Social Suffering and Public Value
A Spur to New Projects of Social Inquiry and Social Care
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Introduction

One of the distinguishing features of social science in the twenty-first century lies in a new-found concern with problems of 'social suffering'. Over the past thirty years or so this has featured as a headline interest in some important works of critical sociology and anthropology (Bourdieu et al 1999; Kleinman et al 1997; Das et al 2001; Renault 2008). With reference to 'social suffering' researchers declare a commitment to understand how human suffering is caused by society, but with a focus brought to how this is encountered and manifested in people's experiences of day-to-day life. Forms of social organization and uneven distributions of socio-economic resources are made subject to critical debate with attention placed on lived experiences of pain and misery. More directly, this involves researchers documenting the ways individuals give voice to their distress and how suffering is manifested in their physical and mental health conditions. The incidence of social suffering is understood to expose how society operates to damage people's human dignity and personhood. Here social life is taken as a distinctly moral experience that greatly matters for people (Kleinman 1998; 2006). Readers are invited to feel for the plight of individuals caught up in situations of adversity. A deliberate attempt is made to stir up emotions of sympathy and compassion on the understanding that these hold the potential to operate as a means to forge bonds of social solidarity and a political concern for social justice (Farmer 2006). In this regard, research and writing on social suffering is directly concerned with advancing the public value of social science (Brewer 2013). Here the conduct of social research is informed by an earlier 'classical' example of critical pragmatism championed by figures such as Jane Addams, W.E.B du Bois and Albion Small (Addams 1998 [1910]; Becker 1971; Deegan 1988; Morris 2015). It is directed by the understanding that social science should be committed to projects of ameliorative social reform. The pedagogy of caregiving is deemed a necessary part of the processes through which we might apprehend the meaning and value of human life in social terms (Wilkinson and Kleinman 2016).

Arguably this approach is connected to a wider movement within contemporary social science that seeks to better understand the roles played by human emotions in the conduct of social life (Forgas 2001; Lvon and Barbalet 2004; Williams 2001). Research and writing on social suffering can be portrayed as part of an 'affective turn' where scholars attend to how human thoughts and behaviors are directed by moral feelings, and further take note of how these are set to shape our politics (Ahmed 2014). Here a connection might also be drawn to critical movements operating within medical sociology that aim to expose the damage done to people through the 'medicalization' of health. It is notably the case that social suffering features as a concern among those intent on questioning the values governing the conduct of modern rationality as applied to health care and the practice of medicine, and more often than not this is accompanied by a protest against the ways these are set opposed to humanitarian principle and the appeal of moral sentiment (Abramowitz et al 2015; Farmer et al 2013).

The attention that is brought to problems of social suffering can also be related to the fact that over the last fifty years or so, new communication media, and especially through the forms of cultural experience made possible by television and the internet, have transformed the ways we relate to our moral situation and the needs of others (Wilkinson 2005; 2013). The daily routine of watching television news or trawling viral video sites brings us into contact with dramatic scenes of war, famine, atrocity and abuse that were unknown to previous generations (Thompson 1995: 226-7). Insofar as it is now commonplace for us to gaze upon human suffering at a safe distance far removed from actual contexts of violence and harm, it is argued that we need to re-think our ethical situation and reappraise the bounds of moral responsibility (Boltanski 1999; Chouliaraki 2006; 2013; Cohen 2001). It is argued that the dramatic scale of the world problems now made visible for us, and especially through graphic depictions of human suffering, is operating to transform social subjectivity in ways we scarcely recognize or understand (Biehl, Good and Kleinman 2007). Some of those involved with problems of social suffering share in an attempt to make better sense of our existential condition in a cultural context where it is commonplace for human misery to be commercialized as news 'infotainment' (Kleinman 1995; Kleinman and Kleinman 1997). On this view, by documenting expressions of moral feeling that take place in response to the suffering of others, and by attending to how these appear to influence the dynamics of social action, we are seeking to understand distinctly new possibilities for human consciousness and behaviour (Rifkin 2009).

At another level of understanding, however, the twenty first century interest in social suffering marks a return to traditions of social inquiry that place a high value on the cultivation of our potential for 'fellow feeling' (Mullan 1988). 'Social suffering' is a concept that originates in the eighteenth century enlightenment of sympathy (Frazer 2010; Wilkinson and Kleinman 2016: 25-9). It belongs to an earlier cultural and political movement that welcomed the eighteenth century flowering of humanitarian sensibility as a means to further the bounds of social recognition and social understanding. In this context 'the social question' was first posed along with the understanding that it involved us in a political debate over how to respond to the moral feelings we experience when we are made to observe the suffering of others (Himmelfarb 1991). It was commonly the case, moreover, that those such as William Wordsworth, who was among the first draw a focus to 'social suffering' as such, were of the opinion that compassion had a vital role to play in making it possible for us to grasp how conditions of social life directly matter for people (Wilkinson and Kleinman 2016: 25-29).

