

REMEMBERING EMOTIONS IN EGO-DOCUMENTS. A FEW INSIGHTS FROM COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND NEUROSCIENCE¹

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The aim of this article is to problematize the relationship between emotions and memory in ego-documents. Ego-documents (self-narratives or first-hand accounts), such as memoirs, diaries and autobiographies, have traditionally been considered sources that provide direct access to the emotions of people in the past. However – what happens to emotions between the moment they are experienced and the moment of writing? In this article I seek to find an answer to this question, drawing on the findings of cognitive psychology and neuroscience. I provide an overview of this highly disparate domain of research, focusing particularly on flashbulb memory and the fading affect bias. In the second section, I show that cognitive appraisal theories can be particularly useful for the history of emotions because they deny that emotions are purely physical arousals and consider the reconstructive nature of remembered emotions.

Although psychological and neuroscientific research into the relationship between memory and emotions has found little common ground, existing studies have demonstrated that remembered emotions cannot be interpreted as direct, unchanged “mirrors of the soul”. On the other hand, the empirical research carried out in these fields can be inspirational for the history of emotions, which is primarily focused on social practices, schemas and norms, in turning our attention back to real lived experience.

1 This research was supported by GAČR (the Czech Science Foundation) grant 15-02993S entitled Family Memory and Intergenerational Transmission of Identities. The first draft of this text was prepared for the XXIIth International Congress of Historical Sciences held in August 2015 in Jinan, China. The text was read as part of one of the congress's four Major Themes, called Historicising Emotions, organized by Ute Frevert (Max Planck Institute, Berlin) and by Andrew Lynch (University of Western Australia). My thanks go to all participants in the Major Theme whose interest encouraged me to develop my initial ideas further.

Key words: memory, history of emotions, ego-documents, cognitive sciences, psychology, body

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Over the past decades, ego-documents such as diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, personal letters, family chronicles and oral historical accounts have become privileged sources for historians.² Their vogue in historical research is undoubtedly supported by the contemporary “public culture of self-divulgence” characterized by the appearance of various types of confessions in numerous media.³

It has commonly been believed (and still is, above all among journalists and amateur historians) that these genres reveal more than any other historical document privileged information about the “self” and uncover their authors’ inner feelings and emotions. “What is more thoroughly individual, what is more personal than an emotion?” Lucien Febvre asked in his 1941 study on sensibility and history, urging historians to study emotions and thereby to understand “all the processes in society”.⁴

This singular appeal went unheard at the time, but was later picked up by the emerging history of emotions – considered a “star” of present-day historiography, a burgeoning field with several research centres, book series and a scale encompassing all historical periods and geographical areas, which strives to show that emotions “have a history and make history”.⁵

- 2 Although the term “ego-document” is largely accepted, it has also been questioned. See e.g. KASPAR VON GREYERZ, *Ego-Documents. The Last Word?*, *German History* 28/2010, no. 3, pp. 273–282. In this article, the terms firsthand accounts, personal narratives and self-narratives are used as synonyms for “ego-documents”.
- 3 LYNN ABRAMS, *Oral History Theory*, New York 2010, p. 36.
- 4 LUCIEN FEBVRE, *Comment reconstituer la vie affective d’autrefois? La sensibilité et l’histoire*, in: Lucien Febvre, *Combats pour l’histoire*, Paris 1992, pp. 260–279.
- 5 The website of the Research Centre for the History of Emotions at the Max Planck Institute of Human Development, Berlin – www.mpib-berlin.mpg.de/en/research/history-of-emotions, accessed August 4, 2018. For overviews of the field, see e.g. SUSAN J. MATT, *Current Emotion Research in History. Or, Doing History from the Inside Out*, *Emotion Review* 3/2011, no. 1, pp. 117–124; ROB BODDICE, *The Affective Turn. Historicising the Emotions*, in: *Psychology and History. Interdisciplinary Explorations*, (eds.) Cristian Tileagă, Jovan Byford, Cambridge, 2014, pp. 147–165; RADMILA ŠVAŘÍČKOVÁ SLABÁKOVÁ, *Dějiny emocí: nové paradigma*

It would be erroneous, however, to think that the history of emotions draws exclusively on the close examination of ego-documents. On the contrary, in the 1980s Peter Stearns, one of the founding fathers of the history of emotions, asserted that historians have no access to “true” emotions and for that reason they are obliged to separate them from the body and study their manifestations in cultural norms and rules, as expressed in normative documents such as conduct books. “Emotionology”, a new field, was established to focus on the attitudes or standards that societies or groups maintain towards emotions and their expression.⁶

A new vogue in the history of emotions initiated by Barbara Rosenwein at the turn of millennium did not focus on ego-documents either. The reasons for this were both practical (notably, the absence of relevant sources for earlier historical periods), as well as theoretical. In their effort to refute the claims of some psychologists and neuroscientists about the essentialist and universal nature of emotions, historians of emotions preferred to focus on long-term changes and the historical character of emotions rather than on individual feelings.⁷

The aim of this article is to return to individual feelings in ego-documents and tackle the question of the individual memory expressed in them.⁸ No research has been carried out on the relationship between emotion and memory in ego-documents in particular, and this article intends to fill that gap. Above all, it intends to summarize the current state of emotional memory research in cognitive psychology and neuroscience and thus open the door to a more informed and careful theorization of the emotions expressed in ego-documents.

ve studiu historie [History of Emotions. A New Paradigm in the Study of History], ČČH 114/2016, pp. 291–315.

- 6 PETER N. STEARNS, CAROL Z. STEARNS, *Emotionology. Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards*, *American Historical Review* 90/1985, pp. 813–836.
- 7 Paul Ekman's thesis about universal facial expressions of emotions has been vividly refuted. BARBARA ROSENWEIN, *Worrying about Emotions in History*, *The American Historical Review* 107/2002, pp. 821–845; BARBARA ROSENWEIN, *Problems and Methods in the History of Emotions*, *Passions in Context. Journal of the History and Philosophy of the Emotions* 1/2010, p. 4, www.passionsincontext.de/, accessed July 13, 2015. See also JÁN PLAMPER, *The History of Emotions. An Introduction*, Oxford 2015.
- 8 It is necessary to add that in consequence of a massive expansion of collective memory studies, following Halbwach's idea that individuals remember through dialogue with others within social groups, the role of individual memory was minimized or even denied. ANNA GREEN, *Individual Remembering and 'Collective memory.'* *Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates*, *Oral history* 2/2004, pp. 35–44.

