

**Anne Karpf/Review of EMOTIONAL LABOUR IN ORAL HISTORY
RESEARCH: THE HIDDEN TOLL Accepted version**

Jennifer Harding and Verusca Calabria

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For a very long time, emotions were assumed to be personal sensibilities, and thus the preserve of the 'psy' disciplines: they seemed, by definition, to belong outside the purview of other social sciences. Over the past twenty-five years or so, however, this idea has undergone a profound change: pioneering work by scholars such as Nikolas Rose and Sara Ahmed dismantled the idea of emotions as private experiences and recast them as socially governed and performed. In this stimulating and wide-ranging new book, Jennifer Harding (building on her 2009 co-edited *Emotions: A Cultural Studies Reader*) and Verusca Calabria situate oral history within this 'emotional turn' in the social sciences. Leaving behind the long shadow cast by positivism ('the ghost of the dispassionate investigator', they suggest, 'still lurks and haunts the academy'), they go further and focus their attention not on the emotional experiences of the researched but onto the researchers themselves. In so doing, they unearth a deep mine of powerful and often uncontained emotions that, in the modern neoliberal university, have nowhere to escape but inwards.

Their starting point is Hochschild's 1983 coinage of the term 'emotional labour'. Studying flight attendants for whom, she suggested, 'smiles are a *part of her work*' (p.8), Hochschild went on to explore what happens when 'feeling rules' are mandated and the managing of emotions becomes part of the suite of tasks required of labour, leading to what she saw as a commodification of emotions that stood in contrast to a private, authentic self.

While Harding and Calabria view Hochschild's text as foundational for their own research, they also critique her rigid binaries of false and authentic selves, and public and private emotions. At the same time, although they welcome social constructionism for its ability to show how feelings can be

shaped by social structures and change over time, they reject the idea that feeling necessarily comes from without, which itself perpetuates a split between the individual and social. Instead, they opt for what they call a culturalist approach, one that is more fluid, embodied and postmodern and which derives from a 'feminist relational ontology' (p.21).

They used this model to analyse interviews about conducting oral history research, on topics such as abuse and addiction, with thirteen researchers at different stages of their careers, some based in universities and others working on community projects. What emerged can only be described as a deluge of emotion. Researchers expressed intense feelings of anxiety, anger, frustration and disappointment, engendered in part by the nature of the material they were eliciting, but also because of the lack of emotional support they received from supervisors and colleagues. Hearing and witnessing other people's trauma can itself be traumatic, without adding in the sense of epistemic responsibility felt by researchers who wanted to do right by their often marginalised interviewees and carefully, respectfully shepherd their stories into the public domain. The task for oral historians of managing the sometimes overwhelming feelings of the people they interviewed, at the same time as their own, was often experienced as burdensome.

It could be argued that Harding and Calabria's own participants were a self-selected group, having responded to a call that the authors put out through their professional networks. It is conceivable that swathes of others, unaffected by the emotional dimensions of doing oral history on sensitive subjects, exist out there. More likely, though, is that this group was more willing to talk openly (albeit anonymised here) about the challenges they faced and speak for a much larger group doing this kind of research.

The question, therefore, is why has it taken so long for this subject to be addressed, especially since the 'emotional turn' in the social sciences is by now well entrenched? Here, Harding and Verusca challenge the twin shibboleths of modern research, reflexivity and positionality, arguing that these often treat power as a zero sum game so that, if the research participant has so little of it, ergo the researcher must have a lot. Oral historians, they suggest, following Jessee (2017), feel anxious about

drawing attention to their own sense of vulnerability for fear of deflecting attention away from their more vulnerable research participants. Harding and Verusca propose instead a view of positionality as ‘fluid, shifting, dynamic and relational’ (p.60), even while it acknowledges structural imbalances of power.

They identify another reason for a reluctance to engage with the oral historian’s emotions: the modern managerial and marketised university that prizes speed, fosters individualism and is itself situated in a deeply competitive higher education environment. The lack of support structures, of spaces of care, both formal and informal, that they document for this kind of oral history research is shocking, as are the accounts here of supervisor indifference to their students’ difficulties, alongside common collegial nonchalance. The result is that such problems become transposed into individual failings and thence a source of shame. When I finished reading the book, I immediately emailed one of my doctoral students to check on how she was coping with her fieldwork.

If there are any limitations in this thoughtful book — and there are but few — it is perhaps the relative lack of attention given to gender as a source of both the neglect of oral historians’ emotions (the majority of oral historians are women and emotions were for a long time considered ‘soft data’) and the disparagement of oral history itself (some participants reported their colleagues as claiming that oral history wasn’t ‘real’ history).

In addition, a psycho-social studies framework, which views the psyche and the social as mutually constitutive, might have enabled the authors to explore with their participants the extent to which their choice of a research subject with the power to stimulate in them such overwhelming feelings reflected a desire to work through earlier traumas of their own. While this is evident in some of the interviews, it could perhaps have been discussed more explicitly.

Overall, though, this is a sensitive, nuanced and deeply humane book which will open up the subject for qualitative researchers of every stripe. Although in no sense a ‘how to’ text, it does end with suggestions of ways to

move collectively towards a culture of care in oral history research. Such a move is urgently needed.

References

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