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Affective disposition

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This article introduces the concept of an affective disposition. An affective disposition is an individual’s capacity to affect or be affected as it is framed in a specific context of affective relations. An affective disposition is constituted by traces of past affective encounters. Such traces act as specific affective potentials in present situations. At the same time, the concrete affective dynamics, in which these potentials might actualize, are not determined by traces of the past, but modulated and co-shaped by the affective dispositions of other individuals in the situation. The actualization of an affective disposition is thus a constitutive process. The article introduces the concept in the context of a relational and dynamic affect theory based on Spinoza and Deleuze.

An affective disposition is an individual’s repository of affective traces of past relations, events and encounters, acting in the present as potentials to affect and be affected. In philosophy, the term disposition, or dispositional property, denotes the capacity of a thing to act or be acted upon in a specific way. A disposition is a latent property that manifests only in specific encounters. This article introduces the concept of affective dispositions in an affect theoretical framework that understands affecting and being affected as a relational and constitutive register of being, such as in Spinozan ontology (→ *affect*). The concept “affective disposition” is coined specifically to describe couplings of active and receptive inclinations of a body as part of its striving for self-preservation (*conatus*) and is thus very close, but not identical, to what is called *potentia* in Spinozism.

With the phenomenal scope of social theory in mind, an individual’s affective disposition is a product of their biographical past. It is shaped, for instance, by infant-caregiver interaffectivity, by significant personal relations, bodily abilities, traumatic experiences and sedimented patterns of relational affect. As a repository of such traces, an affective disposition is inseparably a bodily and a mental entity (see Spinoza’s parallelism theorem, → *affect*). It manifests in forms of embodiment and in the relational dynamics of being a social body among social bodies. By way of an affective disposition, influences of the past are *virtually* present in an individual’s future relations. This means that affective traces from the past co-shape future affective dynamics, not in a deterministic way, but through differential actualization in interplay with the affective dispositions of all other bodies in a particular context. The way an individual’s affective disposition manifests in a particular relation thus always depends on out-

side factors that both partially augment and inhibit the individual's capacity to affect and be affected. It is, accordingly, a process of reciprocal modulation.

The English term "disposition" has a double meaning that reflects this conceptual entanglement between the diachronic co-presence of the past and synchronic modulation in the present. It can mean a prevailing tendency or inclination of an individual *towards* something ("disposition" in the sense of temperamental, psychological, or personal inclinations), and it can mean a power of disposing an individual *to* something ("disposition" in the sense of the environment's power of disposing the individual to certain affective modes of interaction). In analogy to this meaningful duality, an individual's affective disposition can manifest either as a set of tendencies towards affecting others and reacting to affect engendered by others in a specific way. Or it can manifest as a specific susceptibility to be at the disposition of the present field of affective relations due to the way the person's specific affective disposition is captured, harnessed and thereby modulated in a certain relational context. This duality of contributing to the situation and at the same time being shaped by it is at the heart of the concept of an affective disposition.

At a systematic level, the concept of an affective disposition serves as a theoretical hinge to connect individuality and social structures in the register of inter-affectivity. Affective dispositions explain the emergence of inter-affective patterns. These bear the signatures of the persons involved and perpetuate social structures and large-scale regularities that pertain to a higher entity or social whole. Beyond the dichotomy of structural determinism versus bodily essences of the individual, the concept of an affective disposition helps to explain how social and cultural regularities in affective interactions, such as gendered and authoritarian patterns or the subtleties of a specific social or cultural vibe, are virtually sedimented in each individual's capacities to affect and be affected as a product of biographical influence.