A Diary, Emotion and Retrospection

In 1818 or 1819, Sophie countess Mensdorff-Pouilly (1778–1835), born princess Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld, noted in her diary: “Today, it is fourteen or fifteen years since that day on 8th October that was so important for me. You know, after that evening in the chateau in Bayreuth, the evening was unsettled and the storm was brewing, the wind was hurling raindrops at the window, I was waiting for you in a half-feverish state, half hopeful, I was trembling and at the same time, I was very happy, we were young and foolish, how life changes as the years pass.”⁹

These sentences, added fourteen or fifteen years later to the page of her diary where the inscription dated 8 October 1804 was originally made, inform us about her emotions, on the day in 1804 when she first met her future husband. Her initial diary entries for that day and the days that followed, during which she spent time with him, reveal a whole range of intense feelings: happiness when she meets him, desperation if she is not with him. She is joyful and passionate about spending evenings with her loved one but also drowned in tears and anxious at the prospect of not seeing him again.

A historian’s interpretation of these exalted emotions (even by a historian of emotions) would probably emphasise the romanticism and sentimentalism typical to this period. It would consider the literary conventions of the early 19th century, and in the end, would probably put Sophie down as an enthusiastic reader of Rousseau whose model of self-examination of the soul in his *Confessions* would have lent this tone to her emotions.

However, these social and literary conventions tell us little about Sophie as a person and her real experiences. It seems that she returned to her earlier diary entries from time to time and recalled how she had felt. She recollected her earlier happy days, but for instance in 1830 also noted: “I have the same gloomy thoughts and anxieties as I had at that time”, meaning the period of her youth, around 1800. Her retrospective notes about her feelings inevitably lead us to the question of the relationship between emotion and memory: Is it possible that

9 Sophie, countess Mensdorff-Pouilly (1778–1835), born Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld, was the sister of Leopold I of Belgium and aunt of Queen Victoria. In 1804 she married French emigré Emanuel Mensdorff-Pouilly who settled in the Austrian lands (specifically in the contemporary Czech Republic) after the Revolution and Napoleonic wars. She wrote diaries throughout her life, carefully describing each day, though not all the diaries have been preserved. Quoted in RADMILA SLABÁKOVÁ, *Le destin d’une famille noble émigrée d’origine française dans l’empire des Habsbourg et en Tchécoslovaquie de la fin du XVIIIe aux années trente du XX^e siècle: les Mensdorff-Pouilly*, Grenoble 1999 (diss.), p. 76.

she remembered how she had felt thirty years ago? Is it possible that she could have the very same feelings? Or was it only the note in her diary and its contents that she remembered?

Although diaries are not typical self-narrative retrospective genres,¹⁰ Sophie's notes point to the centre of our interest. What happens to emotions between the moment they are felt and the moment they are written down? What happens to the emotions we felt ten or thirty years ago? Are they stored forever? Can they be forgotten? Can they be reinvented?

Unfortunately, the discipline of history does not provide us with adequate interpretative tools to consider these questions. On the other hand, emotions and memory have been the subject of research in both psychology and neuroscience. Unlike some historians would have us believe, psychologists do focus on emotions and their effects on memory over longer intervals, encompassing several years or even decades, and this kind of research is particularly relevant for historians of emotions. I suggest turning to these disciplines and present the current state of knowledge on the subject in them.

It is not easy to write this kind of overview because research into emotions and memory in these disciplines has moved in numerous directions without any convergent point. These areas of research have been described more than once as a "patchwork of more-or-less distantly related subdisciplines, each with their own dynamics and disputes".¹¹ Each of these subdisciplines has its own objectives, methods and outcomes and it is not exceptional to find that they make totally opposite claims (e.g. on the question of what emotions do to memory there have long been two opposing views – that emotional memories are indelible, and that emotion has no special effect on memory at all).¹² Moreover, it is extremely difficult for an outsider from the humanities to judge the validity of a given theory or experiment, to understand how these fit into a particular subfield and what importance they bring to the whole discipline. The following

10 Typical first-person retrospective narratives are memoirs and autobiographies, which retell a period of one's life or one's whole life till the moment of writing. Diaries may evolve into memoirs but are usually written almost immediately after the events have been experienced.

11 JOHN SUTTON, CELIA B. HARRIS, AMANDA J. BARNIER, *Memory and Cognition*, in: *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, (eds.) Susannah Radstone, Barry Schwarz, New York 2010, pp. 209–226, esp. p. 210. Similar observations also in FELICITY CALLARD, CONSTANTINA PAPOULIAS, *Affect and Embodiment*, in: *Memory*, pp. 246–262, esp. p. 248; J. PLAMPER, *The History of Emotions*.

12 LINDA J. LEVINE, DAVID A. PIZARRO, *Emotion and Memory Research. A Grumpy Overview*, *Social Cognition* 22/2004, pp. 530–554.

overview cannot thus be considered exhaustive or representative. It was guided rather by a desire to pick up a number of these theories and experiments, which seem pertinent for personal retrospective memories and the history of emotions.

As such I identified four relevant strands of psychological and neurological research related to personal and autobiographical memory to present in this article. First, I will discuss eyewitness, traumatic and flashbulb memories. In the second part of the article I will focus on cognitive appraisal theories of emotions, including a brief discussion of the hotly debated split between cognition and emotion in the cognitive sciences. Cognitive appraisal theories seem to be particularly useful for the history of emotions because they do not treat emotions as physiological arousals but as aspects of cognition. In the end, the article will return to our diary extract and discuss it with the help of the article's findings.

