



MEDIA@LSE Electronic Working Papers

Editors: Dr. Bart Cammaerts and Dr. Nick Anstead

No. 23

Suffering as a discipline? Scholarly accounts on the current and future state of research on media and suffering

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Published by Media@LSE, London School of Economics and Political Science ("LSE"), Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE. The LSE is a School of the University of London. It is a Charity and is incorporated in England as a company limited by guarantee under the Companies Act (Reg number 70527).

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INTRODUCTION

In his seminal work _____, sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992) assessed our modern society as increasingly preoccupied with invisible, unpredictable and uncontrollable risks such as disasters, terrorism, poverty, pandemics and conflicts. These risk

move the research forward. For this purpose, we draw on a literature review and elite interviews with leading scholars in the field. The latter includes nine semi-structured face-to-face interviews that were conducted during February and March of 2012 while additional data was gathered through three interviews via mail (cf. appendix). The literature review is divided in two parts. First, we address suffering as object of scholarly inquiry within the broad field of social sciences. Secondly, we give a general outline of the research on media and suffering.

SUFFERING AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Before going into the various research strands, it is important to flesh out our interpretation of suffering. In this paper the definition by Kleinman, et al. (1997: xi) is used. They approach suffering as 'an assemblage of human problems that have their origins and consequences in the devastating injuries that social force can inflict on human experience', including political, social, institutional and economic conditions that involve health, welfare, legal, moral and religious issues. This is a very broad definition, but it allows us to address the field in its full complexity as it reflects the variety in possible causes of human suffering. In addition, it does not limit the concept of suffering to the individual experience of pain, loss or psychological distress (Steeves and Kahn, 1987), but opens it

humanities. These fields have theorized and studied suffering from their particular scopes or interests: sociology, political science, economics, media studies, arts and literature, anthropology, theology, law and ethics, ... and all have contributed to our understanding of suffering, its causes and consequences. Moreover, due to the diverse realities and nature of human suffering, several scholars such as Kleinman (1988), Graubard (1996) and Wilkinson (2005) are opposed to constraining the debate on suffering to a single discipline of study and therefore highly appraise the value of cross-disciplinary study as exemplified in the literature on suffering. Having said that, we should be aware of or at least acknowledge what MacIntyre (1981/2007) has called the modern problem of incommensurability in academic research. Despite interdisciplinary dialogues, each discipline dwells on its own premises and standards, leading us to the question whether the various disciplinary narratives on, conceptualizations of and meanings awarded to suffering do not diverge epistemologically even if all use the same word(s) and terminology? In other words, is suffering a common term of reference across all disciplines? And does this lead to a totalizing body of knowledge or only to different partial understandings of suffering? This does not question the value of interdisciplinary research on suffering as such, but it is an important element to take into account when discussing the (need for) disciplinary boundaries of research on media and suffering (cf. *infra*).

Secondly, within social sciences, it appears that disciplines are exploring suffering at very different paces. While for instance theology and philosophy have a long-standing tradition of debate on the subject of suffering, other disciplines such as sociology or media and communication studies have only (re)discovered suffering since the 1980s and 1990s (Wilkinson, 2005: 3). In addition, Wilkinson (2005: 4-6) discerns four particular fields of inquiry that spearhead the contemporary scholarly debate and preoccupation with suffering:

that looks into the socio-cultural components of experiencing suffering and pain; that explores human suffering in a context of extreme social adversity and political atrocity; that according to Wilkinson is given the particular responsibility to develop a language and framework for understanding what the experience of suffering actually does to people and our humanity; and in which the role of media and mediation is investigated in the formation of moral behavior, social consciousness and humanitarian concern with suffering. The latter field of research will be the focus of the next section. Before doing so, let us take a brief look at the broader set of historical forces that have shaped the academic debate on suffering and its emergence.