Example

Consider the case of a high school reunion ten years after graduation. The students have gone in different directions; they have developed, matured, and transformed. Some still know each other, others are completely alienated from the group because they moved far away and have not been seen since high school. And yet, over the course of the night, you might find yourself and many others falling into the same old patterns regarding, for instance, who cracks the jokes, who speaks most, how people laugh together, who clings to whom, who seeks whose attention, who is having subtle tensions and frictions, who is being bullied, what kind of gendered behavior re-emerges, and so forth. It is worthwhile to look at this example particularly from a perspective of the constitution of interactive patterns in processes of affecting and being affected. What is interesting is that a sudden re-emergence of long forgotten but latent inter-affective patterns might occur even if, after school, you went to a completely different en-

vironment where you established completely different ways of relating and forming attachments to others.

Since a high school class is a micro-social whole, this example operates on a mid-range scale. Its interactive patterns instantiate larger social structures, such as gendered or racialized interactions, and yet, as a group dynamic, are so much more than that. While these interactive patterns are highly dependent on the personal characteristics of particular members, this does not mean that the way in which individuals perform “themselves” is similar to how they perform in other group contexts. Speaking in the vocabulary of affective dispositions, an inter-affective “role” that grows out of the group dynamics of a school class over years gets sedimented, in the form of a potential pattern of affecting and being affected, in one’s affective disposition. In the same way, affective roles in families, in relationships, in intensive work environments and many other micro-social constellations might sediment as potentials to affect and be affected in future constellations. While the individual is the carrier of their affective disposition, it takes a certain interactive-situational context of the affective dispositions of others for the former to manifest again. Therefore, in the class reunion, you might find yourself re-engaging in long forgotten inter-affective patterns based on both the situational framing and by your internally sedimented affective capacities.

Related concepts across disciplines

There has been no systematic use of the term “affective disposition” in affect studies so far. Hence this article aims to introduce the concept as a refined understanding of the more general notion of an “affective capacity” that highlights the inherent ambiguity of *being-disposed-to* and *being-at-the-disposition-of* that is connected to one’s affective capacity. There are, however, concepts at work (mostly in empirical disciplines) that share some of the defining properties of affective dispositions. Three of them shall be briefly discussed in this section.

The term “disposition” has been discussed in analytical philosophy (for a historical overview, see Malzkorn, 2001). It must be noted that this debate seems to have little in common with the present account of “affective dispositions”. This is for two reasons. First, the analytic debate is dominated by an approach that seeks to formalize dispositional properties of objects through conditional statements in a logical calculus. The abstracting “if-then”-structure that is inherent in this style of thought contradicts the fundamental idea of a reciprocal and dynamic unfolding of affective dispositions in open and generative processes within situated assemblages (→ *affect*, → *affective resonance*; see also Mühlhoff, 2015). Second, the point of affective dispositions is that they do not rely on a fixed “list” of possible actions or affects a body might engage in based on its disposition, but refer to a set of potentials that manifest differentially in varying relational contexts. At the heart of the proposed understanding of affective dispositions is Spinoza’s famous line: nobody “know[s] what the body can do, or what can be

deduced from the consideration of its nature alone” (Spinoza, 1677/1985, III prop. 2 schol.; cf. Deleuze, 1968/1990). In the analytic debate, “disposition” seems to refer to a static list of how a pre-constituted thing can act or react to the impact of other things in various circumstances. “Affective disposition”, in contrast, is to be understood ontologically and dynamically, that is, as an *ontogenetic* notion: Only through constant actualization of its affective disposition is a thing what it is, but this actualization depends on a changing relational context and is therefore somewhat variable.

Psychology

In personality and social psychology the term “disposition” is used in the sense of *personality traits*. Much of personality research is concerned with the methodology of how to empirically measure a person’s personality dispositions by their manifest behavior or reactions, and of how to predict or explain behavior using the known dispositions of a person. From this empirical perspective, personality dispositions are not immediate observables, but “latent, hypothetical characteristics that can only be inferred from external, observable cues” (Ajzen, 2005, p. 2). There is also a vivid debate on the underlying theoretical models, the most prominent of which is perhaps the “five-factor” or “OCEAN model”. Since its widespread adoption in the 1980s, there is an emerging consensus among empiricists that there are five key dimensions of personality traits (“openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism”) that are deemed sufficient as a system of coordinates with which to map the diversity of individual characters (see Norman, 1963; McCrae & Costa, 1996).