Eyewitness, trauma and flashbulb memories

Discussions within the complicated and disparate domain of memory and emotion research have usually focused on three questions: What impact does emotion have on memory (in other words whether emotion enhances or diminishes memory), whether remembered emotions are persistent in the memory, and whether special mechanisms are required to account for the effect of emotion on memory.¹³ Three areas of research are considered to be key to the study of these questions: eyewitness memory, traumatic memory, and flashbulb memory.¹⁴ All of these three kinds of memory concern autobiographical memory, as does a fourth area of research, (re)discovered rather recently, called the Fading Affect Bias.

Although the research examining the above-mentioned questions has reported divergent results, there currently seems to be consensus that emotions enhance our memory (in response to the first question).¹⁵ Like Sophie, countless Mensdorff-Pouilly, the readers of this article will very probably remember the day they met their future spouse for the first time (and what they did during that first meeting) but will have forgotten what they did e. g. on March 14th ten years

13 JONATHAN W. SCHOOLER, ERIC EICH, *Memory for Emotional Events*, in: The Oxford Handbook of Memory, (ed.) Endel Tulving, Oxford 2000, pp. 379–392. Also a summary of research questions in L. J. LEVINE, D. A. PIZARRO, *Emotion and Memory Research. a Grumpy Overview*.

14 These three research domains are depicted in J. W. SCHOOLER, E. EICH, *Memory for Emotional Events*.

15 L. J. LEVINE, D. A. PIZARRO, *Emotion and Memory Research. A Grumpy Overview*.

ago. Emotional events are better remembered than non-emotional events and we will look below at various hypotheses put forward in contemporary research to explain this impact of emotions on memory.

However, no claims related to emotion and memory seem to be absolutely valid. Even this apparently improved recall of emotional events is subject to various “buts”. Research on eyewitness memory, important for forensic psychology has, after initial investigations of the impact of negative emotions on eyewitness memory, focused on the contrast between memory of central events versus memory of peripheral events.¹⁶ A classic example is that when witnessing a crime, a “weapon focus effect” occurs: the high emotions aroused by the situation can narrow the focus of attention so that memory focuses on central events and not on peripheral events. Witnesses usually do not remember the face of the perpetrator or other details of the crime situation when a weapon was present.¹⁷

The second question – whether emotions are persistent in memory – is more complicated still. “An experience may be so exciting as to almost leave a scar on the cerebral tissue,” William James wrote in 1890.¹⁸ A similar consideration accompanied the “discovery” of flashbulb memories in the 1970s.¹⁹ In their 1977 seminal study, American psychologists Roger Brown and James Kulik argued that the circumstances of a highly surprising and unexpected public event which has consequences and personal meaning become inscribed into the brain with almost photographic accuracy.²⁰ The prototype case they used was that of the assassination of the U.S. president John Kennedy, but their questionnaire also included the deaths of other famous public individuals such as Martin Luther

16 J. W. SCHOOLER, E. EICH, *Memory for Emotional Events*.

17 W. SCHOOLER, E. EICH, *Memory for Emotional Events*. This effect has a tremendous impact on witnesses' (in)ability to pick out the right perpetrator. Because of their weak memory of the details of the event, witnesses may conjure up various false 'memories'. The issue of central and peripheral details has been investigated in various other contexts outside forensic psychology, see e. g. TIZIANA LANCIANO, ANTOINIETTA CURCI, *Memory for Emotional Events. The Accuracy of Central and Peripheral Details*, *Europe's Journal of Psychology* 7/2011, pp. 323–336.

18 WILLIAM JAMES, *Principles of Psychology*, New York 1890, p. 670. Quoted in L. J. LEVINE, D. A. PIZARRO, *Emotion and Memory Research. A Grumpy Overview*.

19 It is noteworthy that flashbulb memories incited interest among present-day psychologists in the study of emotions.

20 ROGER BROWN, JAMES KULIK, *Flashbulb Memories*, *Cognition* 5/1977, pp. 73–99. A brief overview of the study of flashbulb memories in WILLIAM HIRST, ELISABETH A. PHELPS, ROBERT MEKSIN, *A Ten-Year Follow-Up of a Study of Memory for the Attack of September 11, 2001. Flashbulb Memories and Memories for Flashbulb Events*, *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 144/2015, pp. 604–623.

King Jr., and personally significant events such as the sudden loss of a loved one. Their initial hypothesis was that people hold highly vivid and detailed memories about what they did and where they were or how they felt when they first heard about such an unexpected public or personal event.

Following their pioneering study, a huge amount of subsequent research was carried out: these included studies of memories of other public figures' deaths (such as Princess Diana) and politically important events, for example the resignation of Margaret Thatcher, the election of Barack Obama, and the fall of the Berlin wall. Some research also focused on memories of natural disasters and unexpected catastrophes, such as the earthquake in Turkey and the attack of 11 September 2001 in New York.²¹

Brown and Kulik posited that there may be a special neural mechanism that is triggered by the emotional arousal related to an event that is unexpected or extremely important (our third question). This seems to be supported by contemporary research in cognitive neuroscience. Joseph Le Doux, one of the best known popularisers of neuroscience, advanced the theory of the "emotional brain".²² When researching the function of fear in the brain, he discovered that the amygdala, which is responsible for strengthening emotional memories, plays a critical role. When we are emotionally aroused, the amygdala is stimulated and adrenaline is released. The hippocampus, the centre of memory function, is involved, and our memories thus become sharper.²³

According to Joseph Le Doux, the two amygdalae – almond-shaped regions located on each side of the brain – work independently on our cognition (while functioning jointly with the cortical region where cognition occurs). A classic example is that of an encounter with a snake or a spider: when an individual encounters a threatening stimulus, such as a snake (or an object looking like a snake), the amygdala responds seemingly automatically to increase fear – immediate physiological actions such as freezing, muscular preparations or in-

21 Summarized in WILLIAM HIRST, ELISABETH A. PHELPS, ROBERT MEKSIN, *A Ten-Year Follow-Up of a Study of Memory for the Attack of September 11, 2001*. The terrorist attack of 11 September 2011 is probably the most frequently studied occurrence of flashbulb memory – more than twenty studies had been published by 2015.

