




History Looks Forward: Interdisciplinarity and Critical Emotion Research

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Abstract

The history of emotions has become a thriving focus within the discipline of history, but it has in the process gained a critical purchase that makes it relevant for other disciplines concerned with emotion research. The history of emotions is entangled with the history of the body and brain, and with cultural and political history. It is interested in the how and why of emotion change; with the questions of power and authority behind cultural scripts of expression, conceptual usages, and emotional practices. This work has reached a level of maturity and sophistication in its theoretical and methodological orientation, and in its sheer quantity of empirical research, that it contributes to emotion knowledge within the broad framework of emotion research.

Keywords

criticism, history of emotions, history of the senses, interdisciplinarity

This selection of articles, produced by some of the world's leading historians of emotion, and with one notable transdisciplinary collaboration, is not intended as an introduction to, or a basic explanation of, or even an apology for what historians of emotions do. Compendious foundational and introductory works already exist, and I urge them upon readers of *Emotion Review* who may not be familiar with them (Boddice, 2018; Gross, 2006; Plamper, 2015; Reddy, 2001; Rosenwein & Cristiani, 2017). Rather, these essays are designed to demonstrate the indispensable quality of historical work for emotion researchers in other disciplines, as well as intending to inspire other historians to aim for similarly critical engagement across disciplinary lines. Such work has become imperative (see Boddice, 2019b). For many years, research on emotions in different disciplines has taken place upon parallel or even divergent courses, with agreement on the object of study often seeming untenable across disciplinary lines. Within the discipline of psychology, two generations were spent in fundamental disagreement: are emotions cognitive or noncognitive, universal or culturally bound? (Leys, 2017). An alignment of transdisciplinary focus has the potential to offer a solution to some of these conceptual and methodological differences. The history of emotions aligns itself with similar movements in schools of philosophy (Fuchs, 2017), transcultural psychiatry (Choudhuri & Kirmayer, 2009), cultural anthropology (Beatty, 2013; Lock & Palsson, 2016), social theory (Meloni,

2016), social psychology (Stenner, 2017), and social neuroscience (Barrett, Russell, & LeDoux, 2015), to present a view of the human being as bioculturally dynamic, with contingent feelings, expressions, and experiences, where meaning is embodied but nonetheless situated, mediated, and constructed.

While the rise in bioconstructionism within social neuroscience has not, in and of itself, settled primary questions about what emotions are and how they should be researched, the findings of bioconstructionists strike a harmonious note with historians of emotion, the latter discipline being able to provide a wealth of qualitative empirical evidence in favour of the former. Much of the fame of bioconstructionism lies in the work of Lisa Feldman Barrett (2006a, 2006b, 2017; Hoemann, Xu, & Barrett, 2019), and rightly so, but it should not only dwell there (Barrett et al., 2015; Fridlund, 1992; Russell, 2003). Barrett's findings on the relationship between emotion concepts and emotional experience have orientated a whole branch of psychology toward the importance of that which is contingent. The linguistic focus places a strong emphasis on that which is neither fixed in the body nor universal across cultures. The striking takeaway is that while the brain makes emotions, it makes them in a body that is situated in time and space. "Emotion" as an objectively existing thing to be *found* turns out to be a phantom. Others go beyond (or before) linguistic concepts, to the contingencies of expression and gesture, of

bodies in space, of biocultural interaction among humans in particular configurations of society, to argue that from the beginning of life, experience is mediated and mitigated. Senses, external and internal, amorphous feelings that (should) defy easy categorisation, are directed and made meaningful in exchange or interaction, in and through social contexts and institutions, and through culturally bound scripts of expression and action that provide the building blocks of emotional and sensory lives, and experience itself (Fotopoulou & Tsakiris, 2017; Leder, 2018; Pernau & Rajamani, 2016; von Mohr & Fotopoulou, 2018). Such views are extended by historians, who have demonstrated the extraordinary degree of cultural contingency involved in “automatic” systems, such that the delicate balance that determines the differences between bodily integration and disintegration, between homeostasis and catastrophic internal failure, is itself hitched to complex contexts involving the self, culture, experience (what the body knows and what the body undergoes), social institutions, and knowledge. This has been particularly illuminated in the contexts of war, medicine, and disease (Geroulanos & Meyers, 2018).

