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Anxiety as social practice

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Abstract. This paper advances a theory of anxiety as social practice. Distinguishing between individual anxieties and anxiety as a social condition, the paper suggests that anxiety has not been subject to the same level of theoretical scrutiny as related concepts such as risk, trust, or fear. Drawing on the existential philosophy of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, the paper shows how contemporary anxieties involve the recognition of our own mortality and the destabilisation of established systems of meaning. The paper then turns to practice theory to show how social anxieties can be understood as events that rupture the fabric of everyday life, creating specific subjects and objects, ‘framed’ by different communities of practice, and becoming institutionalised to varying degrees. Focusing on a range of food-related anxieties, the paper explores the geographical and historical constitution of social anxiety, examining the process of anxiety formation and the factors that inhibit or enhance its social and spatial diffusion.

Introduction

While some anxieties may be experienced on a personal level, we want to consider the broader sociological, historical, and geographical dimensions of anxiety, including how anxieties are framed, mediated, and institutionalised, how they spread and are contained, and how they shift between social fields and vary across space and time.

Despite frequent claims about its centrality as a defining feature of modern life, the concept of anxiety has received relatively little attention compared with related concepts such as risk, trust, or fear.⁽¹⁾ As others have noted, there is surprisingly little discussion of anxiety among the founding fathers of social theory (cf May, 1950; Wilkinson, 2001). Marx wrote about alienation, Durkheim about anomie, and Weber about disenchantment but none of them spoke at any length about anxiety. It was only with the rise of Freudian psychoanalysis that there is any sustained treatment of anxiety as a psychosocial phenomenon. For Freud anxiety was a normal fact of everyday life rather than a peculiar individual affliction. He saw the increase of anxiety as an inevitable response to the evolution of civilisation which had been achieved through the “sublimation of instinct” (1930, page 63). In his later work, Freud (1936) debated whether anxiety was a cause or a result of repression.

⁽¹⁾The links between anxiety and risk are discussed by Wilkinson (2001). The concept of trust is discussed by Lingis (2004) and illustrated in the specific context of food safety by Kjaernes et al (2007). For a discussion of the challenge of maintaining ‘social trust’ in cosmopolitan society, see Earle and Cvetkovich (1995). The relationship between fear and anxiety has been the subject of lengthy debate. Many authors seek to distinguish between the specific object and rational nature of fear compared with the irrational nature and lack of a definable object associated with anxiety. We do not find this distinction tenable as ostensibly rational fears (about crime, for example) are often associated with irrational anxieties (based on stereotypical attitudes towards racialised Others, for example).

The neglect of anxiety among social theorists is all the more surprising, given the centrality that the concept occupies within theories of modernity. Indeed, the modern era has often been described as an 'age of anxiety' from the work of W H Auden (1947) to more recent analyses of our current economic, social, political, and environmental insecurities (Dunant and Porter, 1996). In our own field of consumption studies, the term appears in the title of several recent works, often without much further elaboration (cf Coveney, 2006; Freidberg, 2004; Griffiths and Wallace, 1998). For many commentators it is its pervasiveness as an everyday social condition that distinguishes anxiety as a distinctively modern phenomenon. According to Bauman (2006), for example, anxiety has become a normal, everyday condition of modern society, with more and more people living in a state of constant anxiety: a 'time of fears' which threatens our bodies, the social order, and our very survival as a species. Similar fears are expressed in Beck's influential account of *Risk Society* where he warns of the invisible risks associated with air pollution, radiological hazards, and food contamination, the "stowaways of normal consumption", that "travel on the wind and in the water", passing through "all the otherwise strictly controlled protective areas of modernity" (1992, pages 40–41).⁽²⁾

There has, of course, been much discussion of anxiety in medical circles where the condition is defined as a multisystem response to a perceived threat or danger involving biochemical changes in the body, patients' personal histories, and specific social conditions. There are standardised measures of the severity of anxiety using symptom inventories and rating scales such as the Hamilton Anxiety scale and the Anxiety Disorders Interview Schedule, covering cardiovascular and respiratory symptoms as well as psychological and sociological variables. Medical and epidemiological studies have documented significant increases in levels of anxiety and depression among successive generations of children and adolescents, including Twenge's (2000) study of birth cohort data which showed that in the US the average American child in the 1990s was more anxious than child psychiatric patients in the 1950s. Attempts have been made to link these changes to the increasingly competitive and divisive nature of American society, though such evidence is disputed (cf Dorling, 2009).

For many authors, then, "It is now a matter of sociological common sense to identify ourselves as living through a period of acute insecurity and high anxiety... the brute facts of anxiety appear to be almost beyond dispute" (Wilkinson, 2001, page 42). So, too, for May, "The evidence is overwhelming... that men and women of today live in an 'age of anxiety'", occupying a state of "nameless and formless uneasiness" (1950, page v). Wilkinson (1999) has, however, questioned whether the presumption that we are living in a qualitatively new or different 'age of anxiety' can be substantiated. He asks to what extent our present-day anxieties about the environment and climate change, the resurgence of nationalism, or the demise of communism differ in a qualitative way from the anxieties of earlier historical periods. We do not seek to answer Wilkinson's question directly, accepting his argument about the analytical complexity and highly speculative nature of any such assessment. We do, however, seek to provide some analytical clarity about the nature of anxiety as a social condition, basing our argument on the existential philosophy of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger and on contemporary theories of practice. We start, though, by outlining our approach to anxiety as a social condition.