Some authors in social psychology distinguish between two major kinds of personality dispositions, personality traits and attitudes. An attitude, unlike a trait, is an “evaluative disposition” (Ajzen, 2005, p. 20) *toward something*, such as “toward politicians and political parties”, or “toward ethnic groups and nationalities” etc. (p. 1). That is, an attitude is a disposition that manifests in judgments “respond[ing] favorably or unfavorably to an object, person, institution, or event” (p. 3), while personality traits are dispositions that manifest as subtle modalities of personally engaging in or with outer affairs. For instance, personality traits could manifest as “dominance, sociability, [...] emotional stability, ambitiousness” etc. (p. 1). The empirical concept of personality dispositions is thus based on the assumption that there is some kind of inner (psychic or emotional) structure to an individual that causes enduring behavioral tendencies. Insofar as these tendencies are statistically “probable” reaction patterns, they are similar to the concept of an affective disposition in that they are non-deterministic in nature.

Another related field in psychology is the field of attachment theory, particularly in developmental psychology. An attachment is typically defined as an enduring “affectional bond” between a human and someone or something else that persists over time and across contexts (→ ***attachment***). Attach-

ment theories emphasize that early infant attachments inform the way individuals engage in future relationships and social relations. If attachment is analyzed specifically with respect to its dynamic affective qualities, such as attunement behavior (cf. Stern, 1985/2001), it is immediately apparent how one's attachment history can be theorized as a significant source for what I call affective dispositions. However, it should be noted that the concept of an affective disposition makes a slightly more general claim than just a "disposition for future attachments". An affective disposition does not necessarily manifest in an enduring episode in which emotional ties develop. Affective dispositions can also unfold in very situated and short-lived dynamics, in explosions, controversies, repulsions or temporary alliances. They can appear in in black-outs or social behavioral patterns like taking space or being shy, speaking up or backing out. They can be unleashed in all kinds of affective spaces, including, for instance, spaces of politics or media. At a theoretical level, the proposed theorization of an affective disposition seeks to escape a cognitivist vocabulary even more than attachment theory does. While attachment patterns are sometimes theorized as forming an internal working model of the self (→ *attachment*), affective dispositions do not generally manifest in such cognitive or reflexive instances. Instead, they are theorized as purely relational potentials, that is, as manifesting only in a concrete affective arrangement. These locally embedded manifestations repeatedly constitute the body as a situated social body. Consequently, there is not one body engaging, based on its history, in evolving and transforming forms of attachments. Rather the body gets re-constituted anew in each situation by means of differential manifestations of its affective dispositions.

Sociology

In sociological theory, the term "disposition" is used in the context of *habitus* theories as an approach to explain participant behavior in relation to a social whole (see Bourdieu, 1980/1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Roughly, so called "dispositional approaches" may be distinguished from positional approaches to the relation of participant and social whole, such as those theories focusing on social roles and role expectations (e.g. Parsons, 1951; see Mouzelis, 1995). Dispositional theories follow a praxeological approach, stressing the role of what they call *habitus*. The *habitus* is a system of perceptive, reactive, and behavioral schemata or tendencies that is acquired in the course of an individual's socialization in various social "fields" (Bourdieu, 1980/1990). This concept serves to account for the influence of social stratifications and backgrounds such as class, religion, education, profession, nationality, ethnicity on an individual's behavior in a certain social context. Social "fields" are organized in hierarchical relations. These relations are given by differentials of power and various forms of capital. A *habitus* is the signature of one's specific social background and history of socialization as an aspect of social capital.

