Social Cognition, Emotions, and the Psychology of Writing

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It should be a familiar fact by now that, apart from writing apprehension (a skewed perspective at best), the emotional dimension of writing has been vague and undifferentiated (Macrorie; McLeod; Murray) or missing in contemporary composition theory (Brand, "Hot"; "Why"). The recent penetration of social themes into professional parlance has eased this problem, providing one believes that social phenomena subsume affective ones or that the two are synonymous. If, however, composition studies continues to embrace the social construction of writing as fully as it has thus far, then it needs to study all its component parts. And that includes emotion.

Because of the very sprawl of social construction theory, the field of composition seems to assume that the emotional experience has somehow been addressed through it. The terms social and emotional are often linked, as in social-emotional or social-personal,1 where the personal stands proxy for the subjective, which in turn stands proxy for the emotional. Alternatively, there is a linking of social and political (Bartholomae) or socio-cognitive, where the social or socio often stands proxy for the emotional.2 The application to writing of the term social continues to inspire confusion regarding emotion, thus yielding no greater insight into its impact on writing.

I am not sure that writing specialists are aware of why some of this has happened, and it is this story I want to tell. But I do not want to tell it from the anthropological or philosophical perspective, but from a less familiar one: that of mainstream social psychology. This essay does not mean to provide a sweeping overview of social psychology. Such a history is complex, and the connections are unwieldy and cannot be fully developed here. Rather, this essay focuses on that piece of social psychology from which "attitude" emerged as a core concept and came to share with "emotion" a common phenomenological base. This is especially important because as central as attitude is to social psychology, it seems only as close as cognitivists are willing to come to dealing with emotions (Flower, "Decision"). My intention is to trace how social psychology and the construct of attitude rose out of general systematic psychology. I then look at how emotions were eased out of early cognitive psychology and found a home in social psychology as
well as in its current social science incarnation, also identified as social constructivism or social construction (Averill; Harré, *Social*). Finally, I address how these developments have influenced composition studies and our thinking about the social and personal aspects of writing. This story may seem a long windup for such a modest assertion: that, up to now, attempts at social-cognitive theories of writing mask the emotional experience of writing, and it is this experience that needs to be incorporated into a psychology of writing.

I do not mean to hail psychology as the major parent of composition. Nor do I assert that social psychology or social construction theory, for that matter, single-handedly gave birth to a pedagogical counterpart in collaborative learning or to emotions psychology. These histories are longer and far more complicated than that (Brand, *Psychology*; Gere). Clearly, we can understand peer writing groups without understanding the history of social psychology. But what is not understood is why emotions have had no place in composition theory despite the fact that emotions are integral to social psychology, an influential progenitor of social construction. Despite the fact that social cognition provides substantial information about writers, it seems at the same time to give us more ammunition to avoid studying their emotional experience. Given our interest in the social aspects of writing, this legacy from social psychology is relevant and instructive.

The Rise of Social Psychology and the Construct of Attitude

Like psychology in general, up to the twentieth century, theories of the intellect were psychologies of the individual (Boring 31). Coincident with the founding of his famed laboratory in Leipzig in 1879, Wilhelm Wundt's scientific psychology, a hybrid of British and German philosophy and physiology, focused almost entirely on the "structural contents" of consciousness. They were revealed by introspection and were therefore private, mentalistic, and individual.

Just how the individual psychology of the nineteenth century made way for its social spur is difficult to track precisely. But I will speak to some of its benchmark. Especially relevant here are the constructs of set and attitude, the grounds for its eventual claim on emotion. While social psychology matured into a discipline by the 1930s, it shares an ancestry with emotions psychology that dates back at least to 1908 when experimentalist William McDougall's abiding pursuit of his twin interests in social and emotional processes produced *An Introduction to Social Psychology*. His was a popular book that provided the basis for a nativist description of human social behavior. Briefly, to McDougall all human activity, including social activity, was instinctive. For each instinct there was a corresponding primary emotion which was goal-directed or purposive and capable of being modified by experience. McDougall was thus among the first in systematic psychology to connect the social, emotional, and cognitive.
Although as early as 1862 Wundt was said to have devoted a phase of his prodigious output to social psychology (Boring), so far as I can see, his contribution to it lay more with his use of the concept of apperception. In order to hypothesize the contents of consciousness, Wundt appropriated Herbart’s concept of apperception. Apperception meant the making conscious of phenomena and the assimilation of these phenomena into a body of conscious ideas called the *apperceptive mass* (a term that had actually originated with Leibnitz two hundred years before). It was logical and structured, and it anticipated modern cognitive psychology which later renamed it *schemata* or *schema* (Bartlett). But the term had an attitudinal base.