⁽²⁾ Cf Swyngedouw's (2007) discussion of how sober analyses of increasing CO₂ emissions can lead to apocalyptic visions of impending environmental disaster.

Anxiety as a social condition

The word ‘anxiety’ has Anglo-Germanic roots and is derived from a variety of Greek and Latin words describing feelings of constriction or throttling. In contemporary English usage it has at least four separate meanings: a state of agitation, being troubled in mind, a solicitous desire to effect some purpose, and uneasiness about a coming event (Tyrer, 1999, pages 3–4). According to this definition, anxiety is a physically embodied state involving mental and emotional distress, combined with a more diffuse sense of uneasiness about a coming event. We would go further to suggest that anxiety may be related to current events as well as to fears about the future. We would also suggest that anxiety may affect social entities such as organisations and governments whether or not particular individuals are troubled in mind. This is what we mean by the concept of social anxiety (elaborated further below in relation to a range of recent food-related issues).⁽³⁾

Hunt (1999) has written about the use of anxiety as an explanatory concept by sociologists and social historians, invoked to explain the occurrence and timing of different social phenomena which elicit a social and political response from an identifiable social group. In expressing his anxieties about anxiety theory, he describes the concept as a “submerged middle term” in sociohistorical thought (page 511). We share Hunt’s concerns about the need to specify the causal mechanisms that are said to be at work, linking the occurrence of anxiety to some putative social cause. Hunt suggests that inferential connections should be substantiated empirically and specific agents (moral entrepreneurs) must be identified if such explanations are to be validated. This is particularly so where explanations invoke notions of “displacement”, where the “real” basis of anxiety is thought to be hidden from those directly involved. Hunt asks what kind of evidence counts towards the substantiation of an anxiety analysis, suggesting that notions of “discursive affinity” and “configuration” may be helpful in moving explanations beyond the purely speculative and conjunctural towards the identification of causal links. Hunt’s analysis resonates closely with our own approach to social anxiety, though we place more emphasis in what follows on how anxieties are institutionalised and can become powerful agents of social change even among those who are not personally anxious.

Following Hunt (1999, page 510), we argue that anxiety has social significance insofar as it is a shared experience that results in some discernible action by significant numbers of people. In Hunt’s example, if people cancel vacations in Egypt because of a fear of attacks by ‘fundamentalists’ this shared anxiety has social and economic consequences. Secondly, following Latour (2005), we argue that anxieties are social insofar as they involve associations: that is, connections of various sorts and entities that spread out over space and time. Thus, unlike the anxious individual in the dark, social anxieties have the capacity to engage and enrol more and more elements: that is, they are expansive.

It may be helpful at this point to further clarify the distinction we draw between individual anxieties and anxiety as a social condition. There is increasing recognition that anxiety has important social dimensions as well as being an individual affliction or purely personal pathology. So, for example, the social historian Bourke (2003) has suggested that anxiety (and other emotions) can be approached as a kind of language game, tracing the circumstances and terms in which anxieties are expressed and how they are articulated within wider social relations of power. The question of whether

⁽³⁾The term ‘social anxiety’ is also used within social psychology but with a range of different meanings (cf Buss, 1980; Leary and Kowalski, 1997; Scott, 2004). Kellner (1995) also uses the term within his cultural studies of the media, referring to fears of decline in the socioeconomic status of individuals and families.

individual feelings can be transmitted or shared with others is, however, the subject of intense debate. In her recent work on the transmission of affect, for example, Brennan (2004) suggests that emotions such as depression or anxiety can be transmitted between individuals through a process of constant communication between individuals and their physical and social environments. (She uses the example of entering a room where “you could cut the atmosphere with a knife”.) It is also likely that some forms of anxiety, such as panic, are readily communicated between individuals, while other forms of anxiety, such as those associated with loneliness, are much less transferable by their very nature, involving the experience of isolation.

Developing these ideas, Wilkinson (2001) defines anxiety as a complex combination of affective experiences, bodily reactions, and behavioural responses. While anxiety may be experienced as a personal condition, Wilkinson maintains, its incidence can be exacerbated by “social predicaments and cultural contradictions”.⁽⁴⁾ A useful way of thinking about the social dimensions of anxiety is suggested by Ungar’s attempt to identify the specific *sites of anxiety* associated with environmental, nuclear, chemical, and medical threats. Ungar sees anxiety as a response to uncertainty and ambivalence where concerns about public safety lead to an exaggerated response akin to a contemporary “moral panic” (Ungar, 2001). Commenting on Ungar’s argument, Hier (2003) suggests that the sites of social anxiety are converging with discourses of risk, frequently containing a strongly moral dimension which he describes in terms of the “moralization of risk”. Hier goes on to identify a growing tension between the “techno-scientific rationalities” of expert systems and what he calls the “social rationalities” of everyday living. The gap between these different rationalities is a fertile ground for the development of social anxiety (as we shall illustrate below).

