



## ***Methods of Analysis*** **Experiential History**

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When experience-rooted rewritings of identity challenge discursive colonization and suggest cross-border, cross-cultural solidarities, these narratives affirm the power to name, embrace, and shift between social positions strategically. In so doing, they not only renarrate the past but identify a historical location from which to imagine a different future. (Stone-Mediatore, 1998, p. 128)

How do we find, preserve, or generate records and narratives of everyday experiences of people arrested and moved in their ordinary lives of the past? This includes the everyday lives of children and youth, who live and learn by experience. For various reasons over the past 50 years, historians have increasingly attended to these challenges (Ludtke, 1995). Alluding to groundwork of the Annales School, LaCapra (2004) observed:

historians have turned or returned to the question of experience, particularly with respect to nondominant groups and such problems as memory in its relation to history. The experiential turn has led to an increased interest in oral history and its role in recapturing the voices and experience of subordinate groups that may not have left sufficient traces in official documents and histories.... Hence much attention has been given to microhistory, which focuses on small or face-to-face groups... or even on the experience of an individual. (p. 3)

In the early 1970s and literary historians turned to readers' experiences, perhaps best exemplified by Fish's (1972) *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature*. This challenged historical and formalist analyses resting on texts. "In an experiential analysis," Fish argues, "the sharp distinction between sense and nonsense, with the attendant value judgments and the talk about truth content, is blurred, because the place where sense is made or not made is the reader's mind rather than the printed page or the space between the covers of a book" (p. 397).

Historians have to be necessarily creative in sourcing experiences in the past and are necessarily cautious of autobiographies and first-person testimonies, despite senses of immediacy. Scott (1991) explores this "evidence of experience." "Documenting the experience of others," she acknowledges, "has been at once a highly successful and limiting strategy for historians of difference. It has been successful because it remains so comfortably within the disciplinary framework of history, working according to rules that permit calling old narratives into question when new evidence is discovered" (p. 776). She then sarcastically queries, "what could be truer, after all, than a subject's own account of what he or she has lived through" (p. 777)?

The "grain of salt" necessary to experiential history does not mean we "dismiss the narration of experience as 'epistemologically incorrect' and propose discourse analysis as the sole critical approach to experience." Stone-Mediatore (1998) instead recommends Mohanty's approach, which "investigates the force of those life stories, testimonials, and 'histories from below'" (p. 123). If previously left out, concrete, daily experiences can be made front and centre of history.

1. What is Experience?

- a. James (1905, p. 30): Prepositions, copulas, and conjunctions, 'is,' 'isn't,' 'then,' 'before,' 'in,' 'on,' 'beside,' 'between,' 'next,' 'like,' 'unlike,' 'as,' 'but,' flower out of the stream of pure experience, the stream of concretes or the sensational stream, as naturally as nouns and adjectives do, and they melt into it again as fluidly when we apply them to a new portion of the stream.
- b. Russell (1914, p. 2): The word "experience" like most of the words expressing fundamental ideas in philosophy, has been imported into the technical vocabulary from the language of daily life, and it retains some of the grime of its outdoor existence in spite of some scrubbing and brushing by impatient philosophers. Originally, the "philosophy of experience" was opposed to the a priori philosophy, and "experience" was confined to what we learn through the senses. Gradually, however, its scope widened until it included everything of which we are in any way conscious, and became the watchword of an emaciated idealism imported from Germany. The word had, on the one hand, the reassuring associations of the "appeal to experience," which seemed to preclude the wilder vagaries of transcendental metaphysicians; while on the other hand it held, as it were in solution, the doctrine that nothing can happen except as the "experience" of some mind.
- c. Dewey (1917, p. 62): Concepts are so clear; it takes so little time to develop their implications; experiences are so confused, and it requires so much time and energy to lay hold of them.
- d. Dewey (1917, p. 37): experience means primarily not knowledge, but ways of doing and suffering.
- e. Dewey, "Conduct and Experience" (1931, pp. 251-252): The structure of whatever is had by way of immediate qualitative presences is found in the recurrent modes of interaction taking place between what we term organism, on one side, and environment, on the other. The interaction is the primary fact, and it constitutes a *transaction*. Only by analysis and selective abstraction can we differentiate the actual occurrence into two factors, one called organism and the other, environment.
- f. Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934, p. 22): experience *is* the result, the sign, and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to the full, is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication.
- a. Steinkamp & Bell (1979, p. 2): in *Webster's (Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, second college edition), experience is an actual "living through an event or events." The "living through" of an experience involves the total personality. We suggest that an experience cannot be understood by fragmentation or isolation; it has identity, continuity, and a broad base involving all human senses and activities. For example, upon reflection one can cite stimuli that evoked the possibility of an experience. One can trace activities within the scope of an experience that sequentially brought about participation in the experience and, finally, dissemination of that experience whether it was positive or negative. It is our contention that individuals, when they think of events from their own past, think of the totality of an experience, of the sequence of related activities within the experience and of their involvement in those activities. Individuals think of experience as an integrated whole involving mind, physical being, and the sum of their previous experience.

