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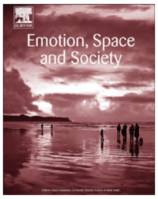

When family and research clash: The role of autobiographical emotion in the production of stories of the Italian civil war, 1943–1945

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ABSTRACT

This paper engages the emotional side of Second World War storytelling practices and research. Specifically, it explores how a politics of trust and togetherness animates communities of remembrance concerning the anti-Fascist Resistance experience in northern Italy. I reflect on my encounter with memories of wartime violence through the lens of autobiographical emotion. In a region torn asunder by conflicting stories of loss and violence during the anti-Nazi resistance and civil war, I possess a dual identity of researcher and Partisan's grandchild. This carries a powerful emotional bond of ethical obligations that cannot be ignored in the research process. Drawing on affect theory, I contextualize my oral history fieldwork experience in relation to that emotional bond.

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1. Introduction

The affective project has widened the epistemological horizons of geographical enquiry to the extent that some commentators dubbed it ‘the affective turn’ in the wake of the cultural turn of the 1970s (cf. Jacobs and Spillman, 2005; Clough and Halley, 2007). A focus on reflexive emotion features prominently in the awareness of the inter-personal consequences of conducting fieldwork and research (England, 1994; Bondi, 2005b; Askins, 2009; Burkitt, 2012). The affective turn has also problematized the body of the researcher in fieldwork, positioning constructions of the self at the forefront of scholarly practice and inferring that, as with all social action, fieldwork is embodied (Tolia-Kelly, 2006; Wetherell, 2012). As recent debates on ‘emotional reflexivity’ suggest, we now consider emotion and cognition to be interwoven and mutually constitutive (Burkitt, 2012).

In this paper I reflect on how oral history interviews may engage an affective process determined by a researcher's and their respondent's mutual autobiographical emotion. Drawing on affect as a vehicle and source of verbal and nonverbal communication (cf. Bondi, 2014), I first consider some of the challenges and opportunities of emotionally-charged research; I then situate my own encounter with emotionally-charged research data, and highlight some consequences of belonging to an affective community when doing oral history fieldwork. I illustrate the workings of autobiographical emotion through discussion of a particularly troubling interview.

The idea of autobiographical emotion is fundamental in the ‘clash’ between my research, my family, my home region and me, and I apply this term to explore the ways in which we all related and reacted to the research I did as part of a post-doctoral project. Between 2009 and 2013 I investigated sense of place and emotion in the experience of the anti-Nazi and anti-Fascist Italian Resistance of 1943–1945. I chose to focus on the resistance movement through interviews and participant observation in my native region of Veneto and specifically in my hometown Vittorio Veneto. The point was to explore the links between place, identity and performativity during the war and resistance in order to identify cultural-geographical themes in storytelling. However, while carrying out this research I unexpectedly clashed against a local, pro-resistance cultural heritage deeply rooted in my own family history and embedded in the geopolitical fabric of my proudly anti-Fascist hometown. At a familial level emotion had heavily filtered my learning about the facts of the armed resistance movement from a very early age. My family has always lived in that town – the town that would prove to be the emotional pivot linking all of our lives,

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although some of us (including myself) have at some point fled the nest. My home, it can be argued, has always been a “site of deep affective attachments and the scene of forceful affective enactments” (Richard and Rudnyckj, 2009: 59).

My household's private memory does not live in isolation. The wider community of Vittorio Veneto's carefully maintained and rehearsed version of the purity of the resistance constitutes a cultural memory that resists questioning. This is what I came up against when I questioned some unsavoury events during the civil war. Specifically, I experienced emotional trauma (dizziness, distress, momentary loss of self) when I discovered evidence of violence taking place alongside – and because of – the resistance. “Because the encounter with violence is a profoundly personal event, it is fundamentally linked to processes of self-identity and the politics of personhood” (Nordstrom, 1997: 4). In my case the encounter with violence perpetrated by Resistance fighters (silenced in local war narratives) affected not only the politics of my personhood but also the politics of my family's identity. These discoveries made me see my homeland through new eyes, in ways I had not anticipated.

I was a ‘local’ in the places I set out to investigate and thus already aware that my autobiographical emotion was essential to the success of the research. I knew I could obtain privileged access to memory gatekeepers because my late grandfather had been a much loved member of the Resistance veterans' community: our shared sense of identity – our shared autobiographical emotion – allowed me to peruse archives not otherwise open to academics. However, our tightly-knit affective community inadvertently sought to manipulate my research practice by expecting undivided loyalty to the cause of the Resistance, taking it for granted that I would disregard competing narratives. In the production of research I thus found myself entangled in disagreeing voices and silenced memories stemming from my family, the veteran Partisan community, and my own understandings of the events of 1943–1945. A hunch that I should not ‘go there’, that is to say not question the ethics of the Resistance experience, resonated with the disapproval of close family members and individuals in the veteran Resistance community whom I met thanks to my family connections.

