



## CHAPTER 2

---

# Social History of Experiences: A Theoretical-Methodological Approach

*Heikki Kokko and Minna Harjula*

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines a historical-theoretical approach to experiences as socially shared phenomena.<sup>1</sup> This makes the relationship between human beings and the social world—and the individual–society relationship as a specific historical variation of it<sup>2</sup>—the focus of our study. We first explore

<sup>1</sup>We are grateful to Pertti Haapala for his comments, support and inspiration in writing this chapter.

<sup>2</sup>In our text, the concept of *social* refers to interaction between human beings and the social world; see Fig. 2.1. *Social* is the reality that is constantly constructed by human beings in the present, while—as an analytic counterpart to nature—*culture* is understood as a tradition that includes humanity and its products from the beginning of time. *Societal* refers to social structures institutionalized as society wherein humans interact. *Society* as the social world connected to a nation state is a variation of a certain historical context only, not a universal phenomenon. Such a broad and ahistorical usage of society has been seen as methodological nationalism; see Couldry, N. and Hepp, A. (2017). *The mediated construction of reality*. Polity Press, 17–21.

---

H. Kokko • M. Harjula (✉)  
Tampere University, Tampere, Finland  
e-mail: [heikki.kokko@tuni.fi](mailto:heikki.kokko@tuni.fi); [minna.harjula@tuni.fi](mailto:minna.harjula@tuni.fi)

© The Author(s) 2023  
P. Haapala et al. (eds.), *Experiencing Society and the Lived Welfare State*, Palgrave Studies in the History of Experience,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-21663-3\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-21663-3_2)

how experiences are socially constructed and how experiences themselves construct the historically changing social reality. Besides this theoretically grounded aim, we introduce methodological tools for tracing and analysing experiences as they can be found in research material.

Instead of approaching experiences as phenomena that refer to the internal world of the human being, our focus is on experiences as societal phenomena. Rather than cognitive sciences or psychology—which have gained ground in recent historical scholarship on emotions, senses and experiences—we anchor our approach to social sciences and to social history, which we closely relate to the history of society and social science history (SSH).<sup>3</sup> Thus, we share the interest of the early 1980s paradigm of the history of emotions that leaned on sociology and emphasized sociality and social interaction in the construction of “emotional communities”.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> On social science history (SSH), the history of society and social history: Lloyd, C. (2013, October 16). *From interdisciplinarity to social science history and beyond: A radical view*. Keynote Lecture to 10th Anniversary Seminar, Institute for Advanced Social Research, Tampere University; Haapala, P. (1989). *Sosiaalihistoria: Johdatus tutkimukseen*. SHS; Stearns, P. N. (2003). Social history present and future. *Journal of Social History* 37(1), 9–19; Haapala, P. and Lloyd, C. (2018). Johdanto: Rakennehistoria ja historian rakenteet. In P. Haapala (ed.), *Suomen rakennehistoria: Näkökulmia muutokseen ja jatkuvuuteen*. Vastapaino, 6–30. Various recent approaches to experiences and emotions: Boddice, R. (2018). *The history of emotions*. Manchester University Press; Tepora, T. (2018). Kiihkeä historia: Tunteet historian tutkimuksessa. In M.O. Hannikainen, M. Danielsbacka and T. Tepora (eds.), *Menneisyyden rakentajat: Teoriat historian tutkimuksessa*. Gaudeamus, 77–93; J. Annola, V. Kivimäki and A. Malinen (eds.) (2019). *Eletty historia: Kokemus näkökulmana menneisyyteen*. Vastapaino; Boddice, R. and Smith, M. (2020). *Emotion, Sense, Experience*. Cambridge University Press; Kivimäki, V., Suodenjoki, S. and Vahtikari, T. (eds.) (2021). *Lived nation as the history of experiences and emotions in Finland, 1800–2000*. Palgrave Macmillan; Katajala-Peltomaa, S. and Toivo, R. M. (2021). *Lived religion and gender in late medieval and early modern Europe*. Routledge 2021; Katajala-Peltomaa, S. and Toivo, R. (eds.) (2022). *Histories of experience in the world of lived religion*. Palgrave Macmillan; Eiranen, R. et al. (2022). Narrative and experience: Interdisciplinary methodologies between history and narratology. *Scandinavian Journal of History* 47(1), 1–15. On critical views: Gangl, G. (2020). *The history of experience: a history like anything else?* Retrieved 25 May 2022, from <https://www oulu.fi/en/blogs/philosophy-history-now/history-experience-history-anything-else>; Väyrynen, K. (2021). History culture of living experience (Erlebnis): Dangers and possibilities for historiography in the era of ‘Experience Society’ (Erlebnissgesellschaft). *Faravid* 52.

<sup>4</sup> Stearns, P. N. and Stearns, C. Z. (1985). Emotionology: Clarifying the history of emotions and emotional standards. *The American Historical Review*, 90(4), 813–836; Rosenwein, B.H. (2002). Worrying about emotions in history. *The American Historical Review*, 107(3), 821–845; Rosenwein, B.H. (2021) Emotions: Some historical observations. *History of Psychology* 24(2), 107–111.

We apply similar theoretical starting points to the early German approach of the *history of experience*,<sup>5</sup> which was also inspired by the social constructionism of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) and the temporalities of experience by Reinhardt Koselleck (1979).<sup>6</sup> The framework that the German tradition applied to the empirical analysis of war experiences also opens a basis for broader theoretical reflections.<sup>7</sup> We seek to develop the theoretical approach further to enable a historical analysis of social structures and social change and to elaborate practical analytical tools for empirical research.

We outline a holistic theoretical framework that forms the basis for our methodologic tools. By combining Koselleck's reflections on historical time and space and Berger and Luckmann's social construction of reality, we bring systematic social theory to the historical theory of the former and historicity to the social theory of the latter. We suggest that this is fruitful for the history of experiences, as it explains the construction and change of society as a social structure via the circulation of experiential knowledge in the social world. The circulation of knowledge is a concept of the new discipline called *history of knowledge*, which addresses questions similar to those of Berger and Luckmann, whose approach is called the *sociology of knowledge*.<sup>8</sup> Although we share an interest in the history of knowledge that explores "knowledge in society and in people's life", our focus extends to experiences, and our target is social reality and social change as a process that is fuelled by experiential change.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Buschmann, N. and Carl, H. (eds.) (2001). *Die Erfahrung des Krieges: Erfahrungsgeschichtliche Perspektiven von der Französischen Revolution bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg*. Paderborn; Schild, G. and Schindling, A (eds.) (2009). *Kriegserfahrungen—Krieg und Gesellschaft in der Neuzeit: Neue Horizonte der Forschung*. Paderborn.