The coming together of these psychologic threads with major research foci in the humanities seems inevitable. For while bioconstruction is predicated upon an understanding of human emotions as culturally and socially *situated*, the theoretical and methodological tools, training, and expertise required for the interrogation, analysis, and interpretation of cultural situatedness remain largely (but not wholly) outside of psychology, and the study of change over time specifically belongs to historiography. Culture has become critical to neuroscientific research, but culture itself is not where neuroscientific expertise lies. This should not be read as a criticism so much as it is a reflection on the limitation of a discipline whose focus is necessarily on the *inside* of the human being. Yet culture is vital to the future of neuroscience as it is currently orientated, for culture is implicated in what goes on inside, just as what goes on inside is dynamically entangled with external states. With this in mind, it only makes sense to try to plot a future course in the study of emotion collaboratively, in the spirit of mutually beneficial exchange. I do not think it tenable that historians can fail to notice or apply what is happening in social neuroscience, and the extent to which its approach imbricates it with the humanities. But nor is it tenable for practicing neuroscientists to remain nonconversant with historical research that has a direct bearing on the questions they ask and the guiding assumptions they employ.

If neuroscience has opened the door to the humanities, and to history especially, then emotion research cannot, as Daniel Gross and Stephanie Preston (2020) ably show in their article in this issue, expect to carry on regardless. History is not merely additive to psychological methods, nor is it merely background. If history’s contribution to emotion knowledge means anything, then it should mean the disruption of the very starting point of emotion research. It alters the assumptions that researchers take with them to the lab, or to the field, and influences the kinds of questions that can be asked, as well as changing the stakes of the answers to be sought. To the nonhistorian, history might seem to

be buried in the past, in dry facts and figures, but historians understand their work to have critical purchase for the present and future. This should not be understood as having to do with “prediction” in scientific terms, and historians do not understand the past as a rich source of “lessons,” like some kind of cycle of repeating circumstances. On the contrary, historians show the profound importance of cultural contingency, of inconstancy and instability, and therefore see the striving for timeless or essential definitions as futile. Objectivity is, as Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison (2007) pointed out, an affect—a posture of situated scientific practice, rather than a *true* understanding of the world. Historians therefore resist anything that looks like biological determinism or essentialism, looking instead for the mutability of bodies, brains, and worlds, locked in dynamic but unstable relationships. Most importantly, they see, with an eye to the future, that psychological research into emotions in the last 50 years or so has not escaped its own moment in time. The work of recent decades, from whatever theoretical or methodological perspective, has a place in the multivalent narrative of the history of emotions. Nobody has “cracked it,” so to speak, such that we can pin down what emotions are and how they work, for all time, and there is increasing agreement across disciplinary lines that such a search has no merit. As new concepts, new cultural conditions, new scientific practices, new technologies (both for living by and researching with), new selves, and new experiences emerge, so the whole framework for understanding how and why we feel will continue to change. If history can “predict” anything, it is the certainty of change. Scientific methods, theories, standards, ethics, assumptions, facts, institutions, and on and on, all change, as do the objects of study themselves. Time, to coin a phrase, has already told. To strive for a definitive answer to the function and working of something so profoundly rich as human emotions is to overlook or misunderstand the history of the human being itself. A deep collaboration between historians and psychologists, among others, is sorely needed in order to reach a better understanding of how and why emotion concepts, emotional experiences, and sensory perceptions, change. Why are emotions so unstable, historically speaking? Why is experience so contingent? These questions get to the heart of the biocultural dynamics of “emotion.” No one discipline is kitted out to tackle them alone.

In emotion research, disciplinary boundaries are breached. Historians in particular find a critical purchase in this instability, but also recognise some ripe opportunities for sympathetic cross-reading and collaboration. To fail to come together and, at first at least, to recognise one another, will be a lost opportunity of enormous magnitude. Emotion research can only count for something if it ceases to be on parallel or divergent tracks according to outmoded and sealed disciplinary logics. Inevitably, that means some branches of emotion research will be cut and will wither. The common ground across the disciplines—the core of an embryonic consensus—is in bioculture, dynamics of continuity and change, mutability and construction, bodies in worlds and worlds in bodies. Our respective positions will be much more strongly put if we work together

to define our commonalities and points of disagreement. Surely there are many of the latter, but we will not be able to broach them till we have first agreed that we share a common purpose and a basic understanding.

The articles assembled here aim to reach out, to try on the one hand to extend a bridge to emotion scientists, philosophers, anthropologists, and social theorists; on the other hand, they show quite forcefully what kind of critical intervention historians can make within emotion research writ large. The articles do not share a historical theme, but they independently arrive at a common historiographical goal: to implicate history in emotion research across the disciplines. This is, in part, to assume one of history's oldest and most traditional roles, namely, that of criticism. Historians have long assumed a kind of fourth-estate practice of keeping other disciplines honest, in part by exposing assumptions paraded as given truths, and in part by adding context (often political, cultural, or affective) to narratives presented as neutral or objective. Collectively, these essays continue this role, but they go further. They also supply theoretical, methodological, and empirical insights that they deem to be lacking in emotion research outside of history.

