

# Emotional Frontiers

Stephanie Olsen and Karen Vallgård

Stephanie Olsen is Senior Researcher at the Academy of Finland Centre of Excellence in the History of Experiences, Tampere University, and the author/co-author of *Juvenile Nation: Youth, Emotions and the Making of the Modern British Citizen* (Bloomsbury, 2014) and *Learning How to Feel: Children's Literature and the History of Emotional Socialization, c. 1870-1970* (OUP, 2014), and the editor of *Childhood, Youth and Emotions in Modern History: National, Colonial and Global Perspectives* (Palgrave, 2015).

Karen Vallgård is Associate Professor of History at the University of Copenhagen. She is the author of *Imperial Childhoods and Christian Mission* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) and has co-edited two volumes on the history of emotions. She has published widely on the history of emotions, gender, race, family, and childhood. Vallgård is a member of the Executive Committee of the Society for the History of Childhood and Youth and serves as vice chairperson of the Young Academy of the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, Denmark.

## Abstract

This chapter focuses on the historical contingency and cross-cultural plurality in codes of “emotional development,” a value-laden and culturally embedded concept. What counts as healthy or virtuous emotional experience, comportment, or growth among children and youth (and in other stages in the lifecycle) varies significantly over time and place. The plurality of emotional codes also mean that an individual might experience either unfamiliarity with the codes of emotional behavior in a given context, or sometimes become aware of conflicting sets of emotion rules. While “formation” designates the culturally specific codes of affective comportment and expression, and the process through which the individual child incorporates and embodies these codes, we introduce the concept of “emotional frontiers” to describe the affective experience of encountering a boundary between different affective formations or divergences within the same formation. A frontier may be encountered in various ways – from a little misunderstanding to a violent confrontation.

**Keywords:** emotional frontiers; history of emotions; history of experiences; children and youth; schools; indigenous people.

## Concept

It is no longer possible to isolate universal processes of emotion development from their cultural situation. Rather, we endorse the concept of emotional formation, defined as the emotional codes that structure a given society, culture, or subculture, and the processes through which humans learn and adapt these codes (see CHAPTER X). Emotional formations are mutable, affected positively and negatively (perhaps even obstructed) by various external factors that are dynamically entangled with an individual's development. As Rob Boddice has recently argued, "Historians of emotion [...] contribute to and complicate biocultural constructionist theories, and radically problematize the fundamental importance of culture." He goes on: "Any given individual case of emotional development... begins with the world of that individual. Historians can instantiate that world" (Boddice, 2019, pp. 1994, 1996). Our focus on "emotional frontiers" in this chapter is designed to show the quotidian complexity of any such world and the cultural demands that must be met in order for emotional development to be considered successful. In fact, "emotion development" itself is a heavily value-laden and culturally embedded concept that privileges a situated understanding of a normative process (see also Chapter X, this volume). What counts as healthy development resulting in situated emotional competence is an expression of a certain instance of script valuation, and such values vary significantly over time and place – they are connected to religion and culture, as well as to shifting understandings of gender, sexuality, race, class, and age. Hence, what is today considered sound emotion development in

Europe or North America might in other historical or geographical contexts have been seen as a sign of sickness, sin, or perversion. Until around the mid nineteenth-century, American parents, for example, thought it proper to instill a certain amount of fear in their children, parenting advice and practice which run counter to contemporary North American and European pressures for children to display happiness as a sign of successful parenting and successful childhood (Stearns & Haggerty, 1991; Stearns, 2010; Vallgård & Nyvang, 2018, Chapter Stearns, this volume). Furthermore, an individual might encounter a plurality of emotional codes at any given time. Such an individual might experience unfamiliarity with the codes of emotional behavior in a given context, or become aware of conflicting sets of emotion rules. Such instances are what we term an *emotional frontier*. Sometimes the individual might succeed in crossing it; sometimes she might not.

Elsewhere, we have explored various historical cases of emotional development on the emotional frontier (see Vallgård, Alexander, & Olsen, 2015). In a separate chapter in this volume (Chapter Vallgård, this volume), we discuss the methodological possibilities of employing the concept of emotional formation as a historically sensitive alternative to “development” that might help researchers grasp the historicity of growth and change in collectives, as well as in individuals’, affective ontologies. While “formation” refers to the culturally specific codes of affective comportment and expression, and the process through which the individual incorporates and embodies these codes, the concept of “emotional frontiers” designates either a boundary between different affective formations, or the divergences or contradictions within an emotional formation. We cannot assume that emotional formations are internally without complexity or contradiction because they are embedded within cultural systems that are themselves shot

through with internal inconsistencies and contradictory expectations. An emotional frontier may be perceived in various ways, either by the individual or through relational practices. An individual may be so habituated to traversing emotional frontiers that they do not notice them at all; alternatively, the existence of a frontier might be registered through a sense of unease, a change in emotional register that requires a conscious shift, or through the socially compromising experience of getting the emotional codes wrong. Relationally, the emotional frontier might emerge via an innocuous misunderstanding or a violent confrontation occasioned by feelings and expressions that do not meet the situation at hand. This is all the more likely when individuals habituated in different emotional formations – or within an internally contradictory formation – meet, and where available emotional scripts are incompatible. The barrier between actors need not be physical, but it feels palpable all the same.