Although the construct of attitude was not coined by the Wurzburg school of imageless thought (a short-lived group of empiricists formed around the turn of the century who broke with Wundt on some issues), what the school proposed instead served as a conduit between the idea of apperception as a fixed aggregate and the modern construct of attitude. It claimed that what could not be observed did not exist nor could be included in science. Thoughts were not amenable to observation. Wundt’s conscious contents of the mind were an insufficient description of what was there. Furthermore, introspection was an inadequate tool for getting at them experimentally. What else in consciousness legitimately accounted for conscious processes led to the more dynamic idea of *set*, forerunner of the social psychological tenet, *attitude*.

The principals of Wurzburg subdivided conscious processes into four intervals, one having to do with the potential consciousness that precedes a conscious course, or a “setting up” within an individual with a particular goal (Boring 404). From set came *conscious attitudes* (Allport, “Attitudes”). Feelings and other contents of the mind were neither sensations nor ideas but conscious attitudes. The Wurzburg school popularized other language important to social psychology. *Preparation* was interchangeable with *predisposition* and *predetermined tendencies*, which in turn were linked to *attitude*, which within a decade replaced *set*. Most important, *predilections* toward things meant the way humans felt about them in general, which were at bottom emotions.

Meanwhile in America psychologists McDougall and Edward Tolman applied purpose to behavior, creating a purposive behaviorism. This small fact is important because, insofar as this psychology freely borrowed the language of the Wurzburg school, it also formed part of the conduit to both modern social and cognitive psychology. It appropriated the concept of attitude to help explain prior experience, preference, values, expectations, and goal-setting. Needs and attitudes were now distinguished. Instincts determined needs, derived needs determined habits, and attitudes determined preferences. And because a preference required some sense of the badness or goodness of things, it was also linked to emotion (Zajonc and Markusy).
To the extent then that set meant attitude, the Wurzburg school was largely responsible for a first psychology of attitude, the study of which was in 1939 declared the field of social psychology par excellence (Allport, "Attitudes" 802). It thus paved the way for modern applications of the term. Attitude, a preparedness or readiness for response, came to have behavioral, cognitive, and emotional components. Its emotional component was embodied in its subjectivity, which included a positive or negative valance and a level of intensity. Certainly, social factors would be expected to have a place in the social science of the period, but social factors in combination with emotional ones also had application in personality (Allport, Personality) and cognitive theory (Bartlett). Ebbinghaus had already brought memory into experimental psychology in 1885. By 1932 British experimentalist Bartlett animated memory by calling it "remembering" and gave it fuller human meaning through repeated references to its social psychology and its affective and attitudinal properties.

Although the actual data of social psychology were more anthropological and comparative than experimental, attitudes, as general and enduring orientations to and evaluations of the world, were popularized by social scientists in the early decades of the twentieth century. Sociologist Charles Cooley and social behaviorist George Herbert Mead, seminal forebears of contemporary social psychology, established the group as the appropriate unit for psychological analysis. Individuals could be understood only in terms of the behavior of the various social groups of which they were members (Mead, Mind). Both saw the self as a product of society and caused by it. Cooley postulated in the self a "looking-glass I," formed from the ability of the "I" of the mind to objectify itself and reflect on the "me." For Mead the self found its source in a "generalized-other," "the universalization of the process of role-taking." To the degree that the self internalized the attitudes of others, it virtually became those others (xxxii; 17).

However, of all the constructs jockeying for definition during this period (attention, attitude, consciousness, emotion, introspection, memory, perception, and selection), consciousness and the conduit to it, introspection, became least useful scientifically. In discrediting consciousness and introspection, mainstream psychology signaled a move to a new, more rigorous exploration of the mind called cognitive psychology. Modern cognitive psychology ultimately salvaged consciousness (Mandler, Mind 89-116), used what it could of attitude for theorizing about values, and all but discarded the rest, namely, emotions. It is uncertain whether or not the affective component of attitude actually came to inhabit a social world by default or by active pursuit of its advocates. In either event, while most major systems have claimed a slice of it, the science of attitude, including its emotional aspects, has been unusually congenial to social science, having, as already noted, been taken as precisely the subject of social psychology.
It should be noted at this point that in the early decades of the twentieth century any surviving adaptive views of the emotions such as Darwin's were deeply undercut by the psychoanalytic psychologies which confirmed the medical model (that is, to be emotional was to be ill). Almost every psychology of that era had something to say about emotion. And it was usually negative. It stands to reason then that cognitive psychology would view emotion in two principal ways: as a dysfunctional response to experience that needed treatment and was therefore a clinical matter, or as part of the softer of the psychological subspecialties. So, since the 1930s there has been an inverse relationship between the ascendency of cognitive psychology and the relevance of emotion to it.

