday life where flows of relations and desire can be glimpsed, as well as the implication of the researcher in the research apparatus.

**Anita Harris** – explores the need for friendships which creates conditions of a type of cosmopolitan ethics amongst young people. Emphasises how young people move in a sense of being together and how the emotional investment in friendship is important for them.

**Anna Hickey-Moody** – explores feelings, aesthetics and affective pedagogy. Emphasis on performativities, becomings and new materialities.

**Arlie Hochschild** – explores the concept of ‘service with a smile’ in the service sector with flight attendants and bill collectors where she described the ‘emotional work’ involved in being “nasty” or “nice.” Emphasises how we manage our outer expressions of feeling through surface acting where there is a gap between what we feel and what we ‘ought’ to feel.

**Kate Manne** – explores research focused on misogyny and sexism historically in areas such as current events, politics, popular culture, etc.

**Erica McWilliam** – explores ‘touchy subjects’ and ‘pedagogical pleasures’ arguing for pedagogy as an erotic field. Emphasises how progressive educators need to recognise desire and pleasure in pedagogy in an attempt to make a case for reclaiming the notions of pedagogical ‘erotics’ and ‘seduction.’

**Martin Mills** – explores the emotional investment in hegemonic masculinity in schooling and how young men can use fear against other boys to try and maintain control within the group.

**Emma Renold** – explores scholarship on assemblages offering diverse ways to about gender, sexualities, violence and consent in which place, space, objects, affect and history entangle in predictable and unpredictable ways.

**Jessica Ringrose** – explores affect assemblages in feminist research to in regards to experiences of girlhood drawing on primarily on Deleuze and Guattari.

**Margaret Wetherall** – explores affective practices, affect and emotion which she theorises as articulations of affect and meaning-making. Argues that social research requires methods that deal with entanglements of embodiment and discourse.

**Raymond Williams** – explores the “structures of feeling” where he focuses on a type of historical moment when there’s a national sense, or a national understanding, around a central issue (e.g. war), that shapes the ‘structures of feeling’ of a community or a nation’s state.

**Michalinos Zeymblas** – explores the politics of difference in terms of ‘emotions and fears’ and bringing forth a racial dimension. Emphasising how educational spaces are complex structures of feeling that evoke strong and often discomforting emotions and what this may mean for ‘the notion of strategic empathy.’
Recommended further reading