22 JOSEPH LE LEDOUX, *The Emotional Brain. The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life*, New York 1996.

23 According to James McGaugh, American neurobiologist, many studies have confirmed that "low-intensity stimulation of the amygdala after training enhanced memory". In contrast, drugs injected into the amygdala impaired memory. JAMES MCGAUGH, *Memory and Emotion. The Making of Lasting Memories*, New York 2003, pp. 71–72.

creased heart rate are initiated despite any previous knowledge that the snake in question is harmless or non-venomous.²⁴ Emotional memories, then, are not in fact memories at all, they are individuals' instantaneous and instinctive reactions.

Historians of emotions are not particularly happy about Joseph le Doux's findings which, in some way, deny emotions any historical status (if emotions were evolutionary instincts, preserved from the stone-age period, natural and universal, there would be no reason to study their history), and research on trauma may seem similarly threatening for them.²⁵

Flashbulb memories, particularly those associated with negative events, can be seen to belong to a more general class of traumatic memories. Research by Bessel van der Kolk, a Dutch-American psychiatrist who is one of the psychologists most frequently cited by researchers in the humanities, is of particular interest.²⁶ He argues that trauma produces embodied and non-representational memories (outside cognition) which are more present and intense than usual memories of past events. Trauma does not occur only in the brain: memories can be trapped in the body and manifest physiologically. The title of his latest book *The Body Keeps the Score*, sums this up eloquently.²⁷

For other researchers however, the question of whether memories of traumatic events can be extinguished has not yet been solved. Is it possible to forget traumatic, highly emotional events? Research into concentration camp survivors' memories collected in the periods 1943–1947 and 1984–1987, in what was perhaps the longest time-scale studied in relation to emotional memories, concluded that memories were generally well remembered.²⁸ Its authors, Dutch cognitive psychologists Willem A. Wagenaar and Jop Groeneweg, however

24 According to Jan Plamper, the example of the poisonous snake is probably the most cited example in general discussions on emotions. J. PLAMPER, *The History of Emotions*, p. 213.

25 Historians of emotion vehemently deny an essentialist and universalist view of emotions and strongly advocate their constructionist nature. See e. g. BARBARA ROSENWEIN, *Worrying about Emotions in History*. See also JAN PLAMPER, *An Introduction*, p. 273, discussing the work of DANIEL L. SMAIL, *On Deep History and the Human Brain*, Berkeley 2008. J. Plamper argues against Smail's view that emotions are "relatively automated", "no different from reflexes", "patterns of stimulus and response".

26 F. CALLARD, C. PAPOULIAS, *Affect and Embodiment*.

27 BESSEL VAN DER KOLK, *The Body Keeps the Score. Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, New York 2014.

28 The researchers drew their data from 78 witnesses in a case against Marinus De Rijke who was accused of Nazi crimes in Camp Erika in the Netherlands. WILLEM A. WAGENAAR, JOP GROENEWEG, *The Memory of Concentration Camp Survivors*, Applied Cognitive Psychology 4/1990, no. 2, pp. 77–87.

also asserted that “specific but essential details were forgotten”, such as having been maltreated or having witnessed murder. Survivors also tended to forget the names and appearance of their torturers. It seems that even emotionally intense memories can be forgotten as well as memories for nonemotional events.

Studies of flashbulb memories have in this sense curiously confirmed the conclusions of Wagenaar and Groneweg. Of particular importance for historians of self-narrative genres are examinations of flashbulb memories that encompass recollections of events over an extended period of time, i.e. with long retention intervals. Although the majority of flashbulb memory studies have examined retention intervals of a few months or at most two to three years, one study conducted on the attack of 11 September 2011 used extended retention intervals of two and even ten years.²⁹ This study, led by a consortium of researchers across the United States, examined flashbulb memories within a week of the attack and 11, 25 and 119 months after the attack. The event memories, i.e. remembered facts about the attack (for instance how many planes were involved), were explored together with flashbulb memories (the circumstances in which the participants learned about the attack). A total of 3,246 participants completed the first three surveys but the researchers’ centre of interest was the set of 202 respondents who participated in all four surveys. The researchers examined the level of forgetfulness as well as the consistency between what the participants recollected at one time and what they recollected subsequently. They were also interested in the confidence the participants gave to their recollected memories.

The researchers observed that the level of emotional intensity declined over time and that both flashbulb and event memories were rapidly forgotten within the first year, but thereafter memories were not significantly forgotten. They considered the phenomenon of a “permastore”, which means that memories retained for a certain period of time, usually around six years, cannot later be forgotten. Crucially, the participants remained very confident about their accurate flashbulb memories and any inconsistencies in these memories were more likely to be repeated than corrected over the period of ten years. On the other hand, event memories tended to be corrected, due to the influence of media such as films about the attack released over the research period, and discussions with friends. This research showed that recollections of extremely emotional events can be retained over a long period of time, but that their vividness does not ensure their accuracy. In other words, people may keep a high level of confidence in inaccur-

29 W. HIRST, E. A. PHELPS, R. MEKSIN et al., *A Ten-Year Follow-Up of a Study of Memory for the Attack of September 11, 2001*.

ate memories of events that happened a long time ago. Such autobiographical memories of emotional events may not be forgotten even though they do not accurately reflect what really happened.³⁰

The Fading Affect Bias and Autobiographical Memory

Let us turn our attention to another subdiscipline examining the relationship between memory and emotion in personal memory, the fading affect bias (FAB). Initially introduced to explain the decline in the emotionality of certain events over time in general, the FAB is currently understood as a tendency to forget the emotion associated with negative memories more quickly than the emotion associated with positive memories.³¹ Research into the FAB is usually conducted on the basis of diary records, with participants evaluating their emotions associated with chosen events and re-evaluating those emotions after a certain period of time, usually several weeks or months.