Throughout the nineteenth century this was an issue of great controversy. Among educated elites, humanitarian sentiment tended to be portrayed as an irrational force that, if left unchecked, was set to become a moral corruption. Social sympathy was variously cast as a feminine weakness, an encouragement to indiscriminate charity and as a lust for sensationalism that led people to indulge in acts of promiscuous voyeurism (Barker-Benfield 1992; Halttunen 1995; Reddy 2000). As Hannah Arendt reminds us, there were also occasions where 'the passion of compassion' was understood to operate as an encouragement to revolutionary insurrection, for it was widely assumed that a morally outraged and sentiment fired response to human suffering could be used to justify violence as the means to make right the world (Arendt 1963: 59-114). For these reasons, moreover, among most early practitioners of social science, and especially those concerned with the status of sociology and anthropology as 'science', the 'rebellion of sentiment' tended to be cast as an anathema to sound reason and principled judgement (Bannister 1991; Haskell 2000; Lepennies 1988; Poovey 1994; 1998; Roberts 2002: 258-95).

In this chapter I offer a brief review of contemporary research and writing on social suffering. This is designed as an invitation to further dialogue and debate. The first section offers a more detailed overview of the range of interests and concerns that characterize the ways in which problems of social suffering are addressed in current sociology and anthropology. The second section further outlines how these developments are set to court moral and political controversy. I conclude by arguing that the renewed gathering of interest around problems of social suffering is set to make the public value of social science a pressing matter for debate. More directly, this draws a focus to many longstanding tensions and hostilities in the relationship between social science and modern humanitarianism. I suggest that here we are challenged to reformulate and revise the ways we assess the role of moral sentiment in the production of social understanding. I also hold that the conduct of social research is drawn into debate in terms of how it operates a moral practice, and at this point it stands to be judged not so much in terms of the production of critique, but rather in its contribution to the practice of human care.

The Field of Social Suffering

The concept of 'social suffering' is used to refer us to the lived experience of pain, damage, injury, deprivation and loss. Here it is generally understood that human afflictions are encountered in multiple forms and that their deleterious effects are manifold, but a particular emphasis is brought to bear upon the extent to which particular social conditions and distinct forms of culture both constitute and moderate the ways in which suffering is experienced and expressed. With reference to 'social suffering' researchers attend to the ways in which the subjective components of distress are rooted in social situations and conditioned by cultural circumstance. It is held that social worlds are inscribed upon the embodied experience of pain and that there are many occasions where an individual's suffering should be taken as a manifestation of wider processes of social structural oppression and/or collective experiences of cultural trauma (Wilkinson 2005; Kleinman et al 1997; Kleinman and Wilkinson 2016).

In the sociology of health, social medicine and medical anthropology, 'social suffering' is associated with efforts to broaden the biomedical conceptualization of pain so that recognition is brought to the ways in which both the experience of pain and a person's responsiveness to its 'treatment' are moderated by cultural conditions and social contexts (Bendelow 2006; Delvecchio Good et al. 1992). And here it also features as part of a critical engagement with conventions of health care practice that aims to make these more attuned to the lived experience of illness and the involvement of people's social biographies within the generation of debilitating forms of mental anguish and distress. With a focus brought to problems of social suffering, a person's health condition is cast as a cumulative product of social processes and critical life events. It is argued that in the quality of a person's physical and mental health we are presented with a moral barometer of their social experience (Kleinman 1988; 1999; 2006).

In the contexts of French sociology and psychology, research and writing on 'social suffering' has been taken up as a means to bring public attention to the cumulative miseries of ordinary life, and here such work tends to be overtly political in its intentions and design (Renault 2008). It operates as part of a movement to expose the negative social effects of neo-liberal economic policies. It works to expose the harms that are done to people trapped living in poor housing conditions in areas mired in social deprivation. It documents the many humiliations and agonizing frustrations borne by the unemployed as well as those struggling to survive on the low wages they receive for the exhausting hours spent performing menial work tasks (Dejours 1998; Bourdieu et al 1999). Practitioners argue that where government ministers and policy

makers are often inclined to 'explain away' such suffering as an unfortunate and unavoidable 'side-effect' of social life in capitalist societies, by contrast, we should regard this as morally and politically unacceptable and as a pressing matter for critical concern. Accordingly, 'social suffering' is addressed as a problem that issues a humanitarian challenge to the moral conventions of our political culture, and further, aims to provoke us into a critical questioning of the cultural and political processes whereby 'we' are acclimatised to regard the suffering of 'others' as a 'normal' or 'necessary' condition of social life.