The distinction between anxiety as an individual pathology and anxiety as a social condition can be illustrated via a range of food-related examples. Consumer anxieties about food in the Global North have been exacerbated by a series of recent ‘food scares’ (including BSE in cattle and salmonella in eggs). The causes and consequences of these anxieties are very different from parental anxieties about childhood allergies and food intolerances, for example, which are defined and experienced in a much more individualised manner. Anxieties about eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia occupy an intermediate position, with both a personal, biographical dimension as well as clear evidence of wide cultural variability in their incidence (as discussed by Giddens, 2006). In some cases, then, food-related anxieties are contained at an individual level, while in others (such as BSE) they extend from specific health concerns to wider debates about environment and society (cf Stassart and Whatmore, 2003). Similarly, when ‘food scares’ lead supermarkets to withdraw goods from the shelves, consumers are implicated in the social condition of anxiety whether or not they are personally anxious.

A parallel argument is developed by Pain and Smith (2008) in the context of their recent work on the geopolitics of fear and everyday life. Fear, they stress, is “a social or collective experience rather than an individual state”, “embedded in a network of moral and political geographies”.⁽⁵⁾ This has a profound impact on their research agenda:

⁽⁴⁾ To quote Wilkinson in full: “anxiety is conceived not so much as a personality defect but, rather, as a function or consequence of the social predicaments and cultural contradictions in which individuals are made to live out their everyday lives” (2001, page 17).

⁽⁵⁾ There has been a proliferation of recent work on the geography of fear, ranging from Sparke’s (2007) work on the geopolitical fears that were used to justify the Iraq war, through Katz’s (2008) analysis of the monitoring devices that parents use to track their children, to Ingram’s (2008) and Gill’s (2009) work on immigration anxieties.

“Recognising the materiality of fear means that there are tracks and traces between the different lives of those who seek to control fear and those whose lives are pervaded by it. It is possible to follow the materialisation of certain fears into local landscapes; and it is important to show how everyday practices might be inspired by this, might tolerate it, could ignore it, will certainly pose alternatives, and may well have other, more pressing, ‘things’ to contend with” (page 13).

It is this emphasis on the practices through which anxiety is manifested that we seek to develop in the rest of the paper, approaching anxiety as a social condition, characterised by the rupturing of established routines and the ‘framing’ of events by particular communities of practice.

Existential anxiety

Before turning to our specific argument about the possible contribution of practice theory to understanding the nature of social anxiety, we wish to explore the development of modern theories of anxiety in the existential philosophy of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. In doing so, we highlight how the concept of anxiety has been shaped by these thinkers and the way their work can be used today to deal with specific social phenomena including a range of food-related anxieties. An engagement with their work also helps us to explore some of the normative baggage of the concept of anxiety.

In his seminal work on *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard (1980) describes anxiety as an internal condition of the human being rather than as something that intrudes on the individual from outside. Anxiety is, on the one hand, terrifying and humans seek redemption from it. They are, on the other hand, pulled into it. In the state of anxiety, humans come to realise their own position within the world and to distinguish themselves from their surrounding environment. Thereby, individuals pass through different stages, from ignorance and purposeless seizing of this or that opportunity, through becoming a thoughtful and responsible individual, to the realisation that everything is grounded in nothingness, opening up the possibility of true faith (grounding the human being in the eternal). While anxiety can lead to inaction and paralysis, it can also be a spur to creativity and freedom, for “whoever is educated by anxiety is educated by possibility” (Kierkegaard, 1980, page 156).

In a similar vein, Nietzsche (1961) identified three stages of spiritual development. First, we believe in ideals, then we destroy those beliefs and lastly we have to accept the nothingness which gives way to a new, child-like way of affirming life. Between the realisation that all meaning is relative and the last stage lies the transition that Nietzsche famously called nihilism. It is the realisation that humans have no purpose in the world apart from those they craft themselves, that the world is indifferent towards human life and that death is inevitable. This is not a cause for desperation in Nietzsche’s philosophy. It is the beginning of a glorious new age where humans live their lives free from prejudice and traditional biases.

A similar trajectory can be traced in the work of Heidegger. In *Being and Time* (1978), for example, Heidegger analyses *Angst* as a phenomenon which is at the heart of understanding the human condition. For Heidegger anxiety is directed towards the condition of being itself. To be clear, Heidegger has a material and bodily grounded concept of anxiety, but anxiety is experienced as a sudden awareness of the nothingness that is ‘nowhere’ but everywhere:

“Therefore that which threatens cannot bring itself close from a definite direction within what is close by; it is already ‘there’, and yet nowhere; it is so close that it is oppressive and stifles one’s breath, and yet it is nowhere” (page 231).

Essentially, for Heidegger anxiety reveals the relativity of all meanings to the individual. In more sociological terms this refers to the insight that the world as it is experienced by human beings is always-already interpreted, filled with meanings. In the face of anxiety, an individual realises that these meanings are not stable or absolute but relative; that we are ourselves the creators of these meanings. The world in itself has no meaning; therefore there is nothing. Anxiety also reveals the inevitability of one's own death which is the annihilation of being. Being as it shows up in human beings is always producing meanings. Death therefore is the end of all meaning. These two, separate but interrelated, aspects characterise anxiety. The anxious person realises the relativity of all meaning and recognises his or her own mortality.

