

Finding Meaning: Oral History, Power and Emotions

21-22 April 2022, UPPA Pau

The history of emotions is one of the most notable progressions in the field of history in the last few decades, and in recent years an astonishing number of articles and books has focused specifically on emotions in history. With this “emotional turn” (Boddice, 2018: 72), historians have determined that emotions change over time, and are thus a subject deserving of historical inquiry. Perhaps more importantly, emotions are at the center of human experience and therefore at the center of our history: “human emotions are neither timeless nor universal, but rather shaped by historical and cultural circumstances” (Thomson, 2019: 1). Emotions are both the effect and active cause of historical events. In addition, as argued by Boddice, focusing on emotions enables “to rehabilitate the unsaid – the gestural, affective and experiential – of traditional historical narratives” (Boddice, 2019: 10). He even proposes to refer to various labels – such as “feelings” and “affective experiences” – so as to open possibilities for the expression and interpretation of emotions (14).

Feelings have also been the focus of oral historians for many decades before this historical turn towards emotions. The key findings of oral historians are not so much the events that narrators recall, but the “meanings and feelings” relating to those events, in line with Alessandro Portelli's argument that it is the subjectivity of oral history interviews that constitutes an invaluable contribution to the field, as it allows the researcher to analyze how the interviewee gives meaning to personal experience; this, in turn, is indicative of the collective construction of meaning (Portelli, 1981: 96-107). Accordingly, the primary aim of this conference is to explore the relevance and possibilities of *finding* meaning in oral history interviews. The conference organizers wish to explore oral history's potential to record, interpret and make sense of emotions in historical experiences in the Americas, the United Kingdom and Ireland, but also across global geographical and cultural areas. The narrative element becomes key to the understanding of these meanings, which cannot be revealed by any other type of source. The plot, the way narrators choose to organize their story, and shifts in the pace of the narration, as, for example, when only a few words are devoted to talking about experiences which lasted a long time, or the exact opposite, can unveil the subjectivity of human experience. Paying careful attention to language, particularly language used to express feelings and emotions can also help researchers to go beyond the constraints of internalized cultural boundaries, which shape memory (Anderson and Jack, 1991: 11-26). Feelings and emotions can give meaning to activities and events, as for example when certain emotions are silenced because they do not sit nicely with the prevailing collective narrative of a certain event.

The purpose of this conference is to re-center the role of oral history in the history of emotions on the one hand, as well as the role of emotions in history and oral history on the other. Indeed, oral history offers the unique possibility to study the way in which experiences are remembered as well as the relationship between individual and collective memory. “Individual remembering is affected by cultural narratives about the past” (Thomson, 2019: 2) and emotions are essential in this process because they are “impacted by social relations and cultural expectations” (Thomson, 2019: 2). Joanna Bourke focused on fear and anxiety in an article published in 2003 (Bourke, 2003: 111-133), in which she argued that humans narrate their emotions by conforming to certain narrative structures. Bourke shed light on the dialogical nature of the link between the personal emotion and the collective emotional environment of a society. This paves the way for further studies on the shifts in the way people narrate certain emotions and the subsequent ways in which these shifts may also alter their subjective experience.

The other facet of the study of emotions that the conference organizers wish to explore is its relationship with power which, despite its complexity, has yet to be fully problematized. Bourke writes: “emotions such as fear do not only belong to individuals or social groups: they mediate between the individual and the social. They are about power relations” (Bourke, 2003: 124). Fear – and emotions more generally – are the product of a society and of given “power relations”, but they may also contribute to reforming them, as shown by the history of the evolving status of women or minorities in society. More precisely, are emotions experienced differently because of one’s gender and/or one’s identity, as suggested by Boddice (2018: 100-122)?

It may also be argued that emotions can be empowering: in the context of war and conflict for example, oral testimonies indicate strong interrelations between affective experiences and agency. The organizers of the conference also wish to assess the extent to which oral history as a methodology is empowering when it gives agency to participants who have traditionally been excluded from more classic approaches to historical research. Paradoxically, emotions may also be indicative of situations of domination and subordination, and of a person’s powerlessness.

From a methodological perspective, how could historical analysis enhance the narratives which include expressions of feelings and emotions? Alistair Thomson offers some insight into this in his most recent work on emotions in oral history (Thomson, 2019: 1-11). The sound of personal testimony can further our understanding of the emotions and their historical and cultural meanings. Speakers can add emphasis by increasing volume, or adding well-timed pauses; excitement and emotion can be shown by a change in the speed of the speech, whereas slowing down might express difficult moments. Silences are widely studied by oral historians, as they often mean painful moments, a struggle with the narrator's own memory, or even embarrassment or shame. Thomson writes: “the voice can suggest warmth and pleasure, anger and disappointment, sarcasm or disapproval” (4), and how would one interpret the meanings of laughter, sobs or tears?

Furthermore, the organizers propose to include both the interviewing process and analysis carried out by the same researcher as well as the so-called “secondary analysis”, or the analysis of pre-recorded interviews which have been (or are about to be) deposited in sound archives around the world by someone else. This practice of reusing past interviews is somewhat controversial and frowned upon on the basis that an oral history interview is not a “data-bank”, offering empirically neutral material that anyone at any moment in time can draw upon. This attitude has been referred to as the “naive realism” of the researcher, with the argument that interview data are “socially constructed”, and are not “simply facts that are free of theoretical presuppositions” (Bornat, 2010: 43-52). Yet, following Joanna Bornat’s argument in favor of the practice of revisiting past interviews, the organizers of the conference would also like to explore the possibilities for historical research offered by the exploitation of the many hundreds of hours of recorded interviews held in sound archives, some of which are even available on line. The underlying ambition will be to identify a scientific framework in which such a research method could become an interesting (re)source and could eventually open up new research prospects.

The themes to be investigated include (but are not limited to) the following:

- The relations between emotions, history and oral history
Emotions as cultural, social, political and/or historical constructs
The role of emotions in the construction of memory; “memory composure”
The meanings and feelings of human experience
Emotions and historical experience
- Historicizing emotions
- Emotions and causation
- Emotions, empowerment and activism; emotions and power relations (domination, subordination)
- Emotions in the context of war and conflict
- Emotions and gender
- Emotions, racial and ethnic issues

Proposals seeking to explore methodological issues will be welcome, such as:

- The advantages and drawbacks of reusing past interviews / interviews conducted by someone else;
Methodological approaches to secondary analysis
- Methods for finding and interpreting emotions; Interpreting silence / what is not said

The organizers will welcome proposals from specialists in History, Oral History, Geography, Civilisation Studies, Social Sciences, Political Sciences, Law and Transitional Justice. The geographical scope will include – but will not be limited to – the Americas, the United Kingdom and Ireland, and proposals taking a comparative and interdisciplinary approach will be particularly welcome. The proposals should preferably focus on the 20th and 21st centuries.

This international, cross-disciplinary conference will be held in English and French.

Please send a 300-word abstract in English or in French to Joana Etchart and Simona Tobia : joana.etchart@univ-pau.fr and stobia@univ-pau.fr by **September 6th 2021**

The acceptance or rejection of proposals will be announced in October 2021

Organizers: Joana Etchart and Simona Tobia, University of Pau (UPPA – ALTER Research Group)

Keynote speakers:

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Lindsey Dodd (University of Huddersfield, UK)

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