Throughout this paper I use the terms emotion, community and autobiography. I also refer to mine and my interviewees' positioning within the research I do as ‘autobiographical emotion’, emotion engendered and shaped by my identity in relation to my respondents, which also feeds off the respondents' own emotional response, and is influenced by our love and respect for my grandfather. Autobiographical emotion is continually negotiated with respondents and my family, and as such it permeates every research interview/encounter in unpredictable ways (cf. Stewart, 2007). Askins (2009: 5) defines emotion as “both physical feeling and a conscious making sense of that feeling”: the reflexivity inbuilt in autobiographical emotion. Further, I use the term ‘community’ to indicate the actors in a specific cultural memory of the Resistance in northeast Italy which resists attempts to question the guilt of the Fascists or the violence perpetrated by Resistance fighters.

After all, emotions shape identities, subjectivities, communities, polities and histories (Burkitt, 2012; Cronin, 2012). Through a focus on autobiographical emotion I position myself and my affective community in what Weedon calls “conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual (…) sense of self, and her way of understanding her relation to the world” (1997: 32).

2. The workings of affect

Echoing de Certeau's (1984) and Rosenwein's (2010) reflections on how past emotions shape our understanding of events, memory-work with Resistance veterans contributes a textured feel for history. Each interview is an encounter in the present moment shaped by experience whilst concomitantly shaping experience in its unravelling (cf. Thompson, 2000: 100; Cándida-Smith, 2002; Wetherell, 2012). In this sense, oral history does not simply gather historical data to buttress more ‘objective’ facts and document-based data: it engages with persons and emotions (Hodgkin and Radstone, 2003: 6). Such encounters create an energy and mould an inter-subjective emotional place bridging the past and the present in the ‘here-and-now’: affect (See also Anderson, 2009). Affect moves through bodies, dreams and “social worldings of all kinds” (Stewart, 2007: 3) – it thrives in autobiographical emotion.

This paper situates autobiographical emotion in fieldwork in the wider experience of my home region and veteran community through the useful lens of affect; specifically, I draw on the notion of affect to make sense of the emotional bias carried by my identity, as “memory is central to the sense of self and is therefore a crucial part of our agency – the stance we take towards others and the way we act” (Burkitt, 2012: 468). I also follow Bondi's (2005b, 2014) conceptualization of affect as a nonverbal connection between persons in the fieldwork encounter. This process is somatized in our autobiographical emotion, in the moods and atmospheres consciously and consciously co-created and negotiated with my respondents.

Due to the interactive nature of memory-work, emotions such as hate, love, and shame play a central role in what is transmitted as cultural memory from one generation to the next (Hirsch, 1996; Olick, 2008). And, as we now openly acknowledge that we ‘write ourselves’ into research reflexively and inter-subjectively (England, 1994; Burkitt, 2012), accepting to become part of the story can be troubling (Mullings, 1999; Evans, 2012). Joint storytelling is a profoundly moving process (cf. Hardy, 2012; Bondi, 2014) and this is even truer when the subject matter of the research overlaps with a researcher's own family legacy.

Reflexivity has obviously been with us for a while. Some (England, 1994; Ellis and Bochner, 2000) refer to reflexivity as the status quo; others (Thompson, 2000: 134) as an innate quality in any ethical researcher. Anthropology, sociology, cultural studies and geography routinely engage with the reflexive politics of emotion in interviews: a preoccupation with defining and interpreting fieldwork interaction informs practice in fields like economic geography (Mullings, 1999), feminist geographies (England, 1994; Rose, 1997; Bingley, 2002), anthropology (Cappelletto, 2003), sociology (Altorki, 1988; Lughod, 1988; Bousetta, 1997; Burkitt, 2012; Hardy, 2012), development geography (Sultana, 2007) and cultural geography (Bondi, 2005a, 2014; Askins, 2009; Evans, 2012) to name a few.

Affect is a prominent feature of reflexivity as it is intersubjective and pervasive (Cronin, 2012): indeed, the main problem with the interpretation of affect ‘without a subject’ developed by Thrift and others (e.g. 2008) is that these give “no way of thinking through human and personal specificity” (Wetherell, 2012: 138): they are disembodied affects, and therefore not reflexive. All reflexive practitioners acknowledge the consequences of engaging with other people, their stories and emotions (Burkitt, 2012), and also of the respondents' expectations of what the research will look like (Evans, 2012).

Oral history interviews are one of the fieldwork methods through which researchers interact with communities of memory (Pickering and Keightley, 2012) in a way that understands history's different scales (cf. Hirsch, 2008). As practitioners we are all aware that interviewees are thinking about what the published research will say about them (Thompson, 2000). We now increasingly admit that this anxiety may encroach on our own personal worlds as well as marking the worlds we come into contact with. The main point is

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