This reasoning could be seen as irrelevant to our aim of theorising social anxieties were it not for the fact that Heidegger provides us through the analysis of anxiety with his own stance towards the societal development of modernity. In his view, people do not want to face anxiety but rather lead a conformist life rooted in dull everyday routines. Heidegger argues, as did Kierkegaard, that people take the world for granted and lead inauthentic lives, governed by the norms of mass society. This critique is deeply rooted within Heidegger's understanding of modernity as "the progressive establishment of a new scientific *praxis* upon the pre-modern world" and the epochal emergence of the objectivism of science "whereby being is calculated in advance, verified and 'set in place'" (Videla, 1994, page 192).

By and large, Heidegger's antimodernist stance derives from a negative reading of the emergence of industrial technology announcing "the final epoch in the long decline of humanity's understanding of the being of entities" (Zimmerman, 1990, page 17). There is an inherently moral spatiality to this understanding that has been elaborated by humanistic geographers: a rift from space to place:

"The ideal person described by phenomenologists appears to be rural (at least 'local') at heart; nonplace-based social networks do not seriously influence his knowledge of space, or his attractions or repulsions from places" (Buttimer, 1976, page 284).

It is precisely against this notion that a critical, politically active writer such as Massey (2005) argues "for space". Taken to its extreme, the phenomenological and existentialist concern is with the individual, the local and place, dismissing more abstract understandings of society and space. We need to bear this in mind when returning to our initial concern with 'social anxiety' after exploring Heidegger's concept of *Angst* that is firmly tied to the individual.

For Heidegger modernity cannot be overcome actively. However, it would be desirable if everyone would realise their own individual human condition as being a maker of meaning in a world of indifference. To achieve this goal, he recommends anxiety as a main tool. In short, following Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Heidegger wishes people to be more anxious in order to become real individuals who accept the truth of nothingness. The utopia concealed within this realisation is a world full of individuals who live according to their personality and grasp the potentiality to shape their lives in their own terms (rather than following the mass).

It is in this spirit that Kierkegaard claimed that "anxiety is freedom's actuality" (1980, page 42), an argument that has also been made by more recent commentators. So, for example, Tyrer writes that anxiety is not something to be abhorred or stamped out, for "a world without anxiety would be a grey and boring place that would lead to frustration and torpor" (1999, page 1), while Salecl suggests that:

“While anxiety is today perceived as something one needs to be able to control and hopefully in the long run get rid of...it is almost forgotten that philosophy and psychoanalysis discussed anxiety as an essentially human condition that may not only have paralysing effects, but also be the very condition through which people relate to the world” (2004, page 15).

Having explored the use of anxiety by different writers and how the concept is embedded within their own political agendas, we want to draw attention to the normative edge of much of what is written and said about anxiety in contemporary society. In other words, we seek to clarify how social anxieties *work*: where they occur, how they develop, who they involve, and how they are dealt with. Drawing on theories of practice, we shall explore the procedural geographies of social anxiety showing how they give rise to a moralising agenda and serve to displace or repress other psychosocial concerns.

Mortality and meaning: theorising the event

As noted above, Heidegger identifies two things that *Angst* reveals: the relativity of meaning and the recognition of one’s own mortality. For analytical reasons—and it will become clear later why this matters—we want to distinguish between these two anxieties. Both are relevant to our current concern with social anxieties, some of which hinge on our mortal fear (the anxiety of death), and others of which are concerned with the anxiety of meaninglessness.

To begin with, the rupture of everyday life occurs when something happens, something unusual and extraordinary, an event: “anxiety always announces itself to us as something new” (Wilkinson, 1999, page 452).⁽⁶⁾ In existential philosophy and subsequent theories of practice, everything that occurs is an event. Moreover, Schatzki characterises all doings as events:

“Doings are a subset of the general category of events. Whereas events are units of occurrence, doings are incidences of accomplishment or carrying out” (2002, page 191).

Recently, Badiou’s theorisation of the event has gained much critical attention (eg Bassett, 2008; Wright, 2008). For Badiou (2007), the event is an unforeseeable turning point of history, where something new comes into the world and changes the future to varying degrees, “it opens up a space of consequences in which the body of a truth is composed” (Badiou, 2009, page 386). To gain fuller understanding of how we can conceive of anxiety as an ‘event’, it is instructive to review Badiou’s notion of the event in contrast to Deleuze. At risk of oversimplification, Deleuze defines four components of the event: it is extensive, intensive, affective, and affirmative. The event is extensive in the sense that it expands over time and space: that is, it is always more than the immediate present and more than the immediate location. It is intensive in the sense that it draws together single properties of the event (height, timbre, value, etc). It is affective in the sense that one entity “prehends” the other as “[I]iving beings apprehend water, soil, carbon, and salts” (Deleuze, 2006, page 88). It is affirmative (and this is our own crude term) for the event is made of ‘eternal objects’: that is, qualities, figures, or things that enter (‘ingress’) the event as something permanent though they are themselves in flux. Overall, the Deleuzian understanding of the