To this theoretical climate were added the world wars. Social psychology in its golden age became the appropriate discipline to address the social and emotional disabilities produced by them. Ideas about mental hygiene had already been promulgated during the 1920s. While the goal of the medical model for psychological health remained the problem of the mental disease of individuals (White 51-52), mental health was becoming more positive and more social. Clinics, social service agencies, and therapists like Harry Stack Sullivan responded to the Zeitgeist with an interpersonal psychology that held social situations squarely at the center of healthy self systems. Thus, the constructs social and emotional (now sometimes hyphenated) were firmly bonded for better or for worse, in sickness, in health, and in the social sciences, where emotions have largely remained.

Cognitive Studies and Social Construction

Since that time, no matter how much scholarship accrued, how much their personal lives confirm it, mainstream cognitive psychologists, like others in high science, seem to disavow that their own internal experiences derive from anything other than objective realities. Emotions were bad: "discrepancies," "interrupts" in the proper study of human mind (Mandler, "Constructivist" 31-32; Newell and Simon). Composition studies has believed likewise. With only isolated breaks in twentieth-century paradigms, until recently cognitive themes generally accounted for the mind at academic work, and writing was no exception. Little was missing, little slipping between the cracks or lapping messily over the sides. Few social motifs. Rare affective ones (Applebee).

Enter collaborative learning. Through the pioneering efforts of Kenneth Bruffee at Brooklyn College, the social psychology of writing has come to matter. But unlike its social science counterpart (Armon-Jones, "Thesis"), it has not been a vehicle for the study of attitude, much less emotion; both seem to have fallen away, emotions further than attitude. It has become the hinge for a catalog of professional models and pedagogical practices such as peer group work, from which writing centers, peer tutoring, and peer editing sprung. Its historical and theoretical underpinnings came somewhat
later to composition studies, a nearly perfect inductive process. But it came, and it did so in the name of social construction, a movement already ascending in related fields. Social motifs could account for phenomena that cognitive psychology neglected: audience, situation, community, the \textit{Zeitgeist}, and reality (Fish 171; Rorty). Our very selves were constituted by circumstance (Bruffee, "Conversation"; Goffman). The self finds its source in relationships, or the self and thought are considered public property. The extremist position would believe in an abrogation of self, a self so constituted by others that it is in effect hollow, a cipher, without them. A reality without others was a reality without meaning.

Social construction theory has spread rapidly through composition studies, intersecting with linguistics, ethnography, literacy studies, epistemology, hermeneutics, and literary exegesis. On the one hand, critical theory has become more attentive to readers and their projective activities (Alcorn; Holland). On the other, the rejection of textual objectivity has meant that formal patterns of interpretation—interpretation is produced in thought and, as such, is internal and individual—were at the same time social because interpretation relies on communities. The reflexive experience of the intellect thus found its corresponding social one.

Social construction has introduced an important instability (because of a healthy loss of faith in hard-core reality). On the face of it, social construction, as composition theorists currently apply it, has remained fairly independent of, if not antagonistic to, cognitive psychology. Social learning themes versus information processing themes, the group versus the individual, the public versus the private, the affective and personal versus the rhetorical and social: social constructionists pay attention to the collective act; cognitivists work with the individual act. Bruffee maintains that thought is an artifact of milieu; cognitivists maintain that it is an "essential attribute" of the mind (Bruffee, "Conversation" 640; Greene). Rorty claims that knowledge is driven by consensus, and Geertz envisions "cognition, emotion, motivation, perception, imagination, memory" as communal affairs (153). Cognitivists claim that knowledge is driven by the cognitive apparatus. Social construction takes individual private purpose and makes it public and interactive. Indeed, despite its apparent link to social psychology, social construction seems as remote and depersonalized as its reflexive counterpart. Cognitivists disallow the writer's subjective experience. So, it seems, do the social constructionists—at least the way it is now envisioned. Emotions seem to be there, but composition theory (and writing courses) apparently shouldn't much bother with it.

