

Introduction: Experience, Culture and Society: New Insights into Historical Analysis

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The history of experience is a new field that explores the meaning of experiences in everyday life and their place in historical analysis. The aim of this special issue – Experience, Culture and Society: New Insights into Historical Analysis – is to demonstrate and develop experience as a socio-culturally relevant analytic lens. The eight authors represent a broad variety of disciplines, ranging from cultural history, social history, medical history, and the history of knowledge to comparative literature, narrative studies, and human geography. By reflecting on the linkage between experiences and socio-cultural reality, this issue contributes to the discussion on what experiences are, why experiences matter, and how the history of experience can enrich the scope of historical analysis. The focus on experiences responds to the challenge of bridging the from-below analysis of daily life and the macro analysis of societies and cultures. As the history of experience goes beyond the mechanistic binary of individual and structure, it offers new conceptualisations of the past and its study, especially regarding the actor-oriented analysis of social transformations.¹

Conceptualizing Experience

Experience is at once always already an interpretation *and* something that needs to be interpreted ... Experience is ... not the origin of our explanation, but that which we want to explain.²

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Gender historian Joan Scott's 'The Evidence of Experience' (1991) summarizes the key premise of the history of experience. While Scott's influential and often-cited article has been read from various and even contradictory standpoints, her basic anti-essentialist message is that not only experience and experience-based knowledge production but all interlinked categories that explain experience need to be historicized and contextualized in the analysis.³

While the socio-cultural dimension of experiences is generally accepted among scholars in the history of experience, there are differences in how individuality within the socio-culturality of experiences is conceptualized. The Western tendency to localize the concept of experience in the individual's interiority⁴ – and to think that individual experiences only become 'socio-cultural' when they are shared via language – have been challenged in a new way. For example, Sara Ahmed's theorising on emotions suggests that experiences are situated between individuals and the 'outer world'. Furthermore, she emphasizes that the specific 'in-between location' between the actor and structure creates 'the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries' and results in the categories of an inside and an outside of human beings in the first place.⁵ The in-between location of the experience and presence of socio-culturality in all sensation, perception, and reflection in human life challenges the idea of 'pure' or 'authentic' experiences outside the socio-cultural. As a basic categorization of thinking, the dualism of nature and culture has also been challenged via the emphasis on bioculturality, world-body-brain dynamics, and the plasticity of human beings.⁶

While the articles in this issue explore experiences from different scholarly perspectives without aiming to build a unified approach, they share many similar starting points. Firstly, all the articles build upon the socio-culturally and historically mediated character of experiences. Pertti Haapala's article on historical theory with a social-scientific emphasis focuses on explaining experiences in their societal and narrative contexts. In his historiography-based contribution, cultural historian Hannu Salmi approaches experiences as culturally bound being-in-the-world. He points out how the history of experience has taken shape as a holistic approach, reflecting on the earlier fields of history of emotions, history of the senses, and history of the body.⁷ Hanna Meretoja builds upon and further develops her earlier work on narrative hermeneutics to theorize how experiences and experiencing are narratively mediated. The theoretical-methodological article by Heikki Kokko and Minna Harjula outlines experiences as socially constructed through social interaction and thus socio-culturally

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mediated and legitimated. Finally, in their case-study of the 'birth experience' in Britain from the 1940s to the 1990s, Victoria Bates, Jennifer Crane and Maria Fannin open a view to the politics of experience by analysing the socio-culturally changing ideas of 'good birth experience'.

Secondly, all the articles approach experiences as the meaning-making of reality. For example, Meretoja conceptualizes experiences as making sense of being-in-the-world, which involves interpreting reality by giving it structure and shape via cultural webs of meaning that mediate experiences. Salmi points out the interconnection of meaning and experience, and Meretoja argues that there is 'an interpretative continuum from simple sense perception to complex narrative interpretations': while all experience interprets reality (since we always experience something-as-something) narratives are processes of sense-making that afford interpretations of complex experiences. Haapala theorizes how explanation in history links experience to meaning, intention, narration, and action. Kokko and Harjula explore the dilemma of continuity and change as a socio-cultural process of institutionalization and legitimation of experiences where new meanings are integrated into old ones. Bates, Crane and Fannin's case study of the birth experience indicates how the emergence of the concept of experience in the vocabulary of labour and the changing definitions of a 'good birth' by different interest groups created new meanings of childbirth as an experience. This study analyses how the changing meanings were reflected upon in individual narrations in Mass Observation recollections.