⁽⁶⁾ In a recent essay on obesity, Berlant (2007) challenges the tendency to describe such events in the language of ‘crisis’ or ‘epidemic’. Such terminology indicates relatively rare or extreme experiences, calling for heroic agency and diverting attention from the everyday ‘zone of ordinariness’ through which such events are routinely reproduced. Berlant distinguishes between event and environment, focusing on the way that events become occasions for justified moralising and with the potential to misrepresent the duration and scale of current anxieties.

event is tied to his preferred concept of sense that denotes a philosophy of becoming (cf Patton, 1996, pages 320–321). However, Badiou reverses this notion of the event that seems to have no beginning and no end and is already always there. For him the event is a cut (not extensive), it is present (not past-future, an exception of becoming), it acts instead of affects and decomposes rather than affirms eternal objects.

This debate could be dismissed as a semantic quarrel among philosophers were it not for the fact that we can actually put both—if simplified—versions of the event to use for our present purpose. One of the ‘axioms’ of the event that Badiou identifies in Deleuze is that “the event is always what has just happened, what will happen, but never what is happening” (Badiou, 2009, page 382). In Badiou’s reversed axiom, “it is a separating evanescence, an atemporal instant which disjoins the previous state of an object [the site] from its subsequent state... [I]t presents us with the present” (page 384). We think it is not necessary to choose between these different conceptualisations but to understand them as two different aspects of an event. In our case something is happening (present, Badiou, the event) that becomes transformed into something that has happened and is about to happen (past-future, Deleuze, the event of anxiety). What links the event types is achieved through framing. Framing as a concept in social sciences refers to implicit orderings and understandings of events (Goffman, 1974) as well as to purposeful selective or active representations of events (D’Angelo, 2002). Drawing on both notions, we understand ‘framing’ in our case as the social practices that arrange the event. Taken together, framing is the activity that can turn any event that presents itself as rupture into an extensive event of anxiety.

Whereas many doings (in fact the vast majority) assert the everydayness of life, the anxiety-event is a deep cut. It is an event that brings about the realisation of nothingness. In fact, the event of many social anxieties involves the death of people. This does not always mean that people have already died but it can be the projection of the event to the future such as an environmental disaster. This means that we do not just have to look at the event, at what happened, but at the framing of the event. Whether an event arouses anxiety depends on its framing.

Social anxieties occasion a rupture in the fabric of everyday life when the wholesome experience of one’s being-in-the-world collapses into subjects and objects of anxiety: that is, ‘decomposed’. The disintegration of everyday life into subjects and objects of anxiety then leads us to attempt to annihilate both in order to annihilate anxiety itself. Compared with Badiou’s notion of the event, the event of anxiety lasts as long as the decomposition of the old ‘truth’ and until a new ‘truth’ is firmly in place. Thus is the specificity of social anxiety to attend to ruptures that decompose through framing while sparking at the same time efforts of reversal. Let us explain what this means by way of an example.

The death of several dozen people in 2005–06 led to the social anxiety now known as ‘bird flu’ (avian influenza).⁽⁷⁾ The framing of the event implied that more or less everyone in the world could become subject to the highly pathogenic H5N1 virus (Davis, 2005). Following these events, the object of anxiety—the virus and the birds—was established and monitored closely (Hinchliffe and Bingham, 2008). In order to destroy the subjects and objects of anxiety, the objects (infected and vulnerable birds) were annihilated in a very literal sense so that people were no longer subject to the virus (and to the potential catastrophe that would occur if the virus mutated and spread more often from birds to humans). In this case the subjects of anxiety disappeared together with the object. This account misses all the efforts and negotiations

⁽⁷⁾ “How many people could bird flu kill?” (ABC News, 30 September 2005, available at <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/Flu/story?id=1173856>).

on various scales that went into managing the pandemic threat and one could argue that anxiety disappeared because the strain proved less virulent than expected. However, it disappeared as a subject of anxiety-laden reporting before the risk disappeared (Ungar, 2008). It also became clear that this particular strain of H5N1 was less virulent than had been feared.

A different thing happened in the case of the 9/11 and 7/7 terrorist attacks in the US and Britain, especially with respect to international air travel. The object of this anxiety was much harder to grasp. Physical attempts to destroy the object include the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but the object is the idea of terrorism rather than terrorists themselves. Thus, as long as the annihilation of the object is not possible, the creation of subjects has to be fought back constantly (cf Kellner, 2003). This happens in different ways. One is the individual decision to avoid air travel altogether. Another is the introduction of elaborate security checks at airports (Martin, 2010). Both practices try to control the subject of anxiety in the sense that not flying or the thoroughly checked passengers cannot become subject to terrorism.