<sup>6</sup> Berger, P. L. and Luckmann, T. (1991) [1966]. *The social construction of reality*. Penguin; Koselleck, R. (2004). *Futures past: On the semantics of historical time*. MIT Press; Koselleck, R. (2018). *Sediments of time: On possible histories*. Stanford University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Buschmann and Carl (2001); Schind and Schindling (2009); Kivimäki V. (2013). *Battled nerves: Finnish soldiers' war experience, trauma, and military psychiatry 1941–44*. Åbo Akademi, esp. 52–59.

<sup>8</sup> Berger and Luckmann (1991), 26. Cf. Burke, P. (2016). *What is the history of knowledge?* Polity 2016, esp. 9–12.

<sup>9</sup> See Östling, J. and Larsson Heidenblad, D. (2020). Fulfilling the promise of the history of knowledge: Key approaches for the 2020s. *Journal for the History of Knowledge* 1 (1): 3; Lässig, S. (2016). The history of knowledge and the expansion of the historical research agenda. *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 59, 29–58; Nilsson Hammar, A. (2018). Theoria, praxis, and poiesis: Theoretical considerations on the circulation of knowledge in everyday life. In J. Östling et al. (eds.), *Circulation of knowledge: Explorations in the history of knowledge*, Nordic Academic Press, 107–124.

For the history of experiences, the major idea of Berger and Luckmann is that experiences not only reflect reality, but they serve as the constructive units of social reality. Berger and Luckmann do not explicitly theorize experience in their seminal work, even though *everyday experience* is the starting point and an integral component in their analysis of the social construction of reality.<sup>10</sup> Our application aims to develop their theory towards the *social history of experience*.<sup>11</sup>

The approach enables us to bridge the dichotomy of individual and collective experience and to analyse the process of sharing experiences.<sup>12</sup> Significantly, this framework rejects the idea of universal, ahistorical human experience and sees also the structures of human experiencing as historical and social. We contribute to the current emphasis on the bioculturality and historical plasticity of the human being in the history of emotions and experiences by outlining an approach that highlights the fundamental role of human sociality.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Berger and Luckmann (1991) talk about *everyday experience* and *experience of everyday life*. See also Schutz, A. and Luckmann, T. (1973). *The Structures of the Life-World*. Volume I. Northwestern University Press, 99–118.

<sup>11</sup> For our early theoretical and empirical applications, see Kokko, H. (2016). *Kuviteltu minuus: Ihmiskäsityksen murros suomenkielisen kansanosan kulttuurissa 1800-luvun puolivälissä*. Tampere University. Kokko, H. (2019). Kosminen kokemus: Hengellisen ja maallisen dualismi 1800-luvun puolivälin suomenkielisessä kansanomaisessa ajattelussa. In J. Annola, V. Kivimäki and A. Malinen (eds.), *Eletty historia: Kokemus näkökulmana menneisyyteen*. Vastapaino, 113–146; Kokko, H. (2021). Temporalization of experiencing: First-hand experience of the nation in mid-nineteenth century Finland. In V. Kivimäki, S. Suodenjoki and T. Vahtikari (eds.), *Lived nation as the history of experiences and emotions in Finland, 1800–2000*, Palgrave Macmillan, 109–133; Harjula, M. (2020). Eletty sosiaalityö kahden työntekijäpolven murroskokemuksena 1940–2000. In J. Moilanen, J. Annola and M. Satka (eds.), *Sosiaalityön käänneet*. SopHi, 47–75; Harjula, M. (2021). Perhelisä yhteiskuntakokemuksen raamittajana: suomalainen sosiaaliturva uuden ja vanhan välillä 1940-luvulla. *Historiallinen Aikakauskirja* 119(3), 302–316.

<sup>12</sup> On individual and collective experiences, for example von Scheve, C. and Salmela, M. (2014). *Collective emotions: Perspectives from psychology, philosophy, and sociology*. Oxford University Press; Nowosadtko, J., Erfahrung als Methode und als Gegenstand wissenschaftlicher Erkenntnis: Der Begriff der Erfahrung in der Soziologie. In N. Buschmann and H. Carl (eds.) (2001), *Die Erfahrung des Krieges: Erfahrungsgeschichtliche Perspektiven von der Französischen Revolution bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg*. Paderborn, 27–50.

<sup>13</sup> Boddice and Smith (2020); Tepora, T. (2020). What, if anything, can the history of emotions learn from the neurosciences? *Cultural History* 9(1), 96–98.

We first present our theoretical conceptualization of experience as the social construction of reality. After theorizing the process of *sedimentation* and *institutionalization* as the mechanism that makes experiences socially mediated, we focus on developing analytic tools for approaching experiences in historical research. In the methodological part of our chapter, we conceptualize the temporal and spatial structures of experience as *layers of experience* and *scenes of experience*, and indicate how they can be traced by exploring the *sediments*—shared meanings of experience—that are stored in different sign systems in a given historical context. We conclude by reflecting on what the social history of experiences contributes to the discussion of the character of historical science.

### EXPERIENCE AS THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

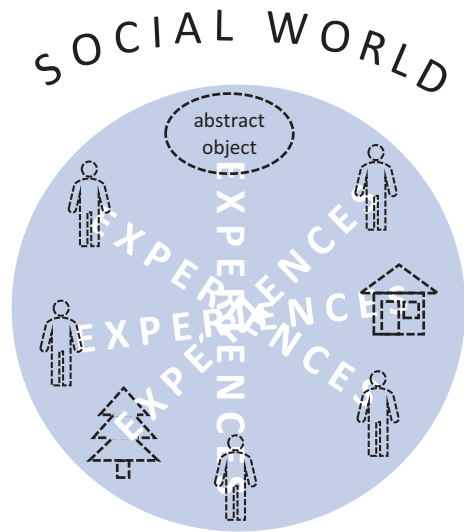
Experience is often conceptualized by using a multitude of interlinked and contested dichotomies, such as individual-collective, subjective-shared, authentic-mediated, lived-narrated, inner-outer, conscious-unconscious and body-mind.<sup>14</sup> For example, the German project on war experiences introduced the division between *Erlebnis* as a subjective, immediate, non-discursive and pre-narrated form of experience and *Erfahrung* as an accumulated, reflected and socially shared one.<sup>15</sup> From the perspective of social constructionism, the division between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* carries two problematic assumptions: the idea of unmediated authenticity often linked to *Erlebnis* and the dichotomy between subjective and social. As we follow the premise of social constructionism, there is neither any “authentic” experience outside the social and the mediated, nor any experiencing outside the social world. By tearing down the dichotomies, social constructionism emphasizes the sociality of experiences in the following multiple ways.

<sup>14</sup> On various analytical and historical conceptualizations and categorizations, see Jay, M. (2005). *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European variations on a universal theme*. University of California Press; Throop, J. C. (2003). Articulating experience. *Anthropological Theory* 3(2), 219–241. On Cartesian dualisms, Taylor, C. (1988). *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity*. Cambridge University Press, 143–158.

