

Body, Colors and Emotions in Buenos Aires: an approach from Social Sensibilities

Abstract

We live in a permanent relationship between what our bodies tell us and what we have socially apprehended.

This paper aims to show some features of social sensibilities in inhabitants of BsAs city linking their everyday bodily experiences, colors they attribute to the body, and parts of the body in which they say they experience their sensations. Based on a 2010 survey, interpretative patterns concerning color, body, and emotions are suggested.

First, the theoretical starting point for connecting colors, emotions, bodies, and daily life is reviewed. Some results of the study mentioned regarding the issue addressed are summarised.

Finally, an interpretation of the findings is displayed, evidencing connections of ways of experiencing the body in terms of colors and emotions.

Key Words: Bodies, Colors, Emotions

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Sensibilities¹

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1. Introduction

The present work springs from the theoretical and empirical articulation of three axes of investigation: body, emotions and colors. The articulation alluded to has hardly been explored —by sociology in particular and social sciences in general— although studies on each of them individually abound.

From the classic reflections of Mauss on the “techniques of the body” to the biopolitics of Foucault, up to the present state of studies, explorations of the human body as the center of processes for production and reproduction of society have been institutionalized in the social sciences.

There are diverse ways to systematize the theoretical orientations on which the studies on the body are based; a possible one, having in mind the Latin American context and without intent of exhaustiveness, is the following: a) a line of work connected to Foucault and his concepts of control, discipline, and technologies of the self; b) an approach connected to Bourdieu and his notions of habitus, body hexis, and social fields; c) a set of investigations in the field of biopolitics referring to Esposito and

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Agamben on the one hand, and to Negri and Hardt on the other; and d) the investigations that, from a post-colonial vision, take up corporality on a track toward anti-hegemonic thought.

A different perspective toward understanding the theoretical traditions that usually support the studies in this field of inquiry is to turn to the classic authors on the theme: Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, Spinoza, and Marx. An additional view is gained in the presence of contemporary authors of sociology such as Goffman, Simmel and Elias, from the philosophy of Derrida, Butler and Deleuze, or the psychoanalysis of Freud, Lacan, and Zizek.

From another perspective, it is necessary to also indicate what Lisa Blackman and Mike Featherstone have recently stated. As publishers of *Body and Society*, they have emphasized the need to repair the multiple connections between life and affects: “In our role as editors we have identified a number of emergent themes that are shaping the field, and these include a renewed interest in relation to life and affect across the social sciences and humanities. The paradigms of both life and affect break down the distinction between humans and other life forms, as we find in various forms of vitalism (Bergson, Deleuze, Massumi) and echoe in debates across the biological and ‘environmental’ sciences (Varela, Oyama, Lewontin, Margulis, Rose). This is a new post-humanism that examines our communality with other forms of creaturely life and companion species (Haraway), and the need for a non-anthropocentric ethics (Derrida). The focus upon life recognizes the governance and regulation of bodies (biopolitics), as well as investments across diverse practices (media, consumer, biotechnological) in both the materiality and immateriality of bodies as biocapital and biomedica (code, information). (Blackman and Featherstone 2010:3)

As is often seen in Latin America as well as in other regions of the world, body(ies) and society(ies) are systematic objects of research where affectivity and sensitivity are strongly present.

Along the same line, social studies regarding the emotions have also been the object of diverse treatments, from Darwin through Sartre and arriving at the proposals of Collins, Hochschild, Kemper and/or Illouz, just to mention a few of their best known reference points.

Smith and Schenider (2009) maintain that the numerous theories on emotions can be grouped within a tripartite classification: determinism, social constructionism, and social interaction.

Gross and Feldman Barrett (2011), with intent to evaluate the differences of perspective on the “generation” and/or “regulation” of emotions, classify present perspectives for studying emotions in four large groups: models of basic emotions, evaluative models, models of psychological construction, and models of social construction.

At the same time, studies on the connections between colors and society, and colors and emotions, have been tackled by various disciplines. As of the 20th century we have classic reference works on the subjects, which are referenced in the next section.

For more than a decade we have been aiming to account for the importance of the “existential turn” of social theory (Scribano 1998), advocating a close connection between the studies of the body and emotions (Scribano 2007a, 2007b, 2009, 2010a, and Luna y Scribano 2007) and also supporting the importance of exploring a line of study regarding the intersection of these works, by investigating the place and feeling of colors in relation to the issues that they raise (2007c).