The concern to 'bear witness' to the experience of 'marginality', and especially the plight of the poorest sections of society, has also drawn many to place problems of 'social suffering' at the centre of the attempt to draw public attention to the experience of people living in developing societies, and in this respect, many of those concerned with problems of social suffering are also engaged in an attempt to re-align the polarities of global social understanding. The documentation of experiences of people suffering from diseases of poverty is taken up as a means to engage in global public debate over the structural conditions that systematically reproduce the material and social deprivation of the so-called 'Third World' (Farmer 1997; 1999; 2005; 2013). Indeed, the advocacy of human rights and humanitarian social reform is made explicit in many instances where 'social suffering' is deployed as a descriptive tool and/or analytical device for conveying the human consequences of the physical violence, emotional distress and social deprivation experienced in contexts of war, civil conflict and totalitarian abuse (Das 1995; 2007; Scheper-Hughes 1992; 1997; 1998).

It is possible to characterise a great deal of research and writing on 'social suffering' as a critical praxis that seeks to establish the right of people to have rights (Arendt 1973). Some label what takes place here as a 'politics of recognition'. Axel Honneth argues that it is often the case that contexts of social suffering are discussed as part of a 'disclosing critique' that aims to make known the 'pathologies of the social' in which 'the other of justice' is denied moral recognition and respect for their rights (Honneth 1995). For example, Paul Farmer contends that 'a failure of imagination is one of the greatest failures in contemplating the fate of the world's poorest', and aims to use ethnographic texts and photography as a means to shock his readers into questioning the human values and responsibilities that bind them to the victims of suffering (Farmer 2006: 145). He uses whatever 'rhetorical tools' are available to him to convey the experience of individuals dying from AIDS and seeks to offend readers' sensibilities with images of the physical torment suffered by people living in circumstances of extreme material deprivation. Farmer uses such methods to advocate an expanded notion of human rights that gives as much importance to the right to 'freedom from want' as to civil and political rights.

Similarly, Veena Das explains her work as an attempt to devise 'languages of pain' by which social sciences might be crafted as a textual body on which 'pain is written' (Das 1997: 67). Her ethnographic practice is designed to fashion a re-entry to 'scenes of devastation' and worlds 'made strange though the desolating experience of violence and loss (ibid.). Here the efforts made to convey the standpoint of women who have been subjected to brutal acts of violence in the internecine conflicts of India's civil wars are intended as a means to 'convert' such experience into a script that can be used to establish ties of empathy and communal self-understanding. Das presents this as part of a 'work of healing' that creates a social space for the recognition of human rights and possibilities for a retrieval of human dignity (Das 1994; 1995; 2007; Das et al. 2001).

Whilst engaging with such struggles for recognition, writers such as Farmer and Das tend to present this as merely a point of beginning. The foregrounding of people's experiences social

suffering is intended not only as a plea for recognition but also as a means to initiate a wider set of inquiries into the institutional foundations of civil society and the grounds upon which it may be possible to realise people's social and economic rights. For example, Farmer writes:

".,..[R]ecognition is not enough…We need another modern movement, a globalized movement that will use whatever stories and images it can to promote respect for human rights, especially the rights of the poor. For such a movement to come about, we need to rehabilitate a series of sentiments long out of fashion in academic and policy circles: indignation on behalf not of oneself but of the less fortunate; solidarity; empathy; and even pity, compassion, mercy, and remorse……Stories and images need to be linked to the historically deeper and geographically wider analyses that can allow the listener or the observer to understand the ways in which AIDS, a new disease, is rooted in the historically defined conditions that promote its spread and deny its treatment; the ways in which genocide, like slavery before it, is a fundamentally 'transnational' event; the reasons why breast cancer is inevitably fatal for the most affected women in who live in poverty; the meaning of rights in an interconnected world riven by poverty and inequality. In short, serious social ills require in-depth analyses."