<sup>15</sup> Buschmann, N. and Horst, C. (2001). Zugänge zur Erfahrungsgeschichte des Krieges Forschung, Theorie, Fragestellung. In N. Buschmann and H. Carl (eds.), *Die Erfahrung des Krieges: Erfahrungsgeschichtliche Perspektiven von der Französischen Revolution bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg*. Paderborn, 14–15, 19–20.

First, experiences are not seen as either something we human beings “have” or something in the essence of the objects we experience. Rather, our contact with objects—including other human beings—formulates experiences. Thus, *experiences are in the social world between us and the objects* (Fig. 2.1).<sup>16</sup> Following Sara Ahmed’s theorization of emotions, we suggest that it is this specific in-between location of experiences that creates “the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place”.<sup>17</sup> Studies on the Western history of the human self have indicated the historicity of this boundary-making, by pointing it out as a result of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Scientific Revolution.<sup>18</sup>

Fig. 2.1 Experiences in the social world



<sup>16</sup> Besides experiences, the social world includes both human beings and the objects. Berger and Luckmann (1991), 78–79.

<sup>17</sup> Ahmed, S. (2014). *The cultural politics of emotion*. Edinburgh University Press, 5–10.

<sup>18</sup> Taylor (1988), 185–198. Empirical studies on the modern self indicate that the circulation of this idea to all strata of societies took several centuries in the Western world; see Wahrman, D. (2004). *The Making of the modern self: identity and culture in eighteenth-century England*. Yale University Press, 274–278; Kokko 2016, 426–442.

Second, experiences are *socially constructed in social interaction*, and the social interaction as the linkage of human biology and the social world starts already in the womb. This does not mean denying the individuality of one's experience.<sup>19</sup> It rather suggests that although all human beings perceive the world by themselves, even the individuality of one's experience is constructed by the ingredients of the social world that are mediated by biocultural human beings and the structures that human beings of the past have constructed. Quite similarly, anthropologist Clifford Geertz—who has developed his empirical cultural approach sharing comparable starting points<sup>20</sup>—has emphasized how “all experience is construed experience” and how experience is not found “between the ears” but in “the world of social action and cultural symbols”.<sup>21</sup>

Third, experiences are *socially mediated and shared by sign systems*. This emphasis of Berger and Luckmann bears a close resemblance to Geertz's idea of systems of signs as cultural webs of significance.<sup>22</sup> Despite the central role of language in mediating and shaping societal, transgenerational experiences in Berger and Luckmann's theory, it should not be confused with approaches that emphasize the omnipotence of language and discourses.<sup>23</sup> Besides language, people have countless different ways to express experiences, many of which are unconsciously acquired in the socialization process: people can talk or be silent, express an emotion, gesture or keep social distance. In a wider sense, even architecture, industrial design or institutional practices can be seen as expressions of experiences. It is essential for historical research to look at these different expressions of experiences in the research material as signs that formulate sign systems to mediate the experiences.<sup>24</sup> Based on this idea, we approach

<sup>19</sup> Berger and Luckmann (1991), 201–204.

<sup>20</sup> Micheelsen, A. and Geertz, C. (2002). “I don't do systems”: An interview with Clifford Geertz. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 14(1), 2–20.

<sup>21</sup> Geertz's theory summarized by Throop (2003), 224–226.

<sup>22</sup> Throop (2003), 225.

<sup>23</sup> Sewell, W.H. Jr. (2005). *Logics of history. Social theory and social transformation*. The University of Chicago press, 356–362; Heiskala, R. (1994). Sosiaalinen konstruktionismi. In R. Heiskala (ed.), *Sosiologisen teorian nykysuuntauksia*. Gaudeamus; Pfadenhauer, M. and Knoblauch, H. (eds.) (2019). *Social Constructivism as Paradigm? The Legacy of The Social Construction of Reality*. Routledge.

<sup>24</sup> Berger and Luckmann (1991), 50–51.

the expressions of emotions as one of the sign systems mediating experiences. Thus, this starting point differs from both the usage of the concepts of emotions and experiences interchangeably, and from the conceptualization of experience as a subcategory of emotion.

Fourth, not only experiences but the *meta-structures for experiencing are socially constructed and mediated*. The concept of *meta-structure*, as we use it here, refers to the framework of the basic categories—such as time, space, nature, culture—people use in perception and in giving meaning to the world.<sup>25</sup> For example, an individual who lives in a modern Western culture acquires the structures of linear time—past, present and future—and the idea of progress within social interaction. In comparison with an individual who adopts the structures of cyclical time and the presence of the hereafter, their experiences are divergently structured.<sup>26</sup> The notion of different meta-structures in experiencing not only challenges the assumption of universal, ahistorical human experience, but ultimately leads to the conclusion that even the most fundamental categories that structure the perception of the social reality—such as nature and culture or inner and outer—are social constructs themselves, historical human products that have no empirical status outside human experiencing.<sup>27</sup>

Fifth, as already mentioned, *socialization is the process* where a human being adopts the sign systems and the meta-structures for experiencing. The socialization process is mostly unconscious. This means that a human being seldom recognizes the frameworks that influence the experiencing.<sup>28</sup> As part of the socialization process, human experiencing as the social construction of reality begins anew in each human being. The socialization process makes the past generations' socially shared experiences present through the sign systems. At the same time, social interaction with contemporaries in sharing the experiences makes the construction of reality a continuous socialization process. Berger and Luckmann described the process with the concepts of *externalization* and *internalization*, but emphasized that the concepts are interlinked: A human being externalizes his or her

<sup>25</sup> Berger and Luckmann (1991), 69–70, 78–79.

<sup>26</sup> Koselleck (2004), 263–275; Kokko (2021).

<sup>27</sup> Berger and Luckmann (1991), 69–70, 78–79.

<sup>28</sup> Berger and Luckmann (1991), 33–42, 85.



experiences to the social reality through the structures adopted in socialization. At the same time, the human being internalizes the social reality as subjectively meaningful through the same filtering structures. In this process, the human being projects his or her “own meanings into reality”.<sup>29</sup>

Sixth, when *experiences are approached as the social construction of reality*—not just as the observation of reality—this emphasizes the two-way linkage between experiences and social reality. Experiences both shape the social reality and are shaped by it. This dialectic premise of Berger and Luckmann is nowadays discussed across the borderlines of disciplines, but the process of social construction is usually taken for granted without explicit theorization.<sup>30</sup> According to Berger and Luckmann, “in this same dialectic man produces reality and thereby produces himself”.<sup>31</sup> The ongoing dynamic dialectics between a human being and his/her socio-historical situation continue during the lifespan. It makes the human being a biocultural creature who generates, maintains and modifies reality through social interaction.