This article proposes to descriptively explore the emotion/body and color/emotion connections. It is based on information available from a non-probabilistic survey that we carried out, involving 141 inhabitants of the city of Buenos Aires during the year 2010. After having conducted studies on the connections between colors and emotions using a qualitative strategy, we designed, with other experiences on the matter in mind, a standardized survey regarding the “structure of feelings” that included two specific questions on the theme being addressed here. The empirical material presented here is based on this information.

2. Colors, Emotions, and Bodies

Color is alive in everyday things, from fruits and vegetables to clothing to social fantasies. Objects, textures, forms, and flavors are coloured, as Michael Taussig maintains: “...but color as that which pulls the observer into the observed, which may even include being pulled into time as in history.” (Taussig 2008:1).

Within the studies on color preferences there is a series of works considered classic, such as those of Eysenck (1941) and Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum (1957) just to mention a few. All of them demonstrate social, age, and gender contextualization in regard to color preference and its implications (Olmo Barbero 2006).

Within the framework of the areas of social sciences, archaeology and anthropology as well as social history have proposed studies into the connections that we explore in the present article. An example can be taken from Gómez Gastélum, who explores the discussion on the universality/peculiarity of the expressions of colors in relation to culturally conditioned impressions (2006).

Another portion of research on the connections between color, taste, emotion, and the body includes a lexicographical analysis (Valencia 2010) and children's literature (Witter Porto and Alcanfor Ramos 2008) just to give two examples coming from linguistic sources.

A field in which bodies, colors and emotions intersect in a systematic form is that of psychology. Studies can be observed regarding color tests to evaluate personality such as the one by Lüscher (Aguirre 2006), or the relationship between colors and emotionality in texts from a psycholinguistic perspective (Strapparava and Ozbal 2010).

Within the framework of the diverse research experience (in other discipline areas) regarding the connections between colors, bodies, and emotions, medicine is no exception —given the importance of color in alternative medicines (Reyes Pérez and Álvarez Gómez 2001) as well as its centrality in industrial medicine (Sánchez *et al* 1996). We should also mention the works on visual perception that connect with plastic arts and architecture, such as those regarding anisotropy of physical space and the dynamics of visual structures where forms, volumes, centers, and peripheries are affected by the use and reception of the colors in particular cultural contexts (Carrillo Canán 2005).

As we can see, numerous studies and paths exist that allow bodies, emotions and colors to be seen in relationship.

3. Exploring Color in Emotionally Moved Bodies

Within the context of what has been put forth thus far, and as expected, in this section we develop a descriptive perspective of the results of the two questions used in

the survey regarding colors and bodies. The aim is to show how emotion, body, and color are articulated in the experience of the interviewees; this being a path to exploring the “sense” of color within the social structure.

The two questions are directed to gather information as to what occurs with the interviewees in regard to the connections between color/body and color/emotions.

3. 1. Body(ies) and Emotions

The question we put forth was as follows: “Now I am going to show you a human figure. Please note in which of these parts of the body you feel. (*Show human figure. Read the name of the feeling, wait for an answer, and mark only one place on the body with an X. At that time, read the following list of feelings*): Anger, Happiness, Fear, Sadness, Love, Distrust, and Peace.”

The record was noted on one of the following parts of the body: Head, Torso/Chest, Arms, Shoulders, Legs, Stomach, Back, Genitals, and Other.

The common responses to this question delivered the following results:

When asked in which part of the body they feel anger, those polled said that 43.7% experienced it in their head, 27.5 in the torso/chest, and 18.3% in the stomach.

In regard to happiness, those polled stated that 44.4% feel it in their torso/chest, 28.9% in the head, and 12% in the stomach.

The parts of the body in which those polled said they feel fear were: 28.9% in their chest/torso, 28.2% in the stomach, and 18.3% in the head.

When asked in which part of the body they feel sadness, those polled answered: 45.1% in their chest/torso, and 31% in the head, with all other options very minimally mentioned.

Insofar as love, those polled claimed to feel it: 44% in their torso/chest, 18.3% in other parts, 11.3% in the head, and 13.4% in the stomach.

Those polled expressed that they feel distrust: 64% in their head, 10.6% in the stomach, followed by 6.3% in the back.

Lastly, peace was claimed to be felt by 23.2% in their torso/chest, 19% in the head, and 31% expressed that they feel it in other parts of the body.

As can be seen, the head, torso/chest, and stomach are the parts of the body most mentioned by those polled in connection with the various emotions.

3.2. Colors and Emotions

In regard to the connections between colors and emotions, we put forth the following question: “Now I am going to show you some colors. Please say which of them you would use to show what happens to you when you feel. (*Read the feeling, wait for an answer, and mark one color with an X. At that time, read the following list of colors*): Red, Green, Black, White, Yellow, Pink, and Blue.” The answers recorded were regarding the following emotions: Anger, Happiness, Fear, Sadness, Love, Distrust, and Peace.