While both of these events (the 'bird flu' scare and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and 7/7) have many similarities, including the extent to which they were both deeply racialised, an important difference between them is that in one case ('bird flu') the annihilation of the object led to the immediate disappearance of the subject which meant that life could go on as it was before the event. If it is harder to identify the object of anxiety or its annihilation is only partial (as in the case of international terrorism), a constant effort is required to retrieve people from their anxious subject positions. This leads ultimately to a long-term modification of certain practices and may bring about irreversible change. So, while many of us eat chicken as much as we did before the threat of avian flu, we are all still subject to elaborate airport security checks.

As noted above, social anxieties are about death and/or meaninglessness. This pertains not only to individuals in their capacities as unique human beings. It pertains also to any kind of organisation, such as a company or a government, or to any institutionalised set of cultural meanings. It is therefore not surprising that the actions taken to annihilate subjects and objects of anxiety are much more likely to involve threatened institutions than isolated individuals. Moreover, institutional anxieties often emerge as a response to the framing of events and the anticipated effects on individuals. This is not to say that individuals do not feel social anxieties in general. Rather, we contend, once social anxieties become institutionalised they can evolve independently from individualised fears. We turn now to the next step in our argument, outlining how social anxieties can be understood via theories of practice.

Theories of practice

Theories of practice may not seem an obvious starting point for informing our analysis of current social anxieties. Theories of practice have been applied most directly to science and technology studies and to studies of organisational behaviour. They include a discussion of what Schatzki (2002) calls "teleoaffective structures" (about which we will say more shortly), but they are more attuned to the analysis of doings and sayings, tasks and projects, than to the analysis of emotional life.⁽⁸⁾ There are, however, more reasons for applying practice theory to the study of social anxiety than simply recasting an old issue in the light of a fashionable theoretical framework. As became clear above, however, our current thinking about anxiety owes much to developments in

⁽⁸⁾ Schatzki defines teleoaffective structures as "a range of normativized and hierarchically ordered ends, projects, and tasks, to varying degrees allied with normativized emotions and even moods" (2002, page 80).

existentialist philosophy. So, too, is this philosophy—and in particular Heidegger's *Being and Time*—the ontological foundation of contemporary theories of practice.

Schatzki (2002) has been especially keen to show how Heidegger prepared the ground for contemporary practice theories. Moreover, the concept of Angst is related to Heidegger's whole conception of modernity and society which in turn gives rise to his theorisation of social life which inspired theorists of practice such as Schatzki. For Heidegger social life is characterised by the daily routines that imply that life just goes on as it is, that we can do the same things over and over again. Angst, however, disrupts everyday life for it makes us realise that we cannot do everything again and again. Heidegger believes that most individuals flee from this conclusion and try to maintain their routines in spite of the revelations Angst provides. If we face Angst, Heidegger asserts, we can grasp the 'real' potentialities of life (that is, being authentically). As Kierkegaard said, anxiety helps us to reflect on the full range of life's opportunities, to assess their consequences, and to make deliberate choices. Inserting anxiety into theories of practice is thus more than adding one affective aspect of human life but to theorise one of the key drivers of social change.

For Schatzki social change is not a matter of virtual structures (such as Bourdieu's habitus, Giddens's rule–resource structures, or Foucault's capillaries of power) that prefigure all doings. Rather:

“the endless becoming of social affairs does not stand under the tutelage of abstract-virtual, possibility-delimiting structures. Concrete goes on *and nothing else* determine what happens in history. The abstract forces at work in history are simply the ideas, plans, models, and principles drawn up in human thought and activity” (Schatzki, 2002, page 222, original emphasis).

However, that is not to say that there is no world interacting with practice. In Schatzki's terminology, there are always-already social orders: that is, a world of human beings, artefacts, things, and organisms that are arranged through social practices. Thus, research can have its starting point in the arrangements that appear at first sight as stable structures such as institutions or places.

Following Heidegger, which ideas, plans, etc have a say in the emergence of doings depends on the 'thrownness' (*Geworfenheit*) of the human being into the material world and our practical ways of dealing with it:

“The mesh of practices and orders does not simply clear some paths and obliterate others. Rather, it figures them as more distinct or fuzzy, more threatening or welcoming, more unsurveyable or straightforward, more cognitively dissonant or soothing, smoother or more jagged, more disagreeable or appealing, and so on” (Schatzki, 2002, page 226).

If we add anxiety to Schatzki's definition, anxiety has the power to change the routinised ways of qualifying this path over another. How this happens and how much it accounts for social change is what we will explain in the following discussion.

Anxiety as social practice

Like anxiety itself, we understand social practice as a complex combination of affective experiences, bodily reactions and behavioural responses (cf Wilkinson, 2001, page 15). More formally, social practice can be understood as “a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood” (Reckwitz, 2002, page 250). In ontological terms, anxiety has to be placed into what Schatzki (1996, page 89) calls a “teleoaffective structure” embracing ends, projects, tasks, purposes, beliefs, emotions, and moods. It might be suggested that practice theory has been better at analysing ends, projects, and tasks than it has been at exploring

purposes, beliefs, emotions, and moods. How, then, might practice theory be adapted to help us understand the social nature of contemporary anxiety?