Finally, experiencing as a social process is the core of *the dialectics between nature and the social world*,<sup>32</sup> which even changes the human organism itself. Berger and Luckmann characterize the human being’s relationship to the environment by using the concept of *world-openness*. The concept indicates the interconnectedness of the “inner” and “outer” and deconstructs the inward–outward dichotomy, as the human inward is seen as a part of the social world.<sup>33</sup> World-openness points to the conclusion that a human being is not a prisoner of the biological organism but open to the world and its varying socio-cultural environments.<sup>34</sup> This capability ultimately results in the plasticity of the human organism. This idea not only breaks away from the body–mind dichotomy but also

<sup>29</sup> Berger and Luckmann (1991), 146, 169, 192.

<sup>30</sup> This should not be confused with the dialectic of Marxism. Berger and Luckmann (1991), 208–209, 233. On the reception of Berger and Luckmann’s theory: Hector, V. (2016), *Rebuilding a classic: The social construction of reality at 50. Cultural Sociology* 10(1), 3–20; Friedman, A. M. (2016). Perceptual construction: Rereading the social construction of reality through the sociology of the senses. *Cultural Sociology* 10(1), 77–78.

<sup>31</sup> Berger and Luckmann (1991), 204.

<sup>32</sup> Berger and Luckmann (1991), 201–204.

<sup>33</sup> Berger and Luckmann (1991), 146, 169, 192.

<sup>34</sup> For the difference between animals and human beings, Berger and Luckmann (1991), 65–70.

strengthens the denial of the assumption of a universal, ahistorical human experience. By emphasizing human sociality as the factor that makes the human being a changing biocultural creature, it responds to the recent conceptualizations of human biocultural plasticity and world–body–brain dynamics, which are based on new findings in neuroscience.<sup>35</sup>

In summary, the sociality of human experiencing is always a blend of the cultural and biological. Experiencing is a holistic, continuous human process in which the social reality is dialectically externalized and internalized. Experiences are the concealed products of this process. The analysis of sign systems makes socially shared experiences reachable for research. Moreover, the social history of experiences is focused on the structures that frame both experiencing and experiences. Social constructionism starts from the premise that human beings have made and make together these structures. Ultimately, this means that the social history of experiences relates to the social construction of reality in the past.

### HOW EXPERIENCES CONSTRUCT SOCIAL STRUCTURES: SEDIMENTATION AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION

How do human experiences create the social structures as a part of the social reality? Recent structural history has emphasized the linkage between structure and agency and underlined that all structures result from human action. The basic idea is that as human beings construct the structures of their social reality (and themselves), they become a part of the structure.<sup>36</sup> By connecting the macro analysis of social structures to a micro analysis of everyday experiences, our approach offers a more detailed view of this process.

For Berger and Luckmann, *social sedimentation* refers to the process of sharing experiences socially, through different kinds of (conscious and unconscious) expressions. In this process, experiences are stored in *signs*—for example, words, gestures or material artefacts—which form *sign*

<sup>35</sup> Reddy, W. M. (1997). Against constructivism: The historical ethnography of emotions. *Current Anthropology* 38(3), 327–351; Boddice (2018), 132–167; Boddice and Smith (2020). Tepora (2020). Asia M. Friedman (2016) argues that Berger and Luckmann see sensory perception as biological, not as socially significant or culturally conditioned. This interpretation bypasses their premise of dialectics, which leads to the conclusion that all perception is socially shaped. On cultural impact on the biological basis of senses, for example Pernau, M. and Rajamani, I. (2016). Emotional Translations. *History and Theory* 55, 64.

<sup>36</sup> Sewell (2005), 139–145, 151; Haapala and Lloyd (2018), 6–30.

*systems*, such as language, gesticulatory systems or architecture.<sup>37</sup> The process of sedimentation is a part of the broader social process of *institutionalization*.

To put it simply, sedimentation means that experiences are stored, and institutionalization means that sedimented experiences become constructed as (either concrete or abstract) institutions. Compared to everyday language, the concept of *institution* is here understood broadly. Institutionalization occurs when repeating habitual human actions and practices form experiences that in social interaction become socially shared and typified as “predefined patterns of conduct”. Any result of such a process of institutionalization can be called an institution.<sup>38</sup>

All human-made institutions—from the handshake to society and the welfare state—can be seen as products of the sedimentation and institutionalization of experiences. These processes are preconditions for each other; they are deeply interconnected and hardly separable in everyday life. Figure 2.2 schematizes how these processes make experiences societal and also produce the structures that construct human reality in the social world.

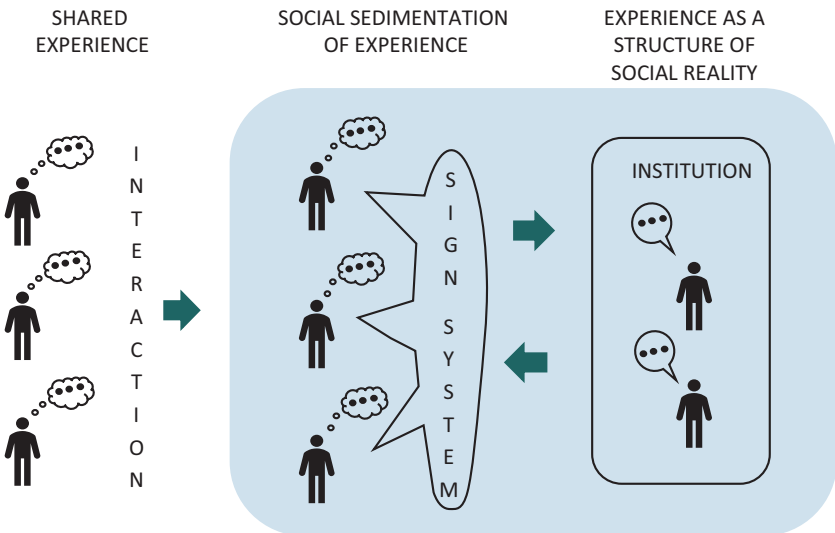


Fig. 2.2 Institutionalization of experience

<sup>37</sup> Berger and Luckmann (1991), 85–89, 115.

<sup>38</sup> Berger and Luckmann (1991), 72.

The simplified schema in Fig. 2.2 can be widened to a societal scale. When two or more human beings in the same historical context interact with each other, they may create a new sign for a similar kind of experience they share or attach this experience to the meaning of an existing sign. They can, for example, begin to refer to this experience with a specific word or a gesture or build a monument that celebrates this experience. For example, when two people share the experience of a concern for the subsistence of the sick and orphans in their community, they could begin to refer to this experience with the new concept of “poor relief” in their interaction with each other. Their experience becomes sedimented in the concept of poor relief. Via the signs in sign systems, the experience is anonymized and objectivated, detached from the original context and transferred to other people who have no face-to-face connection to the original experience.<sup>39</sup>

In daily life, institutionalized objectivated experiences become visible as acts that form practices. When these people began to organize aid for the sick and orphaned, the institution of poor relief is established. The signs that refer to an institution and the mere existence of an institution legitimate the experience and give it the potential to become a part of the socially shared and transgenerational stock of knowledge. For the next generation, the existence of the poor relief institution is a self-evident fact of their social reality. However, this does not mean that the next generation cannot change the institution. They may have shared experiences of the need to support other people too, besides the sick and orphaned. At this stage, their experience—which extends beyond the established poor relief institution—can become sedimented as a new meaning of the sign “poor relief” and result in new kinds of practices that become included in the institution.