Thirdly, the dialogue, dynamics, or dialectics of an individual and the socio-cultural world is a shared starting point for the analysis of experience. The two-way influence opens a view to individual agency by explaining how societies change via experiential change. Salmi emphasizes that while the ways of being-in-the-world depend on the world around humans, people open up their world 'by creating and shaping it'. Meretoja views the two-way linkage as a means of avoiding both individualism and the reification of social reality. Kokko and Harjula emphasize the bridge between agency and structure.

The idea of dialogue leads to the interpretation that experiences not only reflect but also construct and shape reality. While this may seem an abstraction, a generational perspective makes the dynamics more concrete: the experiences of past generations construct and shape the structures that the next generation faces as reality in the form of the institutions, traditions, prerequisites, and possibilities in their lives. Significantly, experiences are not only expressed in thoughts and

words, but result in acts and social practices that historically construct and reshape society and culture.⁸ Such dynamics are analysed from the perspective of ‘historical thinking’ and explanation in Haapala’s article. Kokko and Harjula propose a systematic framework for exploring how experiences result in institutions and structures. They suggest that the historical study of experiences can be seen as the ‘history of socio-cultural realities’.

Fourth, the human body is the site where nature and culture are entangled. Salmi points out three linkages between the history of experience and the history of the body. First of all, the human body is a precondition for all perception. Secondly, the embodiment of experiences inspires new ways of approaching the historicity of analytic categories, and thirdly, the focus on bodies makes agency a crucial dimension of historical analysis. Like Meretoja and Kokko and Harjula, Salmi emphasizes the culture-boundedness of sense perception. Meretoja summarises that a ‘pure’ sense perception is an abstraction: ‘All experience, even simple sense perception, interprets reality’. Kokko and Harjula draw on Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s (1966) theorising of *world-openness* as the human being’s relationship to the environment.⁹ They see human sociality as the key that makes the human being a biocultural creature and emphasize that the dynamics of human biology and the varying socio-cultural environment since the womb result in the historical plasticity of the human organism. In their case study Bates, Crane, and Fannin open an empirical perspective to the embodied experience of birth by indicating how the idea of ‘natural’ childbirth is socio-culturally defined.

In the analytic conceptualization of emotions and experiences, a variety of views from different starting points have recently been suggested within the history of experiences and the history of emotions. The concepts of emotion and experience have been used either interchangeably, or emotion has been seen as a subcategory of experience – that is, as emotional experience or the experience of emotion. By contrast, experience has also been approached as a conceptualized and reflected emotion or an event causing an emotion.¹⁰ This issue explores experience as socio-cultural meaning-making within world-brain-body dynamics. Such approach makes experience into a broader, holistic, and analytic term that includes emotion but is not interchangeable with it.

As Haapala emphasizes, experience serves as a methodological concept rather than as a strict category defining the subject of study. Thus, instead of focusing on experiences as such, the aim is to analyse and explain culture, society, and realities via experience. This approach

to the history of experience bridges the fields of cultural and social history.

Experience, Temporality, and Spatiality

For the history of experience, the linkage between experience, temporality, and spatiality is multidimensional. Experience is not only a situational moment of immediacy but a process of reflection along a continuum from the past to the present and future. Both Haapala and Salmi emphasize the processual and non-static character of experiences. Salmi concludes that ‘the people of the past lived not only horizontally, in the here-and-now, but always also in temporal reality, reflecting on the past and imagining the future’. Salmi points out how the analysis of ‘accumulated layers of meaning’ in experience have been linked to the traditions of memory studies and oral history in cultural history.

Both Meretoja and Kokko and Harjula draw upon Reinhart Koselleck’s conceptualization of space of experience (*Erfahrungsraum*) and horizon of expectation (*Erwartungshorizont*). Experience is the ‘present past’ and expectation is the ‘future made present’. The variety of possible experiences available to people in the present moment is the space of experience, while people orient to and imagine the future via the horizon of expectation.¹¹ Meretoja further develops this idea by concluding that people live in a particular ‘space of possibilities’. Quite similarly, Kokko and Harjula utilize Koselleck’s idea that is conceptualized as the ‘context of possibilities’ by Fanny Brotons.¹²