Piroska Nagy and Xavier Biron-Ouellet (2020) ask fundamental questions about how collective emotions work, emphasising the importance of cultural prescription, political context, and setting. They demonstrate that it is imperative to reach a deep understanding of the political significance of emotional prescription and its connection to prevailing cultural practices of emotion in order to get at the fine-grained particularities of emotions in context, at both the individual and collective levels. They argue for the existence of acutely historical experiences, lost to us but nonetheless recoverable in the abstract, and thereby show the futility of essentialism or reductionism, and the danger of denuding biology of culture. Their work connects to social-psychological studies of collective emotions but demonstrates clearly the extent to which the humanities must play a role in the study of collective emotions in any place or time, including the present.

Nicole Eustace (2020) explicitly connects a historical cautionary tale to a stirring criticism of positive psychology and emotional universalism, urging upon emotion researchers a course of critical reflection. The vehicle for this criticism is American enlightenment values of happiness as property, used to highlight the dangers of unchecked assumptions and privileges, of intellectual vacuity, of the politics of appeals to the universal, and the overwhelming risks of essentialising happiness. It is the latest in a string of reflections from the humanities that point out the unstated but dangerous politics of the happiness industry (Boddice, 2019a, pp. 169–187; Illouz, 2007; Illouz & Cabanas, 2018), but with the advantage of a historical example that remains centrally important in American political and cultural life, which carries its argument to a dark reflection of the naivete of some strands of current research.

Neither Daniel Gross nor Stephanie Preston identifies primarily as a historian. Gross studies rhetoric and Preston is a neuroscientist. Their combination, therefore, has produced an

entirely original historical argument that is aimed at revolutionising the way in which emotion science is done. Noting the influence of Charles Darwin's work on emotions, they demonstrate how far Darwin's method has been lost in the process of pinning specific research goals on an eminent genealogy. Revisiting Darwin's own method, they find fault with the current preoccupations with controls, delimitation of focus, and an overall level of specialism that leads to results that seem to have no connection to the lived experience of emotions. They call for nothing less than a reembrace of generalism that would include the humanities in all aspects of emotion research, an insight reachable only through close historical analysis. Their exhortation, "always historicize," seems like a fitting slogan for this special section.

Bettina Hitzer (2020) conjoins insights from the history of the emotions with those from the history of the senses in order to illuminate the mutability of the experience of disease, with particular reference to the historical situatedness of the sense of smell, the feeling of disgust, and cancer. Her analysis shows that how a patient feels, and how an observer feels about a patient, cannot be reduced to the study of pathology or anatomy and cannot be anchored in a universal human body. The experience of cancer does not inhere in the disease itself, but in the medico-cultural context of the sufferer and in the cultural and political context of its reception. As with other bioconstructionist studies of pain, its experience, and its mitigation (Boddice, 2017; Eisenberger, 2003; Grahek, 2007; Moscoso, 2012), Hitzer shows that there is no 1:1 relationship between physical stimulus and either sensory or affective experience. The latter are always culturally and socially mediated, regardless of the extent to which the stimulus (in this case the smell of cancer) can be understood objectively. The article demonstrates the extent to which an emotion is weighted with moral value and can change over a relatively short time. More importantly, it shows both how and why that change occurs.

William Reddy is probably the world's best-known historian of emotion, though his background is in cultural anthropology. For more than 20 years, Reddy (2001, 2012) has been arguing strongly against the basic emotion theory that prevailed as the orthodoxy in emotion science. He has skewered it theoretically, disproved it empirically through careful historical analysis, and developed a whole methodology from which the field of the history of emotion has benefited greatly. Here he offers (2020) his most confident report yet of the coming demise of biological essentialism, through an appraisal of the critical literature and a fanfare about the recent work of Ruth Leys (2017), whose book, *The Ascent of Affect*, exposed foundational flaws that continue to undergird some strands of psychological work on emotion, impugning its methodology, its guiding principles, and its leading personnel.

The questions that remain concern what to do with what is left over, such that the budding but perhaps still fragile agreement across research fields concerning emotional contingency and biocultural construction is rendered coherent and consistent. While these essays share, at root, a sense that we must all work together, the question of *how* still looms large.

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