This simplified anthropological schema for outlining the construction of the institution does not reach the diversity of different institutionalized experiences in everyday life. All historical moments are loaded up with different institutions and sign systems that influence each other. In daily life, the experience resulting in the institution of poor relief does not emerge “out of thin air” but as a reflection of other existing or earlier institutions. For example, poor relief is connected to the institutionalization of a

<sup>39</sup> Berger and Luckmann (1991), 49–61.

specific idea of society. In the case of Finland, society as a translocal entity, as an imagined community beyond local face-to-face communication, was conceptualized in the Finnish language for the first time in the mid-nineteenth century. At the same time, poor relief as a concept and practice was established as a nationwide phenomenon in Finland.<sup>40</sup> This example illuminates how—as a result of the interrelated processes of sedimentation and institutionalization—socially shared human experiences construct the complex net of social structures as a part of the social reality.

### SEDIMENTS: ANALYSING EXPRESSIONS OF EXPERIENCES FROM SIGN SYSTEMS

A historian has no direct access to experiences in the past, but the sign systems that are found in the materials available serve as a means to reach expressions of past experiences. Sign systems are the key to the social history of experiences in two ways. First, they open up access to the structures of the past that not only mediate the experiences for contemporary people (and the next generations) but also objectify and legitimize the social institutions that these experiences construct. Thus, the sign systems make experiences that are stored in them societal and give them social representativeness. Second, the signs in sign systems provide a means to analyse the shared meanings of experiences in the past.

We use the concept of *sediment of experience* to analyse the expressions of experiences that are stored up in signs in different sign systems in the sedimentation process. The signs and sign systems convey experiences of the era during which they have been expressed and retain a *temporally changing strata of meanings* as traces of the socially shared experiences. Thus, by analysing the expressions of experience in signs, it is possible to reveal the change of shared meanings.

Historical research material opens a variety of different sign systems for the analysis of sediments in signs. For the social history of experiences, language is the most important sign system. As language can anonymize experiences and transfer the sedimented experiences from one generation or collective to another, it enables the societal circulation of knowledge and the social construction of reality beyond face-to-face interaction. Language outlines and typifies human experiencing in a way that

<sup>40</sup> Kokko, H. (forthcoming). The construction of modern social citizenship: The lived institution of poor relief in the mid-1800s Finland. In J. Annola, P. Markkola and H. Lindberg (eds.), *Lived institutions as History of Experience*. Palgrave Macmillan.

ultimately causes the anonymization of experiences. This is because as a repository of experiences, language as a system is already objective in the sense that a human being must follow its patterns. Furthermore, the words in language are fully objectivated signs: they are detachable “from the immediate expressions of subjectivity” of the human being who experiences, and they go beyond “the expression of subjective intentions ‘here and now’”. Therefore, language can “make present [...] a variety of objects that are spatially, temporally and socially absent from” the present situation.<sup>41</sup> For example, in our schema, the meaning of the words “poor relief” became detachable from the original context and were shared by other contemporaries and the following generations.

Compared to language, the degree to which signs in other sign systems can be detached from the original face-to-face experience varies.<sup>42</sup> For example, a spontaneous expression of an emotion, such as weeping, can be seen as a sign, and the norms—that are often unconsciously adopted in socialization—prescribing how these kinds of affects should be expressed can be seen as a sign system.<sup>43</sup> However, in comparison to a word, crying is not a fully objectivated sign. As biocultural subjectivity is more present, it is not completely detachable from the subjectivity of the human being who experiences it. Norms prescribing such expressions lack the capability of language to circulate knowledge across time and space. For historical research, they do not formulate as clear sediments of experience as language does. Thus, as a sign this kind of expression is not as societally representative as a word. It is more context- and institution-specific than language, which has the capability to go beyond these borderlines.

However, institution-specific signs and sign systems have an important role in the social history of experiences. Practices such as how to dress or how to behave can either become sedimented in language or become adopted and learned in daily encounters through tacit knowledge. The sediments of such experiences can be found, for example, in photographs, buildings, furniture and other material objects, as well as in visual art. Usually, the best results can be achieved by combining several sign systems in the historical analysis of experiences.

An inevitable challenge for historical research is that the sediments of the past must be met with the sign systems and sediments of the historian’s own

<sup>41</sup> Berger and Luckmann (1991), 51–54.

<sup>42</sup> Berger and Luckmann (1991), 53–54, 72.

<sup>43</sup> Stearns and Stearns (1985), 813, 828–836; Wetherell, M. (2012). *Affect and emotion: A new social science understanding*. Sage, 51–76.

era. Not only the signs but even the sign systems as the contexts of sediments change over time. Tracking the sediments of experience is especially demanding when only the meaning of the sign changes, but the external form of the sign remains unchanged. Our above example pointed out one such case, as the meaning of the sign “poor relief” was broadened from the sick and orphaned to cover other poor people too. A concrete example is the changing national varieties in the meaning of the concept of *society*.<sup>44</sup>

In the case of words and language, the analysis of sediments comes close to the discipline of conceptual history, as long as it is understood in the Koselleckian sense—primarily not as the history of the words, but as the experiences behind the changing meaning of concepts.<sup>45</sup> Because this approach includes other sign systems besides language, methodologically it could be described as the “history of signs” that widens the scope to the analysis of various traces of human action in research material.

### LAYER OF EXPERIENCE: TEMPORAL ANALYSIS OF SOCIETAL CHANGE

To broaden the analysis from the expressions of experience to the societal level, we employ the concept of *layer of experience*. This concept bridges socially shared experiences and the social construction of reality. In practice, layer of experience is a tool to catch and analyse socially shared experiences that have been institutionalized as the structures of the social world in a certain historical era. More precisely, the layer is a tool for a temporal analysis of the social structures to trace the shared experience behind these structures (Fig. 2.3).

The layer of experience is developed by combining Berger and Luckmann’s sedimentation process of experiences with Koselleck’s theory

<sup>44</sup> Béland, K. and Petersen, K. (eds.) (2014). *Analysing social policy concepts and language: Comparative and transnational perspectives*. Policy Press; N. Edling (ed.) (2019). *The Changing meanings of the welfare state: Histories of a key concept in the Nordic countries*. Berghahn Books; Kettunen, P. (2003). Yhteiskunta. In M. Hyvärinen et al. (eds.), *Käsitteet liikkeessä: Suomen poliittisen kulttuurin käsitehistoria*. Vastapaino, 176–203.