- g. de Lauretis (1984, p. 159): "Experience" is a word widely recurrent in the feminist discourse, as in many others ranging from philosophy to common conversational speech. My concern here is only with the former. Though very much in need of clarification and elaboration, the notion of experience seems to me to be crucially important to feminist theory in that it bears directly on the major issues that have emerged from the women's movement—subjectivity, sexuality, the body, and feminist political practice.... I should say from the outset that, by experience, I do not mean the mere registering of sensory data, or a purely mental (psychological) relation to objects and events, or the acquisition of skills and competences by accumulation or repeated exposure. I use the term not in the individualistic, idiosyncratic sense of something belonging to one and exclusively her own even though others might have "similar" experiences; but rather in the general sense of a process by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed. Through that process one places oneself or is placed in social reality, and so perceives and comprehends as subjective (referring to, even originating in, oneself) those relations—material, economic, and interpersonal—which are in fact social and, in a larger perspective, historical. The process is continuous, its achievement unending or daily renewed. For each person, therefore, subjectivity is an ongoing construction, not a fixed point of departure or arrival from which one then interacts with the world. On the contrary, it is the effect of that interaction—which I call experience; and thus it is produced not by external ideas, values, or material causes, but by one's personal, subjective, engagement in the practices, discourses, and institutions that lend significance (value, meaning, and affect) to the events of the world.
  - h. Scott (1991, pp. 782, 797): The process that de Lauretis describes operates crucially through differentiation; its effect is to constitute subjects as fixed and autonomous, and who are considered reliable sources of a knowledge that comes from access to the real by means of their experience. When talking about historians and other students of the human sciences it is important to note that this subject is both the object of inquiry—the person one studies in the present or the past—and the investigator him- or herself. Experience is not a word we can do without, although, given its usage to essentialize identity and reify the subject, it is tempting to abandon it altogether. But experience is so much a part of everyday language, so imbricated in our narratives that it seems futile to argue for its expulsion. It serves as a way of talking about what happened, of establishing difference and similarity, of claiming knowledge that is "unassailable."
  - i. Burley (2014, p. 33): contact with otherness. The implication is that awareness is the result of how one is changed (how experience is created) by contact with otherness.
2. Definition and Scope of Experiential History
- a. Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (1929): It is not experience which is experienced, but nature—stones, plants, animals, diseases, health, temperature, electricity, and so on. Things interacting in certain ways *are* experience; they are what is experienced. Linked in certain other ways with another natural object—the human organism—they are *how* things are experienced as well. Experience thus reaches down into nature; it has depth. It also has breadth and to an indefinitely elastic extent. It stretches. That stretch constitutes inference. (pp. 4a-1)

- i. Colapietro (2008): In our time, the meaning of experience is inextricably intertwined with the question of otherness, in its multiple senses, so much so that arguably the question of experience, in our time (as distinct from when Peirce, James, and Dewey were writing), has for most practical purposes been transformed into questions concerning alterity. The history of experience— both what philosophers have tried to identify by this term and the vagaries to which the word itself has been subjected— is one in which not only the meaning of this word but also its retention as a pivotal term of philosophical discourse are called into question, time and again. (p. 125)
- b. Herrick, “The Natural History of Experience” (1945): There is, first, extrospective experience consciously directed outward toward objects sensed, either within the body or outside of it, and toward appropriate response to the sensory data.... This awareness, is subjective, but since it is directed outward toward the objects by which it is excited it may be termed objective.... In sharp opposition to this is that subjective [introspective] experience which has no external reference. Here the knower is set over against the known. These experiences may, apparently, be emancipated from the limitations of space and time as these are recognized in the external world. The there may be here in thought, the past in memory and the future in anticipatory imagination may be tied in with the now of present experience. (p. 65)
  - i. The engineer says that a cantilever bridge experiences certain measurable stresses when a train of cars passes over it, and it reacts to this strain in measurable ways. The bridge experiences the strain but, so far as we can tell, it has no scientific knowledge about it... An ameba experiences the satisfaction of hunger when it devours a smaller animalcule. (p. 59)
- c. Eley (1995, pp. viii, ix): By exploring social history in its experiential or subjective dimensions, it was argued, conventional distinctions between the “public” and the “private” might also be transcended, and a more effective way of making the elusive connections between the political and cultural realms be found.... the turn toward ethnology also involved a shift from impersonal social processes to the experiences of human actors. “If social science had traditionally assumed the existence of objective sets of relationships, the need now was to study the social and cultural world from the perspective of the women, men and children who composed it.” [Medick & Sabeau, *Interest and Emotion*, 1984, p. 41] That is, the priority should be a social history of subjective meanings derived from highly concrete microhistorical settings.
- d. Eckert & Jones (2002): In recent decades various historiographical activities and trends have centred on concept of everyday life. The phrase itself is fairly old: *la vie quotidienne* was the title a series launched by the French publisher Hachette in the 1930s. In France the concept social history designed by the Annales school incorporated from early on a focus upon everyday life.... recently, the debate has broadened considerably, so that it now includes, for example, history of experience(s) ('Erfahrungsgeschichte') and micro-history. Finally, concept has become part of a more general debate about cultural history. There were numerous reasons for this shift, which reflects trends within historiography as well general social experience. The approach to everyday life can be seen as a politically motivated movement in opposition to the 'reigning authorities', the

academic establishment of historians. The political aspect has been expressed, among other things, through the perspective 'from below', that is the effort to analyse 'the experiences of mass of the people'. (p. 6)

- e. Synonymous with an individual's perceptual history, "experiential history is the full set of adaptive problems that an individual has faced" (Terzis, 2011, p. 388).
- f. LaCapra (2004, p. 3): In the last decade or so, historians have turned or returned to the question of experience, particularly with respect to nondominant groups and such problems as memory in its relation to history. The experiential turn has led to an increased interest in oral history and its role in recapturing the voices and experience of subordinate groups that may not have left sufficient traces in official documents and histories.... Hence much attention has been given to microhistory, which focuses on small or face-to-face groups... or even on the experience of an individual.... More recently, the experiential turn has also directed attention to the problem of the status and nature of testimony that does not simply convey information about events but bears witness to experience, notably in the difficult case of extreme occurrences and traumatic experience.