The emotions suffer curious afflictions: they make their bed in social psychology; they remain at the center of clinical endeavors; they are only a smattering of their natural selves in social construction; and they remain largely untouched by cognitivists. Because emotions are believed to need "correcting" through therapy and because therapy is the nomenclature for a
treatment model, emotions are considered a disease that needs curing (Brand, Therapy). Because they are experienced internally and individually, emotions conflict with social themes. To the therapy issue we have only to read the record. Bruffee ("Comment") and James Moffett, who ardently reject the therapeutic nature of writing in academic contexts, are counterbalanced by Richard Gebhardt ("Comment" 747-48, "Teamwork" 70), Donald Murray (217-18), and Gabriele Rico (78-80), who give its salutary benefits a more realistic nod and then move on to its educational values. Having lived so much of life, D. Gordon Rohman speaks of coming to terms with it, transcending one's experience by writing. It takes guts to speak out candidly about the emotional ebb and flow of collaborative learning and writing.

Social Cognition

But this is not a story with a bad ending. Unable to ignore its unremitting presence, the donor psychology has recently reconsidered subjective experience. Some cognitive psychologists have adopted a stance that has brought the cognitive and the emotional into a more convivial relationship. The recent coupling of cognitive psychology and social psychology is called social cognitive psychology (or the other way around), and this psychology makes room for interpersonal affect. Social cognitive psychology has taken interpersonal emotion in off the streets, so to speak, though on strictly cognitive terms. It has been scrubbed of its psychodynamic germs and provided with the rights and privileges of left brain rationality. It has also been subjected to similar constraints—some reasonable (attitudes, judgments, and beliefs are considered cognitive surrogates for feelings), others inadequate (the arousal, valence, intensity, and duration of emotion are ignored because cognitive structures were not built to handle them).

Cognitivists and social constructionists in composition studies have lagged behind their parent field in this regard. As they now read, both seem similarly vacant of personal sentiment. Maybe that is why cognitivists in composition have begun to recognize the sociology of writing (Flower, "Studying"; Haas and Flower), because the contribution of emotion to even a social definition of writing is virtually nonexistent. But how may this acknowledgment be interpreted? I am not sure whether it means that the cognitive paradigm has finally made a place in its system for the interpersonal life, or whether it means that the distinction between the cognitive and the social (Hayes 102; Potter and Wetherell 6) is simply more palatable than that between the cognitive and emotional. Or perhaps the term social is a convenient gloss on and gloss over the emotions. In other words, are social themes a red herring, a way to divert attention from emotional ones? Social constructs need not intrude on cognitive structures. What's more, they can keep emotion at bay or absorb it, thereby rendering intellectual processes whole and unharmed. One of my chief concerns is that, if taken to its logical
end, emotion is destined to theoretical oblivion. We feel it but we don’t conceptualize it (Bruffee, “Social Construction” 783).

On balance what have we gained by embracing social construction? Do we eliminate the need to examine the emotions in describing the composing process or the composer? To the extent that social construction informs composition theory with broad ideas about social process, it has irreversibly pushed back the frontiers of contemporary theory. To the extent that social construction has introduced social emotion (not to mention individual emotion) into the current composition paradigm, I must say “no.” Social cognitive psychology has made it possible for cognitive theorists to consider interpersonal emotion, but little of this has filtered down to the prevailing model of writing. The field seems slow to disturb the disciplinary state of affairs. Bartholomae has stated that the fact that “writing problems are also social and political is not to break faith with the enterprise of cognitive science” (143). We do not need to apologize to cognitive psychology for forays into social or emotional processes. Nor do we compromise ourselves by including interpersonal emotion in our socio-cognitive thinking. Emotional processes are not hostile to cognitive or to social ones. They are profoundly complementary.