<sup>45</sup> Koselleck, R. (2002). Social history and conceptual history. In R. Koselleck, *The practice of conceptual history: Timing history, spacing concepts*. Stanford University Press, 35–37. Koselleck, R. (1996). A response to comments on the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*. In H. Lehmann and M. Richter (eds.), *The meaning of historical terms and concepts*. German Historical Institute, 59–70; Hyrkkänen, M. (2002). *Aatehistorian mieli*. Vastapaino, 112–113, 117. More broadly, Koselleck (2004), 75–92.

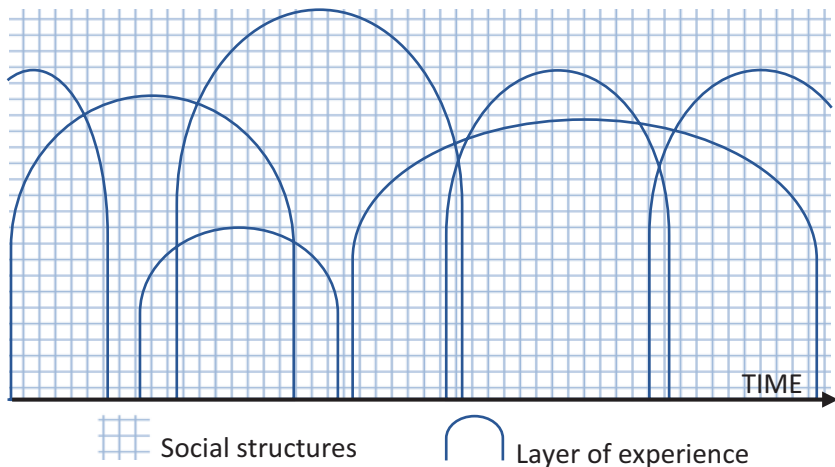


Fig. 2.3 The social structures and the layers of experience

of multi-layered temporalities of experience. In Koselleck's theory, the "gathering, building up, and solidifying into layers of experiences" is a central metaphor for the analysis of temporalities.<sup>46</sup> In his conceptualization, the layer of experience refers to the presence of the past in the experiencing process of the individual. For Koselleck, experience is a phenomenon where "many layers of earlier times are simultaneously present".<sup>47</sup> In our approach, this highlights the deep historicity of human experience which, based on the socialization process, circulates the experiences of past generations.

The layer of experience is especially suitable for tracing and analysing historical social change that occurs through experiential change. From the perspective of human experiences, social change is linked to expectations. According to Koselleck, expectations are present assumptions directed toward the future. Therefore, while experience is the presence of the past in the present, expectations are the future made present. For Koselleck, the variety of possible experiences available to a human being in the

<sup>46</sup> Both layer and sediment have been used as English synonyms for Koselleck's German concept of *Schichte*, but we use them differently here. Hoffmann, S-L. and Franzel, S. (2018). Introduction: Translating Koselleck. In Koselleck, R., *Sediments of time: On possible histories*. Stanford University Press, XIII, XIV.

<sup>47</sup> Koselleck (2004), 259–275. Citation p. 260.



present moment of the specific time era forms the *space of experience*, which is dependent on the current social structures. The space of experience is a temporal-spatial framework, out of which “every human being and every human community (...) acts, in which past things are present or can be remembered (...) with reference to specific horizons of expectation”.<sup>48</sup> The variety of possibilities available for the future in a specific moment is the *horizon of expectation*. Thus, the experiential change is shaped by the tension between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation.<sup>49</sup>

In everyday life, the shared future expectations maintain socially shared experiences (see Fig. 2.4a). However, because the social reality is socially constructed, at some point the experienced reality no longer meets the shared expectations of the future. This makes the expectations penetrate through the horizon of expectation (b) and form a new one (c). This is the moment when the establishment of a new layer of experience is possible. In some cases, the social change and the transformation of social reality is so significant that a totally new institution is established.

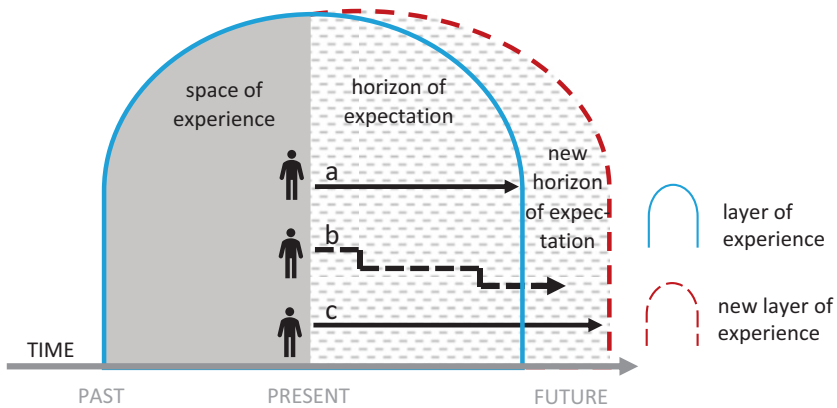


Fig. 2.4 The layer of experience and the horizon of expectations

<sup>48</sup> Koselleck, R. (2002). Time and history. In R. Koselleck, *The practice of conceptual history: Timing history, spacing concepts*. Stanford University Press, 111.

<sup>49</sup> Koselleck (2004), 259–275.

To return to our previous example, the early poor relief institution with the objectified sediment of “poor relief” can be interpreted as the first layer of experience. The second layer of experience was formed when the next generation broadened the meaning of the concept and new practices were developed. To follow Koselleck’s idea, a new layer took shape when new horizons of expectation broke out as a result of the tension between experiences and expectations. This reshaped the shared experience of society, social responsibilities and social belonging.

The analysis of layers opens a view to how the social reality consists of a multitude of overlapping and interlinked layers of experiences. Behind every new layer there are the earlier ones, and every new layer of experience is mediated, objectified and legitimated by multiple shared experiences of different institutions that are sedimented in different sign systems.

It must be emphasized that the defining and periodization of the layers is a result of the research process. The study of the shared social experience behind the “institution of poor relief” consists of a basic social historical analysis. By combining and comparing different sediments of experience found in documents—such as population registers and newspapers acknowledging the orphaned children and sick people in a new way, or using the concept of poor relief with new meanings—the historian can identify the temporal layers. Contextualization of the social structures of the era is needed to track societal and experiential change. As the analytic tool of the layer enables the reading of experiences through social structures, it makes it possible and calls for a more detailed analysis of experiences in their temporal-spatial contexts.