A special time-related challenge for historical analysis is that even the category of experience can be approached as historical and changing, rather than as an ahistorical phenomenon. For example, Koselleck’s key idea is that the linkage of the categories of experience and expectation is not universal but varies across time. According to Koselleck, modernization detached future expectations from previous experiences, while within the earlier dominance of Christian doctrine the future was bound to the past and expectations that went beyond previous experiences were directed to the Hereafter. Thus, the experiences of a modern Western individual who has absorbed linear time and the idea of progress can be seen as divergently structured compared to those of a human being who has adopted a cyclical concept of time and the presence of the Hereafter. This means that in addition to exploring empirical experiences of the past, it is essential to recognize the contextual ‘meta-categories’ of the past that framed experiencing.¹³

The situationality of experiences interweaves time, space, and place and makes experience a socially relevant analytic lens. As Haapala

emphasizes, all experiences have time and place – that is, they are situational, like all related actions and narratives. Salmi points out how the new cultural history has focused on various experiential perspectives of individuals and groups and on how they interact with their environments. Kokko and Harjula present the ‘layer of experience’ and the ‘scene of experience’ as conceptualizations for the temporal-spatial, contextualising analysis of experiences. The layer of experience is a tool for temporal analysis of societally shared experiences that have been institutionalized and legitimized as social institutions. The scene of experience is a tool for approaching the contextualized particular temporal-spatial situations in which these socially shared experiences are produced.

Experience and Socio-cultural Models

The dynamics between the individual and the socio-cultural world mean that socio-culturality is present in every experience, and individual agency is constructed within socio-cultural frames. The articles in this issue introduce conceptualizations from different theoretical starting points for analysing the socio-cultural models that guide sense-making in experiencing and mediate norms for expressing experiences. The inclusion of the socio-cultural frame in the analysis gives the history of experience societal relevance and opens a view to the reality of the past and its power relations.

Bates, Crane, and Fannin point out how the ‘models of experience’ or ‘cultures of experience’ as embedded scripts shape both experiences and the language of experiences. Their analysis opens an empirical view to the politics of power in acquiring authority in relation to experiences. Based on narrative hermeneutics, Meretoja emphasizes how narratives are integral to experiences through an ‘intertwinement of living and telling’. Narratives are culturally mediated practices that ‘function as models of sense-making that shape how things are experienced in the first place’. For her, narratives influence experiencing by having a ‘world-constituting dimension’ that shapes the ‘sense of the possible’. According to Meretoja, the ‘cultural models of narrative sense-making’ that structure how we narrate experiences guide experiencing as well. Besides explicit narratives as textual artefacts, Meretoja proposes the analytic category of implicit narratives, which refers to tacit narrative patterns of sense-making that ‘can be abstracted from cultural discourse’. According to Meretoja, master narratives are often implicit and made visible only through counter-narratives that challenge them.¹⁴ In Haapala’s article, narrative is employed as an explanatory concept of intentional action, and master and metanarratives are seen as cultural models produced and used in historiography.

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By building on Berger and Luckmann's ideas of the legitimizing power of cultural tradition, Kokko and Harjula explore how experiences are organized and reorganized via justifying the present with the cultural tradition. In the legitimacy process, experiences, expectations, and tradition are made consistent with each other. Kokko and Harjula develop the concepts of narrative and script for exploring the legitimacy models in historical research material. For them, narratives are justifications that organize and re-organize experiences and expectations. They define scripts as usually unspoken and unwritten normative models for experiences that can be reached from the descriptions of practices and action in the research material. Scripts are 'taken-for-granted tacit knowledge of the acceptable and appropriate ways to act, which makes interaction predictable and controllable'. Their article explores the dilemma of socio-cultural change and continuity via analysing the legitimation-relation dynamics of experience and expectation.

Perti Haapala's article ends with a model of explanation that is based on the integration of analytical, social scientific, and narrative analysis in studying the history of experience. His 'analytical history of experiences' focuses on experiences as lived reality and on how those experiences help to explain social action – that is, the events of the past. The outcome is a narrative called *history*, which is not the past as it was but how it was studied and told. That conclusion is a kind of summary of how historical writing has changed since the 1960s and gone through several methodological and paradigmatic shifts from empiricism to post-narrativism. In the end, he defends 'realism' and the relevance and value of the experienced (true) past for research. All articles end with similar conclusions but highlight the fact that there are no shortcuts to the past. Instead, there is a rocky road to be built by 'thinking history'.