A pioneering study in the field was that of David S. Holmes in 1970, who studied the diary records of 26 participants and asserted that negative emotions faded faster over time than positive emotions.³² An American cognitive psychologist, W. Richard Walker initiated the modern era of FAB studies in 1997, with his discussion of the role of memory in remembering emotions, observing as Holmes did that emotions associated with unpleasant events faded more rapidly than emotions associated with positive events.³³

The FAB is usually explained as the result of a tendency towards self-consistency and self-protection, towards maintaining the positivity of the self-concept.³⁴ However, researchers have asked to what extent positivity and cheerfulness are

30 The authors discussed the possible consequences of flashbulb memories for collective memory of important public events, which can become stable over time although they might be based on inconsistent autobiographical flashbulb memories. They also advanced an explanation of the phenomenon – flashbulb memories are unlike other autobiographical memories built around public events.

31 An overview of the history of research on the FAB in W. RICHARD WALKER, JOHN J. SKOWRONSKI, *The Fading Affect Bias. But What the Hell is it For?*, *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 23/2009, no. 8, pp. 1122–1136.

32 DAVID S. HOLMES, *Differential Change in Affective Intensity and the Forgetting of Unpleasant Personal Experiences*, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 15/1970, no. 3, pp. 234–239.

33 W. RICHARD WALKER, RODNEY J. VOGL, CHARLES P. THOMPSON, *Autobiographical Memory. Unpleasantness Fades Faster than Pleasantness Over Time*, *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 11/1997, no 5, pp. 399–413.

34 W. R. WALKER, J. J. SKOWRONSKI, *The Fading Affect Bias. But What the Hell is it For?*

the effects of cultural norms and values. Since the majority of FAB research has been carried out on American undergraduates, the researchers have looked at whether the FAB could be the result of American culture preferring positivity as a typical American worldview.³⁵ It has also been observed that cheerfulness and happiness are considered desirable and good in European and American culture but that this is not a universal emotional norm.³⁶ These questions recently led to a pancultural study of the FAB, based on the recollections of 562 participants across ten cultures. The researchers included Afro-Americans and Native Americans in this study because they hypothesized that their treatment in the past might have influenced how they remember emotions. Nevertheless, they observed the FAB everywhere, depending on local culture, but as an omnipresent emotion. According to the researchers, the FAB is an affect regulation mechanism that is not impacted by cultures and norms (like facial expressions, which according to Paul Ekman are also universal).³⁷

These observations have tremendous implications for the study of autobiographical memory and thus for any analysis of ego-documents, particularly those provided by the contemporary era. If the FAB occurs automatically, then its effect cannot be interpreted as an intentional selection of what an author preferred to recollect or leave to posterity in their memoir, autobiography or oral-history interview. Historians should consider this effect when analysing any autobiographical account and the emotions expressed in it. A tendency towards a positive life story (the well-known phenomenon of looking back on one's life through rose tinted glasses) has been most strongly observed among older participants – the older the participants, the stronger the FAB.³⁸

Not only did these researchers observe that emotions associated with positive memories tend to fade more slowly than emotions associated with negative

35 TIMOTHY D. RITCHIE, TAMZIN J. BATTESON, ANETTE BOHN, *A Pancultural Perspective on the Fading Affect Bias in Autobiographical Memory*, *Memory* 23/2015, pp. 278–290.

36 JOZEFIEN DE LEERSNYDER, BATJA MESQUITA, ALBERT DUSTIN, *The Cultural Regulation of Emotions*, in: *Handbook of Emotion Regulation*, (ed.) James J. Gross, Guilford 2015, pp. 284–304. The scholars advanced an anthropological research of Catherine Lutz on Ifaluk people in the South West Pacific for whom happiness is not a desirable emotion because it suppresses social duties. Catherine Lutz's research is often quoted by the historians of emotions emphasizing her social constructivist approach, see e. g. B. ROSENWEIN, *Problems and Methods in the History of Emotions*, p. 4; J. PLAMPER, *The History of Emotions*, pp. 106–109.

37 T. D. RITCHIE, T. J. BATTESON, A. BOHN, *A Pancultural Perspective*.

38 TIMOTHY D. RITCHIE, CONSTANTINE SEDIKIDES, JOHN J. SKOWRONSKI, *Does a Person Selectively Recall the Good or the Bad from their Personal Past? It Depends on the Recall Target and the Person's Favourability of Self-Views*, *Memory* 25/2017, pp. 934–944.

memories, but also that negative emotions are more likely to become positive over time than vice versa.³⁹ Talking to others after a given event plays an important role in the way we remember our emotions associated with that event: talking about positive emotions enhances the intensity of our recalled emotions whereas talking about negative emotions decreases their emotional intensity.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, research into the FAB is not without controversy. “Bad is stronger than good”, social psychologist Roy F. Baumeister and his colleagues affirmed fifteen years ago in an extremely well documented study, arguing that “recall for emotional events appears to favour bad ones” and that bad emotions have a greater impact than good emotions.⁴¹ They argued that it is worse for us to lose 5 dollars than to gain 100 dollars, and emphasized that negative emotions contain more information useful for long-term survival than positive emotions do.

Although these scholars saw “bad is stronger than good” as a “general principle across a broad range of psychological phenomena”, more recent research into the FAB, cited above, has refuted their argument as not applicable for individual personal and autobiographical memory.

Moreover, one very recent study of the FAB casts more light on the supposed omnipresent rose-tinted glasses of our autobiographical memory. In that study, participants were asked to recall events that had happened between one and 24 months previously and establish their emotional intensity.⁴² After a month they did the same, then again after two months, and again after two weeks. The results showed that the FAB and its intensity depended largely on whether we are recalling information associated with ourselves or with others. Positive self-information was better recalled than negative self-information, but this tendency was not found in relation to others. Threatening situations were a particular cause of negative thinking about others. Moreover, information recalled about others depended on our evaluation of that person – information related to people we like was remembered with positive emotions, whereas this was

39 JOHN J. SKOWRONSKI, W. RICHARD WALKER, DAWN X. HENDERSON, GARY D. BOND, *The Fading Affect Bias. Its History, Its Implications, and Its Future*, *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 49/2013, pp. 166–215.