While it is instructive to think of the emotional make-up of individuals, it is also crucial to understand that it is part of a collective emotional context which encompasses diverse collective formations: siblings in a family, children in a classroom, people of a certain background, generation or society share emotional formations. They encompass internal variation across what Barbara Rosenwein might have called “emotional communities” (Rosenwein, 2002).

Competence in frontier crossing may well depend on the extent to which the majority of people in an emotional formation are also obliged to deal with a particular frontier. In this case, the process of navigating emotional formations becomes an emotional script itself, central to the particular developmental map in a discrete web of emotional formations.

# Effective Crossing of Emotional Frontiers and Historical Contingency

Emotional formation occurs throughout the lifecycle, as a result of dynamic responses to internal and external signals. An individual's emotional formation is never static so long as she interacts with the world around her – people, spaces, things, institutions, expressions of power.

Historically, however, the periods of childhood and youth have often been pinpointed as crucial for the process of normative emotional development, suited to the contingencies of the individual's class, race, gender, family, society and culture.

Many children (and adults) learn and accept that there are different modes of emotional expression and practice in different social and material contexts. They learn to internalize those differences and move as if seamlessly between them. Crossing emotional frontiers, therefore, might seem so smooth that they appear non-existent. It is only when there is a disjuncture or discomfort when crossing frontiers that their boundaries become apparent and that the process becomes visible. Frontiers are not fixed but necessarily shift according to changes in intersecting emotional formations. The process of learning how to navigate frontiers is inherently protean. The concept is a useful way to understand the formative, or educative, component of emotional formations and how they aid in successfully navigating the emotional frontier. Examples of crossing an emotional frontier include family/school, family/church, school/peers, school/work.

We will now turn to some particular and individual examples to anchor the concept of emotional frontiers. In choosing these examples we stress that all emotional frontiers are historically contingent, meaning that they are shaped by a particular space and time, influenced

by political, cultural and societal factors. The concept, therefore, is equally relevant to historical and contemporary emotional development and experience.

# Experiencing and Crossing Emotional Frontiers

## From Germany to France

Judith Kerr, a German Jewish girl who along with the rest of her prominent family fled Berlin and Nazi persecution in 1933, wrote several famous memoirs of her escape and her life as an exile in Switzerland, France and England. Though in these books she writes in the third person, calling herself Anna (her middle name), these accounts are faithful to her memories and feelings during her childhood. Her account of her entry into a Parisian girls' school, an *école communale*, is a good example of traversing a multi-layered emotional frontier. First, she had to contend with a different language and culture, which entailed particular codes of emotional conduct entailed in that particular emotional formation. Secondly and connectedly, she entered into a school system which was wholly different from both her experience in her school in Berlin and in her village school in Switzerland. Though Kerr tells her story as one of adventure, fun and resilience amid frightening and insecure conditions, she describes her first day at her Parisian school in an uncharacteristically dark and foreboding way:

[...] Anna found herself in a large room crammed with desks. There must be at least forty girls, Anna thought. They were all wearing black overalls and this, combined with the gentle gloom of the classroom, gave the whole scene a

mournful look. The girls had been reciting in unison, but when Anna came in [...] they all stopped and stared at her. Anna stared back, but was beginning to feel rather small and suddenly wondered, violently, whether she was really going to like this school. She held on tight to her satchel and her sandwich box and tried to look as though she did not care. (Kerr, 2017 [1971]:179)

Anna (Judith) quickly adjusts to life at the *école communale*, yet this passage demonstrates that crossing this particular emotional frontier was not automatic nor without emotional strain, as she felt “small.” She needed “violently” to adapt to a different emotional formation in order to benefit from, and enjoy, life at school. Her culture, language, class and family stature all played into this adaptation, which was required of her upon entering and leaving the school every day. Her uniform, the atmosphere and cramped feeling of the classroom, the monotonous recitation, were all new and difficult for her. Even her “satchel” (associated with German children) and her “sandwich box” (her classmates either went home to hot meals, or brought cooked French meals to school), to which she “held on tight”, are indications of her difference and the strain of crossing this frontier.