### SCENE OF EXPERIENCE: A SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

Experience is always situational. Therefore, the temporal analysis must be linked to the study of the micro-level spatial frames for experiences. Like many scholars of experience, Berger and Luckmann point out the meaning of spatiality in structuring everyday life, but they do not focus on it deeply in their theory.<sup>50</sup> We apply and develop the analytic term *scene of experience*

<sup>50</sup>Berger and Luckmann (1991), 40. In their later work, Schutz and Luckmann (1973), 99–118, address the topic.

to conceptualize the concrete frames for the situation of experience in a particular temporal-spatial context.<sup>51</sup>

In the scene of experience, Koselleck's concept of space of experience is developed further in the framework of social constructionism. The scene turns the gaze to concrete situational occasions that exist within the space of experience. Figure 2.5 illustrates how the scene of experience is the

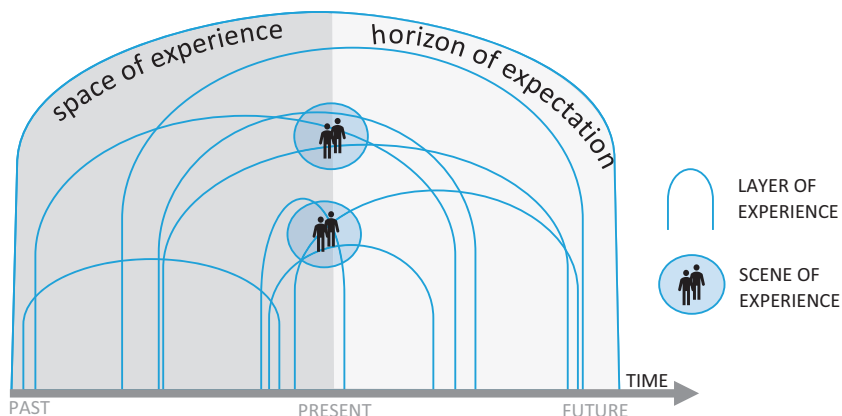


Fig. 2.5 Scene of experience as an analytic tool

<sup>51</sup>The concept *scene of experience* has been used in language, poetry and film studies, for example Firbas, J. (1981). Scene and perspective. *Brno studies in English* 14, 37–79. Retrieved 24 January 2022, from <http://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/118096>; Kelly, M. G. (2008). *Strands of utopia: Spaces of poetic work in twentieth-century France*. Modern Humanities Research Association and Taylor & Francis; Girgus, S. B. (2010). *Levinas and the Cinema of Redemption: Time, Ethics, and the Feminine*. Columbia University Press. In the analysis of user experience in design, see Jääskö, V., Mattelmäki, T. and Ylirisku, S. (2003). *The scene of experiences*. In L. Haddon, E. Mante-Meijer, B. Sapio, K.-H. Kommonen, L. Fortunati and A. Kant (eds.), *The Good the Bad and the Irrelevant*. Media Lab UIAH, 341–346. Our first applications of *scene of experience* at HEX conferences 2019 and 2020. Retrieved 20 June 2022, from [https://www.academia.edu/81880968/Lived\\_welfare\\_state\\_approaching\\_the\\_experience\\_of\\_social\\_security\\_institutions](https://www.academia.edu/81880968/Lived_welfare_state_approaching_the_experience_of_social_security_institutions) and [https://www.academia.edu/86960801/Harjula\\_Minna\\_and\\_Kokko\\_Heikki\\_Experience\\_as\\_social\\_construction\\_towards\\_structural\\_approach\\_Abstract\\_for\\_HEX\\_conference\\_2020](https://www.academia.edu/86960801/Harjula_Minna_and_Kokko_Heikki_Experience_as_social_construction_towards_structural_approach_Abstract_for_HEX_conference_2020); Harjula, M. (2019, August 8). Kun kansalainen kohtasi Kelan virkailijan: Hyvinvointivaltio kokemushistoriana. *Alusta*. Retrieved 22 January 2022, from <https://www.tuni.fi/alustalehti/2019/08/08/kun-kansalainen-kohtasi-kelan-virkailijan-hyvinvointivaltio-kokemushistoriana/>. P. Markkola uses the concept in Katajala-Peltomaa & Toivo (eds.) (2022), see the eBook version, June 2022. [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-92140-8\\_12](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-92140-8_12).

concrete interface linking the space of experience and horizon of expectation.

The scene is an interface where social structures meet the moment of experience. It consists of the institutionalized shared experiences—layers of experience—which are carried by the human beings in the scene and by the sociomaterial environment as the site of the scene. Thus, as the setting of the present interaction, the scene of experience also carries the earlier societal layers of experience. Due to the continuous process of social sedimentation and institutionalization of experiences, the scene of experience can be seen both as a crystallization of the societal layers of experience and as the place where new societal layers and sediments of experience take shape.

Analytically, the scene of experience can be seen as a temporal-spatial “frozen moment” that at the micro level captures the social structures as layers of experience. This does not mean that the scene of experience is a frozen frame that dictates the experience. Instead, it is the situational context within which the active “framing” of the social reality takes place as the tension between experiences and expectations.<sup>52</sup> Thus, the framing can be understood as the situational social agency in the scene.

For the social history of experiences, the scene of experience opens a from-below approach to experiences and adds social agency to the analysis. It combines the micro-level social processes of experience and the macro structures of society. It connects the social frameworks, the mediating structures and the human subject to explore how the social reality is constructed in a particular situation. Besides an analysis of everyday life, the scene can produce a from-below approach to social change, as it is a tool to analyse the specific moment and space when a social change is experienced.

Quite similar analytic concepts have been recently developed within the history of emotion and the history of knowledge. Compared to Mark Seymour’s *emotional arena*, which signifies how given social spatial arenas stage and shape the generation, expression and performing of emotions,<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup>The idea of framing leans on Persson’s combination of Koselleck’s theory and Erving Goffman’s classic concept of frame. Persson, A. (2019). *Framing social interaction: Continuities and cracks in Goffman’s frame analysis*. Routledge.

<sup>53</sup>Seymour, M. (2020). *Emotional arenas: Life, love, and death in 1870s Italy*. Oxford University Press; Seymour, M. (2012). Emotional arenas: From provincial circus to national courtroom in late nineteenth-century Italy. *Rethinking History* 16(2), 177–197.

or Johan Östling's *arena of knowledge* as a platform that offers the opportunity and sets the limits for certain forms of knowledge circulation,<sup>54</sup> the scene of experience is broader. Besides *location*, the scene includes the meanings of *context*, *incident* and *section*, and with the sense of *view* and *panorama*, the concept scene is complementary to Koselleck's visual metaphors and to the social theory based on Berger and Luckmann.<sup>55</sup>

Instead of focusing on personal variations in experiences, the scene of experience allows the structural analysis of the encounters between the individual and the social world by defining the societal limits for the experience. First, the sociomaterial environment for the situational occasion—such as home, factory, outdoor market, maternity clinic, polling station, church—sets limits for the experience. Our previous example included various environments to be analysed as scenes, from the first temporal-spatial moment when the individuals experienced the need to help the poor to the different institutional settings of poor relief. As social institutions carrying earlier layers of experience, the different environments follow divergent conceptual and procedural practices and “predefined patterns of human conduct” for the situational occasions.<sup>56</sup> Similarly to Mark Seymour's arena, the concept of scene of experience is not restricted to concrete places or face-to-face situations only, but also allows for the analysis of virtual environments, such as newspapers as the mass media of the nineteenth century or the Internet in the late twentieth century.<sup>57</sup>

Second, as a part of the scene of experience, the social interaction and the agency of human beings in the encounter is structured by biocultural and social factors, such as age, gender, generation, language, ethnicity, education and social class. Koselleck saw such factors as common shared

<sup>54</sup> Östling, J. (2020). Circulation, arenas, and the quest for public knowledge: historiographical currents and analytical frameworks. *History and Theory* 59(4), 111–126.