40 W. R. WALKER, J. J. SKOWRONSKI, *The Fading Affect Bias. But What the Hell is it For?*

41 ROY F. BAUMEISTER, ELLEN BRATSLAVSKY, CATRIN FINKENAUER, KATHLEEN D. VOHS, *Bad is Stronger than Good*, *Review of General Psychology* 4/2001, pp. 323–370. A similar perspective – that emotions associated with negative events should be especially persistent across time – was advanced by Sigmund Freud in his theory of repressed memories.

42 D. RITCHIE, C. SEDIKIDES, J. J. SKOWRONSKI, *Does a Person Selectively Recall the Good or the Bad from their Personal Past?*

not true for information related to disliked people. In general, the researchers' expectations that people would recall information about themselves most positively and about others most negatively were largely confirmed.⁴³

The FAB, then, seems to result in a tendency towards positive autobiographical memories, related to self-enhancement and self-consistency. This is an important phenomenon, which must yet be tested under a variety of conditions. For instance, a longer interval of recall – five or more years – would be of particular interest for historians working with autobiographical memory and ego-documents such as oral history accounts.

So far we have seen that particular subdisciplines of memory and emotion research have reported outcomes that can together form a useful picture, although they rarely communicate with each other. Research into traumatic memory has shown that emotionally intense memories can be retained over a long period of time, even forty years, but that they are subject to partial forgetting and distortion. Extremely emotional memories such as flashbulb memories can also fade over time, and more importantly, their vividness and level of confidence are not always to be believed: they may inaccurately reflect what happened. This should be seen as a warning for all historians working with autobiographical memory, that emotionally vivid accounts of events, which happened a long time ago, should be interpreted with caution.

Research into the FAB has reported that there is a difference between how we forget emotions associated with positive and negative events. Emotions associated with negative memories tend to fade more quickly than emotions associated with positive memories. It is explained, among others, by the tendency towards self-consistency and self-protection. Although the study we mentioned on concentration camp survivors' memories was not specifically related to the FAB, it is clear that such a tendency towards self-consistency and self-protection could explain the survivors' partially distorted memories of traumatic events.

Emotions and Cognition – Contrasting or Overlapping?

As I previously mentioned, neuroscientists and psychologists like Joseph le Doux and Bessel van der Kolk considered emotions to be physical and unconscious phenomena, distinct from cognition. This distinction has its roots in the

43 The authors also evoked the impact of storytelling – people usually tell positive stories about people they like and negative stories about people they dislike. If stories are retold, memory is strengthened in a person-congruent manner.

Cartesian division of mind and body, rationality and emotion, in a prevailing paradigm of modernity. It is therefore unsurprising that scholars in various disciplines, including history and psychology, long disregarded emotions as something inferior to thinking, as “parasites” of rationality, unwanted but inevitable.⁴⁴ Although emotions were the subject of psychological study in the early 1900s, the concept of emotions was then attacked by empirical psychologists in the 1930s and 1940s.⁴⁵ One of them, Max Meyer, proclaimed in 1933: “The will (of Freud) had virtually passed out of our scientific psychology today, the emotion is bound to do the same. In 1950 American psychologists will smile at both these terms as curiosities of the past.”⁴⁶ Meyer’s words became true between the 1950s and 1970s, a period in which emotions were literally banished from the field of psychology.⁴⁷ Only relatively recently have psychologists and neuroscientists begun to research emotions in more detail.

One of the first scientists to argue against the dualist separation of cognition and emotion was Antonio Damasio, a Portuguese-American neuroscientist. In his well-known 1994 book *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*, he depicted emotions as not mutually exclusive and as playing an important role in social cognition and decision-making.⁴⁸ However, Damasio’s work was not welcomed by historians of emotions – he considered emotions purely physical signals of the body reacting to external stimuli, the role of which is to simplify, accelerate or improve higher cognitive processes.⁴⁹

44 DAMIEN BOQUET, PIROSKA NAGY, *Une histoire des émotions incarnées*, Médiévales 61/2011, pp. 5–24, esp. 7, www.puv-univ-paris8.org/media/ouvr_pdf/528_IntroMed61.pdf, accessed October 5, 2015.

45 *Designing Positive Psychology. Taking Stock and Moving Forward* (eds.) KENNON M. SHELDON, TODD B. KASHDAN, MICHAEL F. STEGER, Oxford 2011, p. 104.

46 MAX MEYER, *That Whale Among the Fishes – The Theory of Emotions*, Psychological Review 40/1933, pp. 292–300, www.brocku.ca/MeadProject/Meyer/Meyer_1933.html, accessed August 4, 2018.

47 *Designing Positive Psychology. Taking Stock and Moving Forward* (eds.) K. M. SHELDON, T. B. KASHDAN, M. F. STEGER.

48 ANTONIO DAMASIO, *Descartes’ Error. Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*, New York 1994. Damasio’s examination of patients with damage to the part of the brain that generates emotions is widely known. These patients could not feel emotions and, suprisingly, they could not make decisions either.

49 Strong arguments against Damasio’s investigations can be found e.g. in J. PLAMPER, *The History of Emotions*, pp. 214–219.

Cognitive Appraisal Theory of Emotions and Reconstructions of Emotions

As can be seen from the aforementioned research, there are two contradictory answers to the question of whether emotions are stored permanently (which is closely related to the question of where emotions are stored). According to Joseph LeDoux and his colleagues, “memories for the emotional significance of events are stored permanently and mediated by different brain circuits than memories for events themselves”.⁵⁰ Other researchers have argued that emotions are not stored directly in memory at all, but are reconstructed “based on recall of emotion eliciting circumstances”.⁵¹ In other words, we do not remember past feelings at all, but reconstruct feelings based on our memory of past circumstances (what happened, what we thought, how we behaved, etc.) and our beliefs about what we were likely to have felt then.⁵² Only representations of feelings are available to us, the feelings as such cannot be accessed directly. Thus, emotions do not persist in memory per se. Illustrative are, in this perspective, the ideas of William James, who already in 1890 argued that: “The revivability in memory of the emotions” is very limited. “We can remember that we underwent grief or rapture, but not just how the grief or rapture felt.”⁵³

In contrast to neuroscientists like Joseph le Doux or Antonio Damasio, some cognitive psychologists do not consider the body to be a source of emotion at all. For them, emotions are related to evaluations, judgements and mental processes. In the 1970s, American philosopher Robert C. Solomon argued that emotions are not passions, but are tools with which we observe the world and engage in it.⁵⁴ His theory of emotions as judgments became inspirational for many other cognitive scientists who consequently developed the appraisal theory of emo-

50 The scientists' arguments are cited and debated in LINDA J. LEVINE, VINCENT PROHASKA, STEWART L. BURGESS, *Remembering Past Emotions. The Role of Current Appraisals*, *Cognition and Emotion* 15/2001, pp. 393–417.