Anna adapts to the expectations of her teachers and her classmates, brings the correct food for lunch, and, crucially, learns French. After a while, Kerr writes, she

could hardly wait to go back to school. She loved it all since she had learned to speak French. Suddenly the work seemed quite easy and she was beginning to enjoy writing stories and compositions in French. It was not a bit like writing in German – you could

make the words do quite different things – and she found it curiously exciting. (Kerr, 2017 [1971]:245)

Anna's emotional formation at school increasingly matched what was expected of her. She "loved" school, passed her exams (against her own expectations) and even received a top essay prize. Though not without effort, she ended up successfully crossing the emotional frontiers between life in her German family (and previous schooling) and her new school.

### **Class barriers**

Robert Roberts, who was a boy in Edwardian Salford (England), described his childhood in the slums in devastating detail. He wrote of a highly stratified existence, where everyone had to deal with numerous class, gender and age-based divisions, which exemplify varied emotional frontiers. These divisions informed life at home, at school, on the streets, in the workplace – all emotional frontiers, in and of themselves. As Roberts explains, "A boy had to learn the hard way what modes of speech and gesture, common in the street, were strictly forbidden at home." (Roberts, 1990 [1971]:159, fn 3). Gestures, songs, modes of behaviour, perhaps learned because they were enjoyable or perhaps to fit in with peers, were clearly unacceptable when crossing the emotional frontier of home and family. Yet both sides of this frontier were essential in order to survive in the slum.

Another important and difficult frontier was the school. Roberts describes many students, especially from the poorest backgrounds, as being unable to adapt to the harsh experience of school. Truancy and failure were common. Roberts describes underfunding, poor structures and



supplies, and condescending attitudes by school authorities. He also describes an environment in which the students had constant reminders of their position in the class hierarchy and their future roles outside of school:

Under appalling conditions in our school the staff worked earnestly but with no great hope. The building itself stood face on to one of the largest marshalling yards in the North. All day long the roar of a work-a-day world invaded the school hall, where each instructor, shouting in competition, taught up to sixty children massed together. (Roberts, 1990 [1971]:134)

As a boy, Roberts recognized that this sort of environment was not conducive to academic success, yet he was one of the “bright boys” who was good at his lessons and wanted to stay in school. Because of a lack of both pedagogical and material support, he would fail the exam to obtain a technical college bursary and would need to find work instead. At the end of his schooling, however, he had had relative success in traversing the emotional frontier of his classroom. Social class frontiers would prove more intractable, but the navigation of this emotional frontier in early life helped equip him in later life for his work as a teacher and a writer.

Being accepted in a particular social context and being able to navigate that socio-material space in a comfortable and appropriate manner depends entirely on knowing and mastering the codes of emotional conduct. Because such codes are particular to an emotional formation, the change of social context requires adaptation of emotional behaviour. As the historically grounded and

contingent examples of Anna and Robert vividly demonstrate, the unfamiliarity entailed in crossing an emotional frontier might make individuals intensely aware of their own place in the world. The emotional frontier renders individuals vulnerable, especially when they are not in a privileged position in a social hierarchy. In the next section, the emotional frontier is made even more visible through the intersection of race, and crossing and re-crossing that frontier had devastating consequences for individuals.

## **The emotional frontier made painfully visible/ emotive failure**

We now want to focus on an example in which racialized oppression made the crossing of an emotional frontier particularly painful. Canadian residential schools operated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the last one only closing in 1996. The stated goal of these schools was to “civilize” indigenous children, to remove them from the “corrupting” influences of their parents, families and communities, and to forge new Canadian citizens out of them. The premise was that as children, they were more malleable than their irredeemable parents. These boarding schools were the sites of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse and cultural belittling and denial, giving children a uniform and a number in a concerted effort to forever strip away the individual. These practices have been described as “cultural genocide” (e.g. Miller, 1996:9). As Doris Young, a former student at the Elkhorn residential school in Manitoba, testified under the auspices of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission:

Those schools were a war on Aboriginal children, and they took away our identity. First of all, they gave us numbers, we had no names, we were numbers, and they cut our hair. They took away our clothes, and gave us clothes ... we all looked alike.” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015:145)

Residential school children crossed the starkest of emotional frontiers when they first entered the schools, and they did so again when they saw their families or were allowed to return home for holidays. We are fortunate to have the recollections of residential school survivors who have directly addressed this issue. The indigenous emotional formations of these children before going to school were fundamentally and intentionally re-formed. As Mary Courchene, a former student at the residential schools at Fort Alexander in Manitoba and Lebret in Saskatchewan, testified:

And I looked at my dad, I looked at my mom, I looked at my dad again. You know what? I hated them. I just absolutely hated my own parents. Not because I thought they abandoned me; I hated their brown faces. I hated them because they were Indians... So I, I looked at my dad and I challenged him and I said, “From now on we speak only English in this house,” I said to my dad. And you know when we, when, in a traditional home where I was raised, the first thing that we all were always taught was to respect your Elders and never to, you know, to challenge them. And here I was, eleven years old, and I challenged ... my dad looked at me and I, and I thought he was going to cry. In fact his eyes filled up with tears. He turned to my mom and he says, ... “Then I guess we’ll never speak

to this little girl again. I don't know her.” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015:154)

The extremity of this child's negative feelings toward her parents, and by extension, her community, her culture, and her entire way of life before entering school, is telling of the destructive effectiveness of this system in instilling a new set of emotional codes in students and the effectiveness of the emotional formation taking place at the school. This made crossing and re-crossing the emotional frontier between school and home exceedingly difficult, if not impossible.<sup>1</sup> The schools forced indigenous children to question everything that made up their emotional formations to the point that many policed themselves in avoiding their languages and traditional cultural practices. In the above example, the father devastatingly no longer “knew” his daughter; the process of estrangement and alienation was a sinister and effective tool in ripping apart communities, families and individuals. Examining emotional frontiers at this extreme allows us to demonstrate the usefulness of the concept.

Agnes Mills, a former student at All Saints residential school in Saskatchewan explained: “I wanted to be white so bad, and the worst thing I ever did was I was ashamed of my mother, that honourable woman, because she couldn't speak English.” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015:154). Former students frequently express in the report and elsewhere how residential schools made them feel ashamed of their families, their communities, their languages

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<sup>1</sup> Children, young people, and adults who are presented with emotional frontiers they are unable to cross successfully, suffer “emotive failure,” a concept coined by William Reddy to explain the (sometimes radical) disjuncture between prescriptive demands on emotional expression and the experience of feeling states. (Reddy, 2001).

and their indigeneity. They tried to look, act and sound “white” to “fit” into European Canadian society at a terrible price. Such brutal practices and attitudes, and the forced crossing of emotional frontiers, have contributed to premature death for many former residential school attendees, and lifelong trauma for survivors. As Jim Miller reported after a residential school reunion, many “spoke of wasting years and decades in alcohol, drugs, and violence before they managed to put their lives back together, confront the pain that had been driving them to harm themselves, and get on with the business of living.” (Miller, 1996:7-8)

Though the examples from Canadian residential schools are disturbing, they are hardly unique. From Aboriginal children in Australia to children born to unmarried mothers in Ireland, thousands or even hundreds of thousands of children around the world have been forcibly separated from their parents, usually in the name of serving the best interests of the child (Swain & Hillel, 2010, Gordon, 2008, Vallgård 2014). In addition to the many difficulties and agonies that these children experienced as a result, they presumably also encountered pronounced and powerful emotional frontiers, arising from the often fundamentally different emotional formations to which they were exposed. They were ultimately required to unlearn what they had learnt about proper emotional behaviour and to adopt new forms of feeling and demeanour.

Importantly, however, emotional frontiers do not merely arise from such dramatic circumstances as displacement or resocialisation. Rather, they may occur in more everyday settings, both historical and contemporary, in which competing codes of emotional conduct clash. Present day examples include immigrant children navigating between their home and a mainstream school and young people who are the first in their family to go to college and learn how to adapt to a

new set of emotional codes. Crossing an emotional frontier may be entirely unproblematic, as is often the case when children, youth and adults move between family and school, place of worship and peer groups, the workplace or the supermarket. On some occasions, individuals experience (partial) unfamiliarity with the unwritten rules governing a particular social space; they get the codes wrong or they are unable to adjust their own emotional behaviour to what is expected in a particular context. They, too, experience an emotional frontier. This is often an almost visceral process, but, we stress, a fundamentally historically contingent one nonetheless.

## Conclusion

Working from the premise that individual emotional formation is deeply culturally variable and contingent upon the prevailing emotional codes in the social world within which the child develops, we have argued that new analytical concepts are required to enable a better understanding of the dynamics offered the multiplicity of processes of emotional development. The fact that what is deemed moral emotional conduct or appropriate emotional expression differs from one context to the next, also means that humans are sometimes placed at what we call an emotional frontier, that is, the real and experienced boundary between different sets of prescriptions and proscriptions. Sometimes, the individual (or group) travels more or less successfully between sociocultural contexts, perhaps hardly noticing the emotional frontier. At other times, however, crossing frontiers involves a difficult emotional conflict or powerful confrontation. Although striking, the examples given above are just a few among thousands; after all, most people cross emotional frontiers every day. Whether the emotional frontier appears seamless or is acutely and painfully *felt*, the concept makes visible the historical

contingency and cross-cultural plurality of emotional development and helps explain the fraught emotional experiences that this plurality entails for individuals and collectives.

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