The proposed theory of affective dispositions and the theory of *habitus* both stress that past influences have a latent impact in present interactions. Yet, the crucial difference is that the concepts of "social

field” and *habitus* in Bourdieu – where *habitus* is acquired within a social field – seem to be explicitly limited to “objective relations”. These relations are seen from an external, almost “scientific” vantage point, thus abstracting from personal idiosyncrasies, first person affective experience and situatedness. According to Bourdieu, a “general property of fields is that they are systems of relations that are independent of the populations which these relations define” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 106). As a methodological consequence:

The notion of field reminds us that the true object of social science is not the individual [...]. It is the field that is primary [...]. This does not imply that individuals are mere ‘illusions’, that they do not exist: they exist as *agents*—and not as biological individuals, actors, or subjects—who are socially constituted as active and acting in the field under consideration by the fact that they possess the necessary properties to be effective, to produce effects, in this field. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 107)

The concept of “disposition” in Bourdieu’s *habitus* theory therefore relies on a rather broad angle from which the world appears to be segregated in distinct, impermeable strata. Large-scale structures seem to have an almost mechanistic impact on the individuals by means of socialization, making the individual an abstract agent in a web of “objective” relations. In contrast, the understanding of dispositions presented in this article is focused more on *situated* unfolding and on a subjective-experiential register of evaluation. It is also better suited to accommodate the fluidity of boundaries between “fields”. This can be seen in the example of the high school reunion. The way one falls back into old inter-affective, experiential, and behavioral patterns in the class reunion can hardly be explained solely in terms of class/race/field habitualization, for what makes the patterns re-emerge is the arrangement of individuals, the particular mix of personalities as carriers of potentials to affect and be affected (of which class, race and gender might be a non-reducible part). In the register of affecting and being-affected, dynamic patterns and qualities emerge that do not simply reflect only societal stratifications and social roles. A theory of affective dispositions widens the scope of social theory beyond the abstract set of “objective relations” that subtracts from each social situation its concrete “population”. In fact, the particular mix of micro-social relations in the reunion might produce similar but not identical inter-affective dynamics as ten years ago *despite* the fact that its participants have, in the meantime, been socialized in vastly different social fields, educational paths, economic milieus and social strata.

Apart from a *habitus*, there is also a set of affective traces reactivated in the class reunion. These affective traces act as individual matrices in which sensitivity (the power to be affected) and active potential (the power to affect others) are entangled. The concept of an affective disposition therefore systematically directs attention towards the emergence of inter-affective dynamics. This does not mean that social structuration (class, race, gender, etc ...) is blended out of the picture; rather, in a structure of superimposition, every affective disposition will always inseparably encode both structural aspects and individual particularities.

The authoritarian personality

Another precursor to the notion of affective dispositions comes even closer to the understanding proposed in this article. It can be found in the studies on the *Authoritarian Personality* by Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, and Sanford (1950), a piece of empirical work that is located somewhere between social psychology, psychoanalysis, and sociology. The latter starts from the assumption that there is a “psychological” or “emotional disposition” (pp. xi, 16) of individuals that is distributed to a certain extent in the population and on which susceptibility to fascist ideology is based. In a broad empirical investigation that also aimed at quantitative evaluation, the famous “F scale” was invented as an approach

to bring together in a scale items which, by hypothesis and by clinical experience, could be regarded as ‘giveaways’ of trends which lay relatively deep within the personality, and which constituted a *disposition* to express spontaneously (on a suitable occasion), or to be influenced by, fascist ideas. (Adorno et al., 1950, p. 15, italics in original)

While authoritarianism is a much more specific topic than the general idea of an affective disposition, the concept of an “emotional” or “psychological disposition” that is at work in the *Authoritarian Personality* is an important precursor to the concept of affective dispositions. In particular, the authors stress that a psychological disposition involves both receptivity towards certain influences as well as a tendency toward certain *active* attitudes. For instance, it is due to their specific psychological dispositions that some individuals “gravitate toward [political] groups” (Adorno et al., 1950, p. 195) or that some are “more receptive to one pattern [of political engagement], others to another” (p. 178). Even an individual’s “choice of ideology” in general “appears to be [...] in large parts an expression of important emotional dispositions.” (pp. 206-7). Thus, Adorno et al. do not assume a clear-cut distinction of traits and attitudes. Rather, receptive manifestations of an authoritarian disposition blend into active and attitudinal manifestations.

