

Communities of Experience

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People tend to share their experiences and to relate them to other people's experiences. In these social processes, people recognize similarities between their experiences and this, in turn, creates feelings of sameness and peerness based on the assumption of having experienced something together or having experienced a 'same' thing. Starting with this simple observation, we claim that there emerge overlapping, complex and historically determined communities of identification, that is, communities of experience.

It is usually relatively straightforward to demonstrate how a person's experiences are shaped by certain historical events and the surrounding social and cultural circumstances. It is more challenging to demonstrate how experiences act back upon the communities, structures and cultural meanings. How do we get from studying subjective experiences to explaining society? Historians constantly employ experiences to make their points, but this happens mostly without much thought to how experiences transform into action, identities, intentions and new thoughts. How to conceptualize the evidence of experience in this respect, in a way that would point to empirically approachable research questions?[1]

Developing 'communities of experience' as a theoretical concept is one promising way to answer these questions. As a working definition, we use the concept to refer to people who recognize similarities in their experiences, who share and negotiate these experiences and their meanings with each other, and who start to identify themselves as a group, bound together with a sense of shared experience.[2]

The intellectual pedigree for this approach points to the German history of experiences (*Erfahrungsgeschichte*), which is largely unknown in Anglophone research. In this tradition, it has been crucial to understand experiences as a happening between people in social and cultural relations. Utilizing the German distinction between *Erlebnisse* as a kind of visceral experiences and a process of individual 'experiencing', and *Erfahrungen* as socially shaped 'experiences proper', the latter are seen as mediated, linguistic processes between individuals and social groups. Furthermore, shared experiences may sediment into semantic systems, knowledge regimes, social structures and societal institutions.[3]

It is possible to recognize affinity here with the concept of emotional communities pioneered by Barbara H. Rosenwein. We agree with Rosenwein that, like emotional communities, the communities of experience must always be understood in the plural, also when looking at a single person or a single social group.[4] However, there is an important difference too. Rosenwein's concept is usually an end product of analysis: Having studied the emotional

norms and practices of a given group of people, a historian recognizes it as an emotional community. In contrast to this, the concept of communities of experience assumes that the historical persons in question have themselves perceived the supposed sameness of their experiences and, even more, discussed, processed or debated the meaning of these experiences with each other. Thus, a community of experience has a conscious existence for the historical actors – although they have not, of course, called it by this name. It is also possible that this conscious existence is based on implicit or imaginary assumptions.

As a concept, communities of experience directs our attention to those situations and processes where people share their experiences. This is a process of recognizing the experiences of others and what unites or separates our experiences. Such a recognition can happen in different ways: through shared identities, through already existing communities (of experience) or through the force of events, which creates a new identity for those who have experienced it. In other words: a community of experience can be formed around a specific, transformative event, but it may also evolve more gradually when individual experiences are processed, interpreted and mediated within the shared social spaces, that is, a common social world.^[5] A community of experience begins to take shape at the moment when people recognize similarities in their experiences, start to negotiate the meaning of this supposed sameness, and, in the process, construct social ties and identify with each other, in different degrees and intensities. The base for the recognition of the ‘sameness’ may be either real or imagined, and likewise, the shared space can as well be a virtual one. Any person would, naturally, belong simultaneously to many communities of experience.

It is, thus, an empirical question for historians to show that such a recognition took place and that this led to new experience-based social bonds and networks. At the same time, it is important to note that on the basis of different identities, earlier life experiences, other predispositions and situational factors, people may experience the same event or phenomenon in completely different and opposite ways – and that people constantly deny and reject the supposed sameness of their experiences. The emergence of communities of experiences is often a matter of conflicts and disagreements over the meaning of what people have experienced. Communities of experience may remain as closed, hidden enclaves, comparable to the emotional refuge conceptualized by William M. Reddy.^[6] And, furthermore, one should pay attention to how the already existing communities of experience may block, silence and marginalize competing interpretations when new communities of experience attempt to take shape.^[7] This means ongoing processes of negotiation between the different communities of experience, leading to discursive struggles, competition and finally to ideological and societal changes.