Contextualization

work on media and suffering, we will continue with a historical account on (the research on)

suffering. Due to technological developments, the world increasingly watched the plights and misfortunes of distant others (Ashuri and Pinchevski, 2011) which was reflected in the scholarly output on the issue. Exemplary for this were a series of studies by the US 'Disaster Research Center' and a number of seminal articles that were published in

(a.o. Adams, 1986; Gaddy and Tanjong, 1986; Sood, ., 1987).

In later years, the focus shifted away from disasters to incorporate more causes of suffering (cf. infra) and other fields of research such as sociology and psychology have significantly

A central theoretical concept in these debates is *compassion fatigue*, which was coined by Kinnick, et al. in 1996 and further theorized by Moeller (1999) and others.³ Compassion fatigue refers to a 'diminishing capacity to mobilize sentiments, sympathy and humanitarian forms of response' (Cottle, 2009b: 348). As a result of incessant media exposure to images and narratives of suffering, the audience may act increasingly indifferent and numb to the mediated spectacle of human misery (Moeller, 1999).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Although the interviews tackled a wider range of topics, three key issues about the research on mediated suffering emerged from the thematic

'If we have something called "suffering studies" we would be naturalizing suffering and accepting a world in which suffering occurs. Suffering would become defining of what it means to be human'

Particularly in the case of suffering incited by conflicts or other man-made events of misfortune and atrocity, Tester warns for an implicit acceptance and validation of such events

Alongside the main issue of (inter)disciplinarity, the scholars that were interviewed were asked to reflect on possible explanations for the current rise of interest in the topic of (mediated) suffering and the increasing scholarly preoccupation within social sciences for the issue of suffering. Before doing so, Cottle and Shani Orgad made a vital qualification when stressing the development of research on suffering and media as this dimension is often neglected in the debates. In their view, there has always been an academic interest in the topic, but nowadays it is more articulated and part of a new momentum. According to Cottle, the advent of Cultural Studies and its focus on the everyday and the popular pushed the theme of suffering off the academic agenda. The recent revival in scholarly attention for (mediated) suffering was attributed to a diverse number of explanations, but we were able to discern four commonly uttered determinants which to a large extent overlap with the arguments that we have identified in the literature review.

Firstly, the global nature and prevalence of risk and suffering-related events in general which affect a growing number of people is believed to be an essential factor in stimulating academic research on suffering. Wahl-Jorgensen and Cottle for instance detect an increasing coming of terms within social sciences with the realities of (global) suffering. In this respect, Tester makes an important point. As (Western) academics, most of us do not know what it is like to suffer. Scholarly work on suffering is thus conducted at the level of the of suffering, taking a modest stance towards the sufferers when it comes to the of suffering. Secondly and related to the former, its status of being 'immanently and permanently on display through ubiquitous media' (Frosh, personal communication, 11/03/2012). People are thus experiencing a greater capacity to recognize suffering and respond to it. Campbell, Cottle and Pantti also refer to these vital technological changes which, according to them, have resulted in more scholarly attention to issues of mediation, representation and performance. Thirdly, this pervasive media representation of the other's suffering poses significant claims upon the audience which at the time challenged traditional theories of mediation to investigate this dimension of audience practices. The link with a globalization of the public sphere and a broader tendency towards cosmopolitanism is raised several times in this context, as is the relationship between media and the emerging humanitarian sector. Moeller, Chouliaraki and Orgad relate these elements to a general rise of humanitarianism and an accompanying scholarly acknowledgement of this, which has led, so they assert, to a moral turn in social sciences and academic debates. Wahl-Jorgensen prefers to define it as an affective turn due to the increasing role of emotions in public and media discourses.

Key concepts: in need of conceptual clarification?

A next set of questions aimed to characterize the research on media and suffering in terms of

disadvantages of such conceptualization were discussed, but the social nature of suffering and its status as a fundamentally human experience informed the debates. This has resulted in a positioning of the research on media and suffering at the heart of social sciences and humanities as well as at the crossroads of different disciplines and with no urge to restrict or

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