<div align="right">(Farmer 2006: 185)</div>

In many instances, documents of social suffering are committed to humanitarian projects of social reform. Humanitarian care for people is identified with care for human society as such, and further, by our participation in acts of caregiving, it is argued that it is made possible to work at understanding how human social life is made possible, and in particular the forms of social life which make possible pro-social human relationships (Wilkinson and Kleinman 2016: 161-87). This is the approach that sustained Jane Addams' approach to 'doing sociology' in the context of the activities of the progressive era Chicago settlement community of Hull-House (Addams 1965 [1892]; 1998 [1910]; 2002 [1902]). Addams not only set caregiving as the practical aim of her sociology, but further, she understood acts of care to hold the potential to expose how social life takes place in enactments of substantive human values. The experience of caregiving was taken as the grounds for critical thinking about human social conditions and the potential for sociology to be applied to their amelioration. These commitments and terms of understanding are once again being advanced as a prime concern in the humanitarian medical anthropology of Philip Bourgois, Paul Farmer, Arthur Kleinman and Nancy Scheper-Hughes (Bourgois 2002; Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Farmer 1992; 1999; 2006; 2013; Kleinman 1980; 2006; Scheper-Hughes 1992; 1998; 2005; 2011). In this context, research and writing on social suffering represents a call for social scientists to move beyond the politics of recognition so as to directly involve themselves in actions to deliver humanitarian social change. The work of critique is merely taken as a means to clear a space in which to advance projects of practical care.

Re-awakening Controversy

As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, the earliest references to 'social suffering' were connected to initiatives to promote humanitarian social concern and these attracted a great deal of public controversy, intellectual dispute and political contest. This was partly linked to the political fallout from a radical break in received traditions of moral understanding whereby accounts of human affliction in terms of religious theodicy were being replaced with explanations that drew man-made conditions of society into debate (Vidich and Lyman 1985;

Morgan and Wilkinson 2001). Where for most of human history, the experience of suffering had been invested with religious meaning, here for the first time it was addressed in largely secular terms as a matter that sounded a distinctly *social* alarm, and which further pointed to the fact that something was seriously wrong with the conditions of society in which people were made to live. Many of the early controversies attached to 'social suffering' were also connected to disputes surrounding the moral status of 'the social' as a category of human understanding, and further, to how this should be formulated as a matter of study and debate.

For many, these became most heated in contexts where it was claimed that critical thought about social life and movements to secure progressive social change should be open to the influence of moral feeling. Where on the one hand, some, and especially those identified as 'humanitarian', took the view that the moral feelings aroused in face of the brute facts of human suffering were a vital and necessary part of the cultivation of social consciousness and conscience, others, and especially those set on a mission to 'scientize' the study of society, held that these should play no part in rational processes investigation and debate (Wilkinson and Kleinman 2016: 148). Critics of social sensibility were worried by the possibility that moral sentiment was open to corruption to a point where it became more a vice than a virtue (Halttunen 1995). They also worried over the extent to which it could be appropriated in the service of projects of ideological manipulation (Ellis 1996: 190-221). Humanitarian moral feelings, and especially those connected to the 'the social question', were portrayed as wild and unruly, and as opposed to reason and principled debate (Arendt 1963). By contrast, those prepared to take social sympathy as a guide to critical thought and action tended to see a greater danger lying in the propensity for cultures of rationalization to operate, as Max Weber famously put it, 'without regard for persons' (Weber 1948: 215). In this context, the 'rebellion of sentiment' tended to be directed towards laissez-faire economics and utilitarian forms of thinking in social policy that, by advancing the rule of calculation above all other considerations, operated to draw a dispassionate veil over many desperate human situations and personal miseries (Roberts 2002: 258-331).

It might be argued that in more recent debates connected to problems of 'social suffering', sociologists and anthropologists are revisiting these earlier controversies and are occupying similar value positions. For example, critics such as Craig Calhoun and Lilie Chouliaraki are overwhelmingly preoccupied with exposing the ways in which 'the humanitarian imperative to reduce suffering' and 'the humanitarian imaginary' are used to constrain critical thought and to promote self-serving strains of sentimentality (Calhoun 2004; 2008; Chouliaraki 2013). Similarly, and with more direct concern with the involvement of research and writing on social suffering in contemporary humanitarian politics, Didier Fassin portrays 'humanitarian reason' as a delusional ideology that more often than not operates to institute relations of domination across society. He further argues that here social scientists tend to be fooled into thinking that simply by listening to the misfortunes of others that they are engaged in some form of emancipatory social practice (Fassin 2012). Although very much concerned with the culture and politics of their times, in these instances once again an overwhelming emphasis is placed on the potential for humanitarian culture and moral sentiment to operate to occlude clear sighted critical rationality, and often this is coupled with further worries relating to its potential to promote ideologies of discriminatory social control above any serious attempt to address the real causes and scale of human suffering.