51 L. J. LEVINE, V. PROHASKA, S. L. BURGESS, *Remembering Past Emotions*.

52 LINDA J. LEVINE, HEATHER LENCH, MARTIN A. SAFER, *Functions of Remembering and Misremembering Emotion*, *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 23/8, 2009, pp. 1059–1075.

53 W. JAMES, *The Principles of Psychology*, p. 474. Quoted in SVEN-AKE CHRISTIANSON, MARTIN A. SAFER, *Emotional Events and Emotions in Autobiographical Memories*, in: *Remembering our Past. Studies in Autobiographical Memory*, (ed.) David C. Rubin, Cambridge 1995, pp. 218–243, esp. p. 230.

54 DAMIEN BOQUET, PIROSKA NAGY, *Pour une histoire des émotions. L'historien face aux questions contemporaines*, in: *Le sujet des émotions au Moyen Âge*, (eds.) Damien Boquet, Piroska Nagy, Paris 2009, pp. 15–51 (p. 1).

tions. In particular, Linda J. Levine, director of the Interdisciplinary Affective Science Laboratory and a co-founder of the interdisciplinary journal *Emotion Review*, and her colleagues argued that the disparate viewpoints mentioned above might be reconciled by noticing that the representation of emotion may have different properties depending on the memory system involved.⁵⁵

Two memory systems are currently distinguished in the psychology of memory: explicit and implicit memory systems. The explicit (declarative) memory system comprises semantic memory and episodic (autobiographical) memory. While in semantic memory we remember learned facts (knowing what – for instance that the Earth is round), episodic memory has been traditionally defined as the ability to recollect our past experience, tied to a specific time and context. For example, our wedding day or a holiday in Croatia. If we recall these events, we have the subjective feeling of remembering.

While semantic and autobiographical memories can be consciously brought about, the implicit (non-declarative) system of memory works without us being aware of it. Implicit procedural memory enables us to perform automatic actions without any conscious reflection (knowing how – to ride a bicycle), while various forms of priming (perceptual and conceptual) refer to the higher likelihood we will recognize a stimulus which we have already unconsciously perceived earlier.⁵⁶

Linda J. Levine and her colleagues suggest that the explicit memory system enables people to “consciously reconstruct how they felt in the past”.⁵⁷ It is noticeable that people do so without experiencing strong subjective feelings of physiological changes. However, their investigations make clear that explicit representation is not the only way in which past emotion can persist in memory. They argue that the “implicit memory system allows representations of past emotional experience to persist even when there is no recollection of the original experience”. This memory becomes accessible “without deliberation” when “the resulting experience shares many of the properties of the original emotional experience”. In this case, people experience subjective feelings and physiological changes, it is vivid memory.⁵⁸

55 L. J. LEVINE, H. LENCH, M. A. SAFER, *Functions of Remembering and Misremembering Emotion*.

56 ASTRID ERL, *Memory in Culture*, New York 2011, pp. 84–86.

57 L. J. LEVINE, H. LENCH, M. A. SAFER, *Functions of Remembering and Misremembering Emotion*.

58 L. J. LEVINE, H. LENCH, M. A. SAFER, *Functions of Remembering and Misremembering emotion*. A seminal example of implicit memory was introduced by Édouard Claparède, a Swiss

According to these researchers, both types of memory are subject to forgetting and bias over time as people's goals and appraisals of past emotional events change. Emotions are thus the subject of perpetual reconstruction, as documented by various experiments. For instance, in their already relatively outdated study from 1994, Canadian social psychologist Diane Holmberg and her colleague John Holmes found that husbands whose marriages had become less happy over time recalled early marital interactions as more negative than initially reported.⁵⁹ Another experiment was conducted with college students who were asked to assert how anxious they had felt before a midterm exam.⁶⁰ The students were divided into two groups – one group learned their grades before recalling their pre-exam emotions, the second group learned their grades after recalling their pre-exam emotions. In contrast to the second group, students who learned that they got good grades underestimated how anxious they had felt before the exam, while students who received poor grades overestimated how anxious they had felt. The investigators concluded that the post-event information about their grades led to the distortion of their memories of past feelings.

Other researchers have argued that remembering emotions is often mood-state dependent. In short, if we are sad we better recall sad events and if we are happy we better remember happy events.⁶¹

Discussion and Conclusion

There has been much fascinating research on the relationship between emotions and memory over the past couple of decades. This research has come from within several subdisciplines of psychology and neuroscience, and there has been very little communication between them. Each of these subdisciplines has developed its own paradigm and research agenda. For this reason, it is difficult to give an unambiguous answer to our initial questions about how emotions are remembered in ego-documents. For researchers looking at memory of trauma,

philosopher who in 1911 published his experience with a woman who suffered from amnesia and could not recollect the recent past – each morning Claparède had to reintroduce himself. During one of their “introductions” Claparède hid a pin in his palm and when shaking woman's hand, he pricked her. The next time they met the patient refused to shake Claparède's hand although she couldn't explain why because she did not recollect ever having met the doctor, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%89douard_Clapar%C3%A8de, accessed August 4, 2018.