These considerations are a role model for the conception of affective dispositions as they highlight both the non-deterministic character of dispositions and a deep layer of social structure. Adorno and his collaborators, in line with similar analyses by Erich Fromm and Wilhelm Reich, apply a psychoanalytic model in which “[t]hese dispositions can be understood, in part at least, as expressions of ego weakness.” (Adorno et al., 1950, p. 236) Regardless of what “ego weakness” really means and whether this theoretical view is still deemed adequate today, what is relevant is that the authoritarian disposition is understood as biographically and inter-affectively acquired, and as such is a product of micro-social structures. In addition, the manifestation of a psychological disposition in actual acts is seen as co-dependent on structural conditions in the present.

Psychological dispositions do not actually cause Fascism; rather, Fascism defines a psychological area which can be successfully exploited by the forces which promote it for entirely non-psychological reasons of self-interest. (Adorno, 1951/1982, p. 135)

This makes the concept of an authoritarian psychological disposition a mediator, or a hinge, between social structures, operating in realms like education, infant-caretaker inter-affectivity, and political formations on a larger societal scale. The concept of an affective disposition will copy this functionality at the general level of subject constitution, without limiting its focus to authoritarianism.

Systematic elaboration

In Spinozan ontology, the individual manifests in each situation and relation as a carrier of a power, called *potentia*, which is simultaneously a capacity to affect and be affected by others (see Spinoza, 1677/1985; Deleuze, 1981/1988, 1968/1990) (→ *affect*). At the same time, a truly relational and non-individualistic reading of Spinoza's ontology implies that the individual is itself only constituted in internal and external "relations of motion and rest" – or, in short, affective relations. An individual, with all its particularities and personal traits, is thus the effect of the power to affect and be affected, of which it is itself also the carrier. There is a way to resolve this seeming circularity that remains within the non-individualistic paradigm of a relational ontology of affect and yet still allows for the attribution of individual specificities: Such specificities should not be thought of as rooted in a static bodily constitution, but in a dynamic realm of inter-bodily forces and potentials. That is, the conception of individual specificities of *potentia* may be transposed from the ontological register of actuality and substantial essences (such as of the brain, the body, or the psyche) to an ontological register of dynamic, relational potentials.

In this perspective, the traces of a body's past affective encounters, along with their concurrent mental imaginations and psychic traces, constitute a virtual part of ones *potentia* as long as they stay latent and do not manifest in the here and now. We may refer to this virtual component of *potentia* as "affective disposition". The term "virtual" is taken from Gilles Deleuze (1966/1991, 1968/1994; see also Massumi, 2002), who uses it to describe an ontological register of pure potentiality, in distinction from the register of currently "actual" or manifest forms. Following Simondon (2009), it is important to note that this virtuality, and thus also the affective disposition, is a trans-individual entity.¹ That is, it unfolds in the field of affective forces and dynamics of a relational context; it does not pertain to the independent individual alone but to an individual-in-a-situation. Its possible actualization, or becoming-manifest in an affective dynamic, is co-dependent on all the other individuals and their affective dispositions within a situation. In the process of actualization of an affective disposition, an individual is therefore both "at the mercy" of a wider context as much as they are disposed by their own bio-

¹ Balibar (1997) prominently made this point with respect to the individual in Spinoza.

graphical past. An affective disposition is both a set of latent personal inclinations and a specific susceptibility to the environment's power of disposing a subject to certain affective dynamics. This ambiguity is also why the process of actualization of affective dispositions is always a differential manifestation: it cannot identically repeat forms, as it depends on a possibly altered relational context.