The common responses to this question delivered the following results:

When asked what color they would use to show what happens to them when they feel anger, 52.8% of those polled said red, while 39.4% said black.

When they feel happiness, 31% of those polled said that they would color it yellow, 26.8% green, and 13.4% red.

When they experience fear, those polled replied that: 64.1% would color it black, 12.7% blue, and 10.6% red.

As for sadness, those polled stated that: 33.8% would color it black, 24.6% blue, and 15.5% white.

In regard to love, those polled replied that 41.5% would color it red, 16.2% green, and 14.1% pink.

When asked what color they would use to show what they feel when they experience distrust, those polled said: 27.5% yellow, 26.8% black, and 10.6% red.

Lastly, when they feel peace, those polled said that they would color this experience with: 61.3% white, 10.6% green, and 17.6% blue.

It is easy to notice that the colors most mentioned in the “positive” emotions (peace, love, and happiness) are: red, yellow, white; whereas those most recurrent in describing the negative emotions (distrust, sadness, fear, and anger) are: red, yellow, black, and blue.

3.3. Colors, body, and emotions

In the context of what has been stated, and continuing our exploratory intent, it is possible to now combine the answers to the two questions according to their frequency, using the colors ascribed to the body and to the emotions as the center of the analysis.

In Table 1 we can see at least three interesting indications with which we continue the research: a) the central area of the torso/chest is denoted as the “part” of the body that is the axis of the emotions Happiness/Love and Fear/Sadness; b) it becomes evident that the colors Yellow, Black, Blue, and Red are the ones used to depict the emotions listed; and c) that only Peace was depicted with another color (White) as well as in other parts of the body.

TABLE 1: Colors, bodies, and emotions

	<i>Head</i>	<i>Torso/ Chest</i>	<i>Arms</i>	<i>Shoulders</i>	<i>Legs</i>	<i>Stomach</i>	<i>Back</i>	<i>Genital</i>	<i>Others</i>
<i>Anger</i>	Red								
<i>Happiness</i>		Yellow							
<i>Fear</i>		Black				Black			
<i>Sadness</i>		Black / Blue							
<i>Love</i>		Red							
<i>Distrust</i>	Black /Yellow								
<i>Peace</i>									White

Source: own elaboration, based on frequency of occurrence.

There are four parts of the body colored as black in the “imaginary triangle” that forms the head, chest, and stomach; that is to say, the noncolor, the color naturally associated with both death on the one hand and the powerful on the other. This is the color that those polled feel in their bodies. It is important to emphasize that the arms, legs, and shoulders —associated (at least in this part of the world) with activity and movement— “do not have colors nor emotions.”

Another noteworthy characteristic in the chromatic sense is that of the connections between anger/head/red and love/stomach/red. From diverse analytical and cultural perspectives, Red indicates intensity, excitation, and stimulation in the context of dialectic violence/love.

In this spatiotemporal context it is probable that Black, White, Red (and Yellow) are representing bodies that experience intensely, but in conditions of limited action.

Finally, white and its connections with peace can be seen as associated with purity and calm, as affective states of stability and “non movement.”

In the explored context and revising all the responses, it is interesting to mention the various connections between life lived among the head, chest and stomach along with sensitivities painted with colors that do not necessarily indicate readiness for action.

4. Toward an Interpretation of the Color of Bodies

Everyday life in its space/time manifestations constitutes that special weave that ties together the body and emotions.

One way to approach the feelings of the body and the emotions, according to the data that has been explored, can be posed from three angles that are interconnected but possible to distinguish analytically: the associationist, the representational, and that of a constellation of meaning:

- a) From an associationist perspective, it may be maintained that the subjects tend to relate in more or less homogenous ways to the pairing up of body/emotion and body/color. In this framework, the emotions nest in a part of the body and the colors express the “states of the body.”
- b) From a representational perspective, it can be conjectured that to the subjects, the body is an indicator of certain emotions and that some colors are signals of emotional states.
- c) When the “correspondences” between the body, emotions, and colors are analyzed, emotions and colors form constellations of meaning that function as chromatic emotional body language that gives account for the “anchoring” of feelings.

When articulating and connecting these possibilities, a hypothesis emerges from which the chromatic aspect of the body’s narrative can be seen as a solid track toward reconstructing, at least partially, the configuration of feelings as part of both social structuring and the political economy of the moral. These connections allow conjecturing with greater intensity that there exists—in the reciprocities between the chromatic, bodies, and emotions— a way to explore the indeterminate points, in the present context, regarding forms of domination and collective interdictions.

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