59 Quoted in A. ERRL, *Memory in Culture*, p. 88.

60 L. J. LEVINE, D. A. PIZARRO, *Emotion and Memory Research. A Grumpy Overview*.

61 L. J. LEVINE, D. A. PIZARRO, *Emotion and Memory Research. A Grumpy Overview*.

strong emotional memories are inscribed indelibly into our body regardless of our will. For others, emotional memories are subject to reconstruction, similar to memories of neutral events. Some researchers claim that we must distinguish between emotional memories and memories of emotions, while others argue for a distinction between the different memory systems involved in remembering emotions. These disparate findings should teach humanities scholars working with ego-documents, including historians of emotions, not to pick up any one isolated theory of psychology or neuroscience and base their research on it. Astonishing (and cautioning) is especially the rapidity with which the scholars of life sciences publish new updates of their very recent investigations.⁶²

Nevertheless, there do seem to be at least two points of agreement where memory and emotion are concerned: 1) that the intensity of emotions changes over time, and 2) that emotions enhance our memories of past events (at least for certain details of memories).

Investigations into flashbulb memory and the FAB are of particular interest to historians working with autobiographical memory. The results of various experiments on flashbulb memory have shown that while memories of highly emotional public events can last and become stable and vivid over a longer period of time, they are selective and their vividness does not ensure their accuracy. The FAB casts light on positive life stories, above all among older persons, and informs us that the way we remember our past selves and others' past selves depends on various features including the mood of the persons who remember, their relationship towards persons who are remembered, and the frequency of subsequent recollections.

Cognitive appraisal theories are popular among historians of emotion because they deny that emotions are purely physical arousals. According to these theories, memories of past events (and our emotions associated with them) may change, and are related to our current goals and beliefs at the time of recollection. It is worth mentioning one more study on adolescents and their suicide feelings: adolescents were asked about their suicide feelings and interrogated again five years later; those who had forgotten about their suicide intentions in the meantime were doing better than the ones who remembered their intentions of suicide.⁶³

62 Jan Plamper appeals for "a sceptical and more responsible approach to neuroscience" manifested in the reading of meta-analyses and comparative analysis of a huge number of papers. J. PLAMPER, *The History of Emotions*, p. 242.

63 L. J. LEVINE, D. A. PIZARRO, *Emotion and Memory Research. A Grumpy Overview*.

What are the implications for historians dealing with emotions in ego-documents? First, the very complicated and still largely unknown relationship between memory and emotion problematizes the way historians treat emotions in ego-documents. In the light of the findings we have discussed, emotions cannot be taken at face value and considered direct and unchanged “mirrors of one’s soul”. Most of the researchers we have mentioned believe that emotions change over time, as do our memories of neutral events. In other words, when people recall how they felt in the past, their recollections are not always accurate. Historians should thus interpret all memories presented in ego-documents with caution, including those related to emotions. Emotionally intense memories such as traumatic memories or flashbulb memories may be particularly liable to distortion over time.

Second, although some historians of emotions prefer to study emotions as manifested in cultural norms and rules through normative texts, a focus on individual emotions in textual recollections may help us to return emotions to the bodies who experienced them. In this way, ego-documents can be read not only as products of one particular culture or another (and not only as discursive practices) but as reflections of real lived experience. Psychology and neuroscience can thus help us to return to the history of the whole person, both mind and body.

Last but by no means least, it is helpful for historians to keep track of the substantial amount of research that is going on in these related disciplines. Numerous recent psychological investigations have explored the relationship between memory and emotion over long periods of time and in real-world settings. Their outcomes are of particular relevance for historians of emotion dealing with autobiographical memory in the contemporary period, i.e. for oral historians. Some cognitive psychology studies have also made promising observations related to social and cultural context.

It should be noted that psychologists and neuroscientists have focused on the present-day emotions of present-day people. Their findings, apart from influential theories about stone-aged emotions of present-day persons, tell us little about emotions in the past. Was the reconstructive nature of memories of emotional events equally conditioned in the 11th century as it is in the 21st century? Did flashbulb memories, for instance, have the same impact on pre-Christian people? These questions remain open for further research.

If we return to our diary extract by countess Sophie Mensdorff-Pouilly, we can rethink what happened with her emotions over those thirty years – between the time in around 1800 when, as a young woman, she wrote about her intense feelings towards her future husband, and the later entries in her fifties in which she recorded her emotions as an older noblewoman. In the 1830s, when recol-

lecting her initial meetings with her future husband, she convinces us she was very happy at that time. However, her original entries from around 1800 testify that she used to be anxious and cry, and therefore that what she later recollected in the 1830s was not completely accurate. It is very interesting to see that not even re-reading her original entries prevented her from claiming that her feelings had been different. We could explain her positive recollections by theorizing that her recollected “happiness” is the result of the FAB (memories associated with negative events tend to fade more quickly). This tendency towards positive memories associated with her initial meetings with her loved one could also be supported by her experience of a long and happy marriage with that same person.

However, she must have reread her initial entries because she does also note, in the 1830s, that she is experiencing the same gloomy thoughts and anxieties as she had at that time, meaning the 1800s. We can perhaps, in the perspective advanced by Linda J. Levine, argue that countess Sophie is both reconstructing how she might have felt thirty years ago and at the same time experiencing the same anxiety. She is reconstructing while consciously rereading her notes from that time and thinking about how she might have felt when she was alone without the person she had just fallen in love with. Remembering such thoughts was evidently particularly important for her “self” as expressed through her diary. If she had forgotten her “gloomy thoughts” entirely, she would have been astonished when re-reading her original entries, but that does not appear to have been the case – in contrast, gloom and anxiety became a regular part of her life, as it is evident from the whole diary and other sources, and she likely felt them as intensely in 1830 as she had in 1800.

Findings from psychology and neuroscience certainly cannot be straightforwardly applied to ego-documents written in the past. Psychohistory has attempted to do something similar, applying psychoanalysis to the thoughts of the people of the past in order to explain their behaviour, though this has proven of little use for the majority of historians.⁶⁴ The relationship between cognitive psychology and neuroscience on the one hand, and history on the other hand must include cultural, political, and social contexts too. Since these contexts change with every source, any given model of application would be useless.

64 For the crisis of psychohistory, see e.g. THOMAS A. KOHUT, *Psychobiography as History*, *The American Historical Review* 91/1986, pp. 336–354. Balanced accounts of psychohistory can be found in ANNA GREEN, KATHLEEN TROUP, *The