Practice theory emphasises the skilful performance of social life, the practical knowledge (or ‘know-how’) and learned behaviours that underpin our everyday actions. It is this sense of tacit understanding that anxiety threatens to undermine where people feel unable to deal with the threatening situations in which they find themselves. Where once science and technology may have been looked to for the solutions to social problems and environmental crises, science itself may now be a figure of suspicion. Rather than the Enlightenment replacing fear and superstition with rationality and scientific knowledge, such fears have been displaced to new sites of anxiety which can be equally troubling as the role of magic or witchcraft in the middle ages. As historian Bourke suggests (2003, page 112): harmful microbes and bacteria are equally capable of evoking fear as the evil spirits they replaced; scientists are potentially as destructive as sorcerers.

A practice-based approach reaffirms the nature of anxiety as a necessary or normal part of the human condition, not as some exceptional state associated with individual phobia or personal pathologies. How, then, do practice-based theories understand the emotional and affective not as an individual ‘possession’ but as a social practice? According to Reckwitz, “wants and emotions... do not belong to individuals but—in the form of knowledge—to practices” (2002, page 254). ‘Knowledge’ can, of course, take many forms from technical expertise to lay understanding. It can be explicit or implicit, codified or tacit, and the gap between lay and scientific knowledge can be particularly fertile ground for the growth of social anxiety. Theories of practice offer a valuable way of demystifying this process, demonstrating that anxiety is not some free-floating mental activity; it is embedded in specific (often complex) doings and sayings. Anxieties are embodied and social, practical and practised. Like other social practices, they are routinised, collective, and conventional in character.

This brings us to a potential criticism of practice theory: that it is better at understanding persistence than change. As Warde (2005) argues in his review of consumption and theories of practice, such approaches tend to stress the routine, collective, and conventional nature of contemporary practices, focusing on habitual behaviour, the social embedding of everyday actions, and their tendency to become institutionalised. As Warde also insists, however, practices have a trajectory or path of development, a history that can be traced (page 139). So, for example, in Shove’s (2003) work on the domestic practices of everyday life, we can trace the specific social processes and technological changes that encouraged and enabled people to take a daily shower or to set their central heating at a constant temperature. Likewise, in Grunow and Warde’s (2001) work on ‘ordinary consumption’ we can see how many of our ‘choices’ as individual consumers (about water, gas, or electricity supply, for example) are highly constrained by our current political, institutional, and technological arrangements. Practice-based theories are well suited to understanding this kind of routinised behaviour and offer a powerful alternative to the model of autonomous individuals making informed choices that prevails in much consumer research and in government rhetoric about the sovereignty of individualised ‘consumer choice’. But thinking in terms of routines and trajectories does not imply an inability to understand social change, especially if the focus is on the extensive events generated by practices of framing and on the related responsive and affective practices associated with these events.

In the final section of the paper we attempt to show how the routines of everyday life such as our mundane consumption practices change in the face of social anxieties. In addition, we show how social anxieties can be analysed and interpreted, drawing on notions of framing and the disruption of everyday life, in combination with theories of social practice.

Framing anxiety within communities of practice

On an analytical basis, we can distinguish between three different types of practices that accompany, frame, and are affected by social anxieties. First, the practices of framing the event of anxiety are particularly of interest as they are crucially responsible for the social and geographical reach of a particular anxiety. Here, we are not only thinking of the news media which admittedly play a vital role (cf Miller and Reilly, 1994). We also have to consider the scientific or expert practices that seek to define the subjects and objects of anxiety. Furthermore, people engage in various practices to keep themselves informed about what is going on in the world. Second, practices of annihilation include all those doings and sayings that are specifically designed or employed to destroy the objects and subjects of anxiety. Understanding the proliferation of social anxieties about bird flu or SARS, for example, requires us to attend to scientific endeavours to create new vaccines as well as to the mass slaughtering of animals, the promotion of face masks, or the establishment of security checks [cf Donaldson (2008) on foot-and-mouth disease]. Third, the practices affected by contemporary anxieties include some of the very practices that constitute our everyday lives and whose disruption further entrenches those anxieties. These can be practices of shopping, for example, when specific items are, deliberately or not, avoided or favoured (think of the consumption of 'healthy' organic produce or the practices of travelling by train rather than by plane or avoiding long-distance travel altogether).

We contend that any kind of social anxiety can be understood more thoroughly by focusing on these, different but interweaving, sets of practices. Moreover, in order to grasp how social anxieties develop, become powerful, or wane, we need to understand how they are articulated within different 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).⁽⁹⁾ For example, we might need to examine how hospitals are organised and identify new diseases; how they report specific outbreaks to bigger organisations such as the WHO; how the press gets informed; how the media search for news stories; what they define as newsworthy and how they frame particular events; how institutions react to information and how they deal with it (by setting up committees, restricting foreign travel, etc). In short, practice theories encourage us to examine how the whole flow of everyday life becomes reworked in the face of the disruptive event of anxiety.⁽¹⁰⁾

By way of interpreting the outcomes of a given social anxiety, we have to look at how successful different communities of practice are in controlling the objects and subjects of anxiety. Some social anxieties may require long-term change such as new modes of production and consumption, new sewage systems, or constant vaccination programmes. Others (such as various localised 'moral panics') may, after the successful destruction of the object, with hindsight appear only as a whim on the surface of history. Some may spur technological innovations and 'modernisation', while others may encourage a retreat into more 'traditional' ways of life.