When communities of experience have been formed, they often start functioning as memory communities, the members of which, connected by a shared sense of meaning and relevance of certain experiences, reflect on their past to make sense of their present lives. This social remembering is often accompanied by the feeling that memories can be shared only with the members of the community of experience.^[8] On the other hand, some individuals, especially if facing sudden, overwhelming or catastrophic situations, may encounter difficulties expressing their experiences in a culturally appropriate manner. Over time, individuals may seek and find groups in which they have an opportunity to develop new understanding and interpretations of their earlier experiences. New members are introduced into these communities and familiarized with the collective past of the community through memory work, gatherings, rituals and stories, ensuring that they attain the required social identity.^[9]

One could actually claim that in order to continue as cohesive and relevant entities, communities of experience need to transform into memory communities.

There is indeed dialectic dynamism between the experiences and the community. While the shared sense of experiences would be a necessary requirement for a community of experience to form, the community, in turn, shapes and directs the interpretation of experiences, the ways in which they are shared – and how they finally become visible for the historian.^[10] Any narration of one's childhood memories, for example, draws on a shared idea of a certain socially and culturally determined 'repertoire of agency' a child would have possessed and in the frames of which the experiences are to be interpreted, shared and reacted to; that is, these narrations depend on the particular community of experiences invoked.

Studying these dynamics and tensions means studying the ways experiences influence history. Communities of experience are thus one route to investigate how subjective experiences turn into action, social relations and organizations, new identities, norms and attitudes, into political programmes and agendas. We may indeed ask if there can exist a community without allegedly shared experiences, even if every historical context has its own particular questions in relation to how experiences form into communities. What we see evolving around the concept of communities of experience, in short, is a new field for historical investigation with a rich set of empirical and theoretical questions.

Notes

[1] This is also an attempt to find an answer to Joan W. Scott's critique of 'authentic experiences' in her 'The Evidence of Experience', *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991): 773–97.

[2] For a similar definition, see Ville Kivimäki, Sami Suodenjoki and Tanja Vahtikari, 'Lived Nation: Histories of Experience and Emotion in Understanding Nationalism', *Lived Nation as the History of Experiences and Emotions in Finland, 1800–2000*, eds Kivimäki, Suodenjoki and Vahtikari (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 13–14. For the (probably) earliest discussion linking experience and the values and the everyday of a community with the concept of 'community of experiences', see John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee, 1980 [1934]), 4, 105.

[3] On the theoretical premises of the German *Erfahrungsgeschichte*, see Nikolaus Buschmann and Horst Carl, eds, *Die Erfahrung des Krieges: Erfahrungsgeschichtliche Perspektiven von der Französischen Revolution bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2001). On the concepts of *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* in German historiography, see Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 222–34.

[4] Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 2, 20–5.

[5] See also Sari Katajala-Peltomaa & Raisa M. Toivo, 'Introduction: Religion as Historical Experience', *Histories of Experience in the World of Lived Religion*, eds Katajala-Peltomaa and Toivo (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 18–20. For the social world framework, see Anselm Strauss 'A Social World Perspective', *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* 1 (1978): 119–28.

[6] William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 128–9.

[7] Cf. Jay Winter, ‘Thinking about silence’, *Shadows of War: A Social History of Silence in the Twentieth Century*, eds Efrat Ben-Ze’ev, Ruth Ginio and Jay Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 4–8.

[8] Winter, ‘Thinking about silence’; Mary Fulbrook has also employed concepts of ‘communities of experience’ and ‘communities of identification’ to investigate how constructions of the past change across generations, especially in relation to troublesome past of Nazi Germany. See Mary Fulbrook, ‘East Germans in a Post-Nazi State: Communities of Experience, Connection and Identification’, *Becoming East German: Socialist Structures and Sensibilities after Hitler*, eds Mary Fulbrook & Andrew Port (New York: Berghahn, 2013); Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1994), 48.

[9] Barbara A. Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003), 15.

[10] Miia Kuha, ‘Extended Families as Communities of Religious Experience in Late Seventeenth-Century Eastern Finland’, *Histories of Experience*, eds Katajalla-Peltomaa and Toivo, 139–61. For an early application of the communities of experience viewpoint, see also Ella Viitaniemi, ‘Muurarimestari Kustaa Stenman ja katumaton maailma: Pietismi, kirjoittaminen ja kokemuksen siirtäminen länsisuomalaisella maaseudulla 1700-luvun jälkipuoliskolla’, *Eletty historia: Kokemus näkökulmana menneisyyteen*, eds Johanna Annola, Ville Kivimäki and Antti Malinen (Tampere: Vastapaino, 2019), 76–7.

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