Taking an opposing view, those associated with research and writing on social suffering prefer to place a greater emphasis on the propensity for technocratic discourse to explain away people's hardships so that that these are reduced to a meaningless triviality. For example, Pierre

Bourdieu argues that we should be more worried by the moral position occupied by critical social scientists when they operate from an 'objectivising distance that reduces the individual to a specimen in a display case' (Bourdieu 1999a: 2). He urges us to attend to the 'symbolic violence' perpetrated by rationalising conventions of academic writing that work to clear and cut a way through the many hermeneutic confusions and epistemological frustrations borne by people under common sense conditions of everyday life. As he puts it, the greater danger here is that in our social science 'we do nothing but gloss one another' (Bourdieu 1999b: 607).

By no means is this to deny that there are many risks inherent in forms of writing that seek to cultivate a sympathetic approach to social understanding, rather the key point here is that every symbolic portrayal of social life risks being used in harmful ways that diminish people's humanity. Practitioners of social science cannot operate above the fray of morality and politics. In all their research, and all the more so because it directly concerns what matters for people, they are engaged in enactments of human value. Accordingly, those with a commitment to expose conditions of social suffering do not shy away from courting 'unstable emotions' or from having their work associated with the many controversies are readily attached to modern humanitarianism, for these are taken to be a condition of human social life as such (Farmer 2006). It is suggested if we are serious in our efforts to understand how social life matters for people we must be prepared to broker with the difficulty of making adequate sense of human suffering, and further that this requires us to deal with many painful and morally provocative feelings.

Moreover, it is suggested that this must involve more than critique, for there is a danger here that, within social science at least, critique has a potential to operate as an evasion of social life. While occupying the critical 'high ground', it is argued that social scientists often fail to critically question the values enacted through their own practices within the academy and research field. In this regard, the pedagogy of care that is advocated in some accounts of social suffering is taken not only as part of a moral commitment to people's wellbeing, but also as an essential part of the attempt to understand how social life is made humanly possible and humane. Here research and writing on social suffering is informed by classical traditions of critical pragmatism where researchers hold themselves up to be judged in terms of the practical actions and lived possibilities that result from their work (Wilkinson and Kleinman 2016).

For Discussion

With a focus brought to problems of social suffering researchers tend to operate with the understanding that they are involved in reconfiguring the value orientations of social science and its practice. We are called to attend to the ways in which individuals and societies experience suffering as well as the historical and cultural conditions under which this is ascribed with moral meaning. The problem of human suffering is identified as a decisive element within the formation of individual personalities and within the overall character of societies. The social practices by which individuals struggle to endure this experience, along the institutional arrangements that are set in place under the effort to minimise its deleterious effects on human life, are held to exert a major influence over the formation of political cultures and the dynamics of social change. Here there is also an overt concern to expose the connections between modern humanitarianism and our capacity to relate to one another as social beings in need of social care. Social science is conducted with the understanding that caregiving makes a vital contribution to the development of social understanding, and that our capacity for social understanding is advanced through caregiving.

Writing at the turn of the twentieth century some of early pioneers of sociology such as Lester Frank Ward, Albion Small and Jane Adams promoted the view that sociology should be allied with humanitarianism. While many of the social scientists of their day stood opposed to do-gooder confusion and openly disparaged its sentimentalism, these three held out the hope that sociology might still operate as the handmaid to humanitarian social reform. On this view, it was still possible for rational social science to collaborate with sentiment-fired social inquiry, and it was still possible for critical reason to be informed by humanitarian feeling. However, with the advance of academic sociology and the cementing of the links between scientific accreditation and the pursuit of career, such vision was lost (Becker 1971; Mazlish 1989). Largely speaking, at its origins social science within the academy was set antagonistically opposed to humanitarianism.

Research and writing on social suffering courts dispute. This not only relates to the struggle to diagnose the causes of human suffering and to identify what can be done to help people in situations of adversity. It also draws traditions of social inquiry into debate on account of their moral value and human purpose. In the historical record of human suffering, we repeatedly come across the extreme paradox that through experiences that entail the most terrible uprooting of life, people are brought under the compulsion to reach out for what really matters in their lives. This appears to be engrained in the character of the work that takes place here, and social science is also made to account for itself on these terms. Social science is continually set to confront its limits, but also with a commitment to making these more suited to what social life matters *for people*. The hope here is that there are still better ways to relate to our modern human condition, and that it is yet possible for us to realise more humane forms of society.

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