⁽⁹⁾In their original formulation, Lave and Wenger (1991) defined communities of practice as being formed by groups of people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour, who share a common concern or a passion for something they do and who learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. In a later commentary, Wenger (1998) added that communities of practice are brought together by their participation in common activities, having a shared domain of interest, engaging in joint activities, and developing a shared repertoire of resources.

⁽¹⁰⁾Likewise, November (2008) contends that risk should be analysed as reconfigurations of human–nonhuman relationships by scrutinising practitioners' actions [cf Chilvers (2008) on the emergent epistemic community of participatory appraisal practitioners].

As geographers we are interested in tracing how some anxieties intensify and spread while others are contained or remain purely local concerns. How, for example, did swine flu become recognised as a global pandemic while other diseases, such as malaria and TB, which are much greater threats to human health worldwide, are much less conspicuous as social anxieties at least in the Global North? We argue that these differences can be understood in terms of the way events are framed within different communities of practice. In the case of avian flu the death of a few dozen people was framed as the beginning of a global pandemic, potentially affecting the future of the whole of mankind (WHO, 2009). Everyone became subject to this threat and because the objects (migrating birds carrying the virus) were hard to control, its going global was thought to be a case of when rather than if. The difference with malaria or TB (from the perspective of the Global North) is that they lack the same event-ness. It is happening all the time and is mostly confined to specific places in the Global South: it is unlikely to affect people who do not live in affected areas. The epidemic is confined and managed. Only when the disease begins to show resistance to current medicines, when more deadly mutations of the disease occur, or when it threatens to spread to new areas does the potential for social anxiety increase.

As well as studying the life-cycle of particular anxieties, we can also look at their social geographies. In the case of swine flu we can discern how different responses to the object of anxiety vary geographically and how anxiety is reworked by different institutions. For example, in relation to the spread of swine flu, the Egyptian government ordered a total annihilation of all swine stocks that are kept by the Koptic minority, inflaming religious tensions, while many Asian countries stopped importing pork from the USA and Mexico, fearing that the consumption of meat posed a threat to human health (Johnson, 2009). In the USA, meanwhile, the farming lobby stressed that there was no evidence to associate swine flu with pork consumption, blaming the media for creating 'false' anxieties. While swine flu is still framed as an emerging pandemic with potentially fatal effects, it has already had real consequences not only for infected individuals but for societies and economies in general.

Finally, we might also comment on the way that social anxieties, as articulated within particular frames of reference and by particular communities of practice, contribute to specific political agendas. For example, in his recent work on security and immigration, Bigo (2002) notes the way in which certain sources of anxiety are strategically deployed, naming the purveyors of unease, and identifying a political economy of fear. Likewise, the tendency of the neoliberal order to promote the 'responsibilisation' of citizen-subjects goes hand-in-hand with the proliferation of social anxieties [as described by Langley (2009) in the context of the recent subprime mortgage crisis]. Indeed, some government campaigns may even seek deliberately to raise levels of public anxiety, as indicated by the eagerness with which Thaler and Sunstein's (2009) recent work on manipulating the "choice architecture" underpinning consumer decisions has been appropriated by several right-wing political parties.

Conclusion

In this paper we have outlined a theory of anxiety as social practice, exploring its sociological, historical, and geographical dimensions rather than treating it as a purely individual disorder or personal pathology. We have demonstrated the relative neglect of anxiety within modern social theory, turning to the existential philosophy of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger for inspiration in understanding anxiety as a common feature of contemporary social life. We have shown how these same sources also inspired contemporary theories of practice to which we then turned for methodological support in analysing the formation of recent social anxieties. We have suggested

how anxieties can shift between different sites so that things which once made us anxious may no longer do so. We have shown how science and technology can be both a cause of and a cure for contemporary anxieties. Focusing particularly on recent food-related anxieties, we have looked, in particular, at the way that anxiety disrupts the flow of everyday life, threatening our mortality and/or our established systems of meaning and sense making. We have also suggested how social anxieties circulate within specific communities of practice and that this may help us explain why some anxieties spread more widely than others.

We have argued that the eventfulness of anxiety disrupts the practices of everyday life, creating specific objects and subjects of anxiety, giving rise to justified moralising. We have also suggested that the identification of social anxieties and the 'crises' which they precipitate may invoke heroic action and serve a variety of political purposes, either to subdue public anxiety or to maintain it. Many observers (eg Bauman, 2006; Furedi, 1997; Svendsen, 2008) have noted how our current anxieties give rise to a pervasive 'culture of fear' whose management comes at a considerable cost in terms of our personal and political freedoms. We conclude that approaching anxiety as social practice has considerable potential for understanding a wide range of contemporary issues. While practice theory has included some discussion of the emotional and affective dimensions of social life (particularly via Schatzki's concept of teleoaffective structures), there has been relatively little empirical work on these aspects of everyday life and social practice. Our paper has begun to address these empirical lacunae and we intend to take these ideas forward in our future research.

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