As for the relationship between the social and subjective experience of writers, context may be a lens through which we routinely peer. It may be the mirror and the lamp of emotion. But I do not think it is a replacement for it. We are not a glassy essence, as Rorty puts it, of group think. The source and sustenance of our emotions may be derived from what Bruffee calls “the conversation of mankind,” but that does not make our feelings less “real” than those conversations. I sometimes wonder which is the bigger fiction: the emotions we experience in our heads that is outside the realm of discourse processing, or the conversations we have with an audience that is sitting in them. If we defer to social imperatives, do our feelings go away? Brodkey maintains that just because we write alone does not mean that writing is asocial—an important and useful point. But when we are poised in a reflexive stance with our ideas, we are a community of one. When we sit at our desk, when we write at our computers, we are in the end alone—as we may well need to be. Writing by ourselves is far more than simply a convenience or dislocated speech (Bruffee, “Comment”). It is downright practical. We learn and rehearse our social and personal selves. We get our work done. We may acquire and negotiate the writing through what Brodkey calls “scene,” but only one person at a time ultimately holds the pencil. We may carry our audience in our heads, but, as Elbow eloquently asserts, we must occasionally keep it out in order to be in touch with what we have to say. It may take great mental agility to close the door on audience, even temporarily, even halfway. Yet many of us know that any small effort to abandon audience at critical junctures in our writing can make an enormous difference in it. We calm the outside so the inside can be heard. And that means, for one, listening closely
to what we really mean to say, no matter what. Scene can get in the way, that is, if writing is truly to be an act of courage.

Writing is one of the most common, observable results of cognizing. But sheer writing ability, training, and social imperatives do not render the psychology of writing complete. Nor does conflating social and emotional processes. On the contrary, they should be distinguished and explored for their descriptive, explanatory, and predictive powers—and then for their interaction. Acknowledging their relationship is a start, but it is not enough. Right now, the social constructionist perspective is an orientation, a world view, just like the emotional, both almost totally uncharted in composition studies. Social patterns of discourse need delineating, as do affective ones. When it comes to emotion, it seems that social construction has more in common with cognitive psychology than with social cognitive psychology. But if composition specialists profess loyalty to social construction, it behooves them to consider the complete social agenda. And that means considering interpersonal emotion. To give the affective dimension still greater utility, those emotions not directly interpersonal should also be examined—the individual or personal ones. Some of that work has already started. It thus remains for us to reconcile the cognitive and the emotional structures of written discourse, specify the social and the emotional processes, and factor them all into a common conceptual framework.

Composition studies has put forward a sociology but not a theory of emotion to which it can be genuinely hospitable. Nor do I propose one. The greatest gift we have received from Suzanne Langer is her assertion that the whole of the mind, including language and presentational thought, evolves from feeling. The political ramifications of anything else are irredeemably grim. The belief that sheer intelligence and rationality can solve anything reinforces the mental life of bureaucrats and technicians. Political history has demonstrated that the utter reliance on the cognitive and intellectual or on the blunt force of the communal can be tragic if not fatal. In a world that is tumbling headlong over its own cruelties, listening to our feelings is the least we can hope for.

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Notes

1 See Flower, “Studying” 283; Haas and Flower 482; Harré, “Outline” 4-5; LeFevre 119.
2 See Bizzell 483-84; Flower qtd. in Heller A6; Greene 152; Hayes 102; Purves 106.
3 For example, see Benedict; Darwin; Malinowski; Margaret Mead.
4 See Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia.
5 See Ericsson and Simon; Gardner; Newell and Simon; Potter and Wetherell.
6See Allport, "Attitudes"; Fishbein and Ajzen; Millar and Tesser; Potter and Wetherell 43; Zajonc.
7See Brand, Psychology; Mandler, "Constructivist."
8See Armon-Jones; Averill; Finkelstein; Harré.
9See Beck, Hawkins, and Silver; Harris; Olson.
10For example, Gere; LeFevre; Rafoth and Rubin.
11This postmodernist movement originating in critical theory and in various philosophies of mind should be distinguished from its social science counterpart that still retains attitude as a pivotal construct, sees it as a complex component of emotion (or vice versa), and deals directly with emotion at all levels of human activity (Armon-Jones, "Thesis"; Harré, Social; Millar and Tesser; Zajonc). In other words, social construction as it has been presented to composition specialists is not quite the social construction it might be, were they working from the social science version.
12Vygotsky bridges the gap between the two ontogenetically. But the day-to-day emotional experience during composing remains to be investigated.
13See Fiske; Hastorf and Isen; Wyer and Srull.
14The cognitive position on writing is further along both in representing a particular world view and in differentiating and elaborating on it.
15See Aylwin; Brand, Psychology; Hidi and Baird.

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