<sup>55</sup> Oxford English Dictionary Online. Oxford University Press. Retrieved 16 January 2022, from <https://www.oed.com>.

<sup>56</sup> Berger and Luckmann (1991), 72. In the sociological and organizational analysis of institutions, concepts such as institutional logic, moral and political logic and moral economy are used to reflect the linkage between the structure of institution and people's views of the institution. For example, Larsen, C. A. (2006). *The institutional logic of welfare attitudes: How welfare regimes influence public support*. Ashgate; Mau, S. (2003). *The moral economy of welfare states: Britain and Germany compared*. London: Routledge; Rothstein, B. (1998). *Just institutions matter: The moral and political logic of the universal welfare state*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>57</sup> Seymour (2020), 16–17.

preconditions or *pregivens* (Vorgaben),<sup>58</sup> which as filters create collective “conditions of different chances for experience”.<sup>59</sup> According to him, generations live in the same space of experience, but due to the *pregivens*, their experiences differ.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Berger and Luckmann point out how the social world is “filtered” to the individual through the selectivity absorbed during life.<sup>61</sup> In our approach, these *pregivens* are not analysed as individual inner variations but as social factors indicated by structural history. For example, a generational approach to a scene opens up a view of the tensions between the experiences and expectations of different age groups in situated encounters (Chap. 8).

Fanny Broton has rephrased Koselleck’s idea of a “grid of historically *pregiven* possibilities of experience”<sup>62</sup> as the “context of possibilities” for experience.<sup>63</sup> As this formulation points out, contextualization is the key to tracing the situational social possibilities for experience in a scene of experience. To find the limits of possible experience, the analysis of the scene combines the exploration of the sediments from different sign systems in the situation with the social preconditions of the participants and the historical context, including other social institutions that structure the scene.

When reading the sources to analyse the scene of experience, the researcher faces multi-layered temporalities in historical research. Especially when using oral history collections, it is necessary to differentiate between the “scene of remembering the experience” and the “scene(s) of the remembered experience”. The more time goes by, the slimmer the chances that the individual who remembers and the scene he or she remembers are within the same layer of experience or mediated by the same sediments of experience. The same applies to the historian, as the “scene of researching” adds another temporal-spatial structure to the research setting.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Hoffman and Franzel (2018), XI; Koselleck (2018), 207–213.

<sup>59</sup> Koselleck (2018), 209–213, citation p. 211.

<sup>60</sup> Koselleck (2004), 269.

<sup>61</sup> Berger and Luckmann (1991), 151.

<sup>62</sup> Koselleck (2018), 213.

<sup>63</sup> Boddice and Smith (2020), 29 and 50, cite Brotons, Fanny H. (2017). *The Experience of cancer illness: Spain and beyond during the second half of the nineteenth century*. PhD Thesis, Carlos III University, Madrid.

<sup>64</sup> The idea is based on the differentiation between “Time remembered”, “Time of remembering” and “Time of researching” in Taavetti, R. (2018). *Queer politics of memory: Undisciplined sexualities as glimpses and fragments in Finnish and Estonian pasts*. University of Helsinki.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter presents a socio-historical approach to experiences. As an application of the social theory of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, combined with the conceptualizations of changing temporal structures of experiencing by Reinhart Koselleck, our approach emphasizes how both experiences and experiencing are socially and historically constructed. Experiences are crucial elements of human history because they not only reflect reality but are also the constructive units of social reality.

We introduce the analytical concepts of sediment, layer and scene of experience as methodological tools for exploring how the social construction of reality occurs through human experiencing, which is always based on social interaction. Sediment refers to a temporal stratum of meanings in the expressions of experiences that are stored up and mediated by sign systems. The layer of experience is a temporal stratum of the social institution that clusters the shared experience in the social world. The scene of experience is the situational frame in which the socially shared experiences emerge.

These analytical concepts enable an approach to the shared experiences by considering the limitations that the inevitably assorted and incomplete research material set on the historical study. The three concepts reveal and reflect how human experience is stored in the social world as:

1. the expressions of experience that can be found in research material: sign systems and sediments of experience;
2. the social structures that are constructed by the shared experiences: social institutions and layers of experience;
3. the contextualized particular temporal-spatial situations in which the social experiences emerge: scenes of experience.

This approach clarifies the frameworks for experiencing in a certain situation in a particular society in a specific historical era. As it covers the social frameworks, the mediating structures, the human subject, and the particular situation of experience, it can be scaled from micro analysis to macro-level societal studies of shared experience. Furthermore, by focusing on the transformation of the sign systems and social structures, this approach can trace social change from the perspective of experiences. Thus, it can deepen the understanding of change, which is a primary subject of social science.

The emphasis on social change links our approach to the field of the history of society, which sees the making of society as the research focus

instead of the past itself. As every human experience conveys the multi-layered experiences of the past, there is no way a historian could escape or mute the transgenerational experiences between her/him and the object of the study. Therefore, as the history of society, the social history of experiences is always an analysis of the present-day social world that is approached via the reflection that extends from the past to the present and the future.<sup>65</sup> This means that—in addition to the past—a historian must also seek to handle the present social world and the temporal gap between them. To analyse the experience of society in the past, a historian needs to explore both the layers and sediments of experiences that are temporally between the researcher and the research material.

<sup>65</sup> Haapala (1989); Haapala, P. (1990), *Sosiaalishistorian lupaus*. In P. Ahtiainen et al. (eds.), *Historia nyt: Näkemyksiä suomalaisesta historiantutkimuksesta*. WSOY, 67–92. Haapala, P. (2021) *Lived historiography: national history as a script to the past*. In V. Kivimäki, S. Suodenjoki & T. Vahtikari (eds.), *Lived nation as the history of experiences and emotions in Finland, 1800–2000*. Palgrave Macmillan, 29–56. On the relationship between temporality and the self-understanding of the historical discipline, see Koselleck (2004), 259–275.

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copy-right holder.