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Notes

1. On the linkage between agency and structure in historical research, see R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946); E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1973); E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory* (London: Merlin, 1978); Christopher Lloyd, *Explanation in Social History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); William H. Sewell Jr., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Johan Östling, David Larsson Heidenblad, and Anna Nilsson

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- Hammar (eds), *Knowledge Actors: Revisiting Agency in the History of Knowledge* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2023). See also Haapala's and Salmi's articles in this Special Issue.
- Joan Scott, 'The Evidence of Experience', *Critical Inquiry*, 17:4 (1991), pp. 773-97 (797). Original italics.
 - See Victoria Hesford and Lisa Diedrich, 'On "The Evidence of Experience" and its Reverberations: An Interview with Joan W. Scott', *Feminist Theory*, 15:2 (2014), pp. 197-207.
 - Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 143-58; Kurt Danziger, *Naming the Mind: How Psychology Found its Language* (London: Sage, 1997).
 - Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 5-10.
 - Rob Boddice and Mark Smith, *Emotion, Sense, Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Rob Boddice, 'Authenticity and the Dynamics of Experience', in *HEX Digital Handbook of the History of Experience*, 2022, available at <<https://doi.org/10.58077/C6ED-A565>> (last accessed 31 October 2023); Wolfgang Leidhold, *The History of Experience: A Study in Experiential Turns and Cultural Dynamics from the Paleolithic to the Present Day* (New York: Routledge, 2023), pp. 15, 19, 121, 154.
 - On the dialogue between the histories of experiences, emotions, and senses, see also Boddice and Smith, *Emotion, Sense, Experience*.
 - Pertti Haapala, Minna Harjula, and Heikki Kokko, 'Introduction', in Pertti Haapala, Minna Harjula, and Heikki Kokko (eds), *Experiencing Society and the Lived Welfare State* (London: Palgrave, 2023), pp. 1-13.
 - Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (London: Penguin, 1991 [1967]), pp. 65-9.
 - On the different analytic views on emotions and experiences, see, for example, publications of the scholars from the Research Council of Finland's Centre of Excellence in the History of Experiences (HEX), see <<https://research.tuni.fi/hex/>> (last accessed 18 October 2023); Boddice and Smith, *Experience, Emotion, Sense*; Sari Katajalla-Peltomaa and Raisa Toivo, 'Introduction: Religion as Historical Experience', in Sari Katajalla-Peltomaa and Raisa Toivo (eds), *Histories of Experience in the World of Lived Religion* (London: Palgrave, 2022), pp. 9-10; Ville Kivimäki, Sami Suodenjoki, and Tanja Vahtikari, 'Lived Nation: Histories of Experience and Emotion in Understanding Nationalism', in Ville Kivimäki, Sami Suodenjoki, and Tanja Vahtikari (eds), *Lived Nation as the History of Experiences and Emotions in Finland, 1800-2000* (London: Palgrave, 2021), pp. 1-17; Heini Hakosalo, 'The Ill(s) of the Nation: The Experience and Tuberculosis in Finland from the 1920s to the 1970s', in Kivimäki, Suodenjoki, and Vahtikari, *Lived Nation*, pp. 244-5; Heikki Kokko and Minna Harjula, 'Social History of Experiences: A Theoretical-Methodological Approach', in Pertti Haapala, Minna Harjula, and Heikki Kokko (eds), *Experiencing Society and the Lived Welfare State* (London: Palgrave, 2023), pp. 23-4, 29-31.
 - Reinhard Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, Keith Tribe (transl.) (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 255-75 (259).
 - Fanny H. Brotons, *The Experience of Cancer Illness: Spain and Beyond During the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century*. PhD Thesis (Madrid: Carlos III University, 2017); Boddice and Smith, *Experience, Sense, Emotion*, pp. 29, 50.
 - Koselleck, *Futures Past*, pp. 263-75; John B. Thompson, *Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), pp. 226-7.

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14. See also Hanna Meretoja, *The Narrative Turn in Fiction and Theory: The Crisis and Return of Storytelling from Robbe-Grillet to Tournier* (London: Palgrave, 2014); Hanna Meretoja, *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Hanna Meretoja, 'A Dialogics of Counter-Narratives', in Klarissa Lueg and Marianne Lundholt (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Counter-Narratives* (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 30–42.