Consequently, falling back into old affective patterns, as in the high school reunion, is not an act of mere remembering where past affects are represented and then stored somewhere (in the brain) only to be retrieved and reproduced later. Virtual affective traces act as *potentials* in the present, that is, as the readiness to act anew on one another that will unfold only in relations. If they unfold in an interactive dynamic, these potentials would *differentially* repeat old patterns. The concept of a virtuality does not include the actual shapes it will bring about in its unfolding, only the tendency towards acting on one another in a way that connects to a past. This is why the presence of latent affective dispositions often escapes conscious awareness or easy reflection until there is a relational encounter in which they suddenly unfold. Virtual entities generally evade "clear and distinct" mental representations and yet might suddenly be unleashed as relational forces of unexpected power.²

Although each person's affective disposition is highly particular and idiosyncratic, affective dispositions also tend to perpetuate social structures. In order for a certain regularity to appear in an encounter, for example, a gendered pattern of inter-affectivity, it is often sufficient for a certain fraction of a group of people to have a *more or less* similar affective disposition as a result of previous influences. This is because patterns such as gendered or racialized interactions tend to be mutually stabilizing modes of interaction, which is how they gain so much power. Moreover, such patterns are easily superimposed as general overtones onto what feels like a highly particular and specific affective relationship such as a friendship, a romantic relationship etc. Often, these superimposed structures are affectively stabilized by the implicit fact that many other individuals in a certain environment share these latent meta-structures in their affective capacities as they were exposed to them in their biographic past. This might be the case even if the individuals are not conscious of the impact of meta-structures as the dynamic appears to them as highly individualized, such that their hidden complicity with power structures evades direct attention.

Outlook and applications

The phenomenon of an authoritarian disposition mentioned before points toward an important application of the general concept of an affective disposition. This is deemed of new importance in light of the current political situation of emerging right-wing populist mass movements in many western societies (Gordon, 2017), which provides a politically acute and theoretically puzzling example. Further research should discuss whether, and which, latent affective dispositions might be a factor contributing

² See Deleuze (1968/1994, pp. 213-214) on the clear and distinct (french „*clair et distinct*“).

to populist mobilization. To this end one could, for instance, start by clarifying whether the notion of an authoritarian character syndrome as found in Adorno et al. (1950) or Reich (1933) can be reformulated as a special case of an affective disposition, thus yielding a theory of an *authoritarian affective disposition* that is less dependent on psychoanalytic theory. The Spinoza-based affect theoretical framework facilitates a perspective on ontogeny in which affective relations and the genesis of mental ideas and understanding come together in building a body's specific capacity to affect and be affected. This could be applied to the psychoanalytic account by Else Frenkel-Brunswick (Adorno et al., 1950, pp. 337-389), who suggests that an authoritarian disposition consists of affective traces of hierarchical affective relations in early infancy, where the mind was exposed to these relations not in a mode of understanding but of arbitrariness and subordination: „Was the issue in question explained to the child and was he included in the discussion of it, or did it appear to the child as unintelligible, arbitrary, and overwhelming?“ (p. 371)

An authoritarian affective disposition could be latent for a long time, only to manifest after decades in response to certain political, social or economic circumstances. It is therefore a pressing question what role such affective dispositions play in the current emergence of right-wing populist movements, and how these dispositions are distributed within a certain population. If populism, as Ernesto Laclau puts it, is not primarily a certain “political or ideological content” but a “mode of articulation” of that content (Laclau, 2005, p. 34), this approach will allow one to investigate whether there are specific affective dispositions that make subjects more likely to resonate with a populist mode of articulation. This would supplement the positional or propositional analysis of political engagement with what Massumi describes as a politics of “dispositional trigger mechanism[s]”: “Addressing bodies from the dispositional angle of their affectivity, instead of addressing subjects from the positional angle of their ideations, shunts government function away from the mediations of adherence or belief and toward direct activation” (Massumi, 2005, p. 34). In this way, individual predispositions of neo-authoritarian forms of political engagement could be unearthed, and yet, the potentially long latency of such dispositions can show how relational, social and political co-factors are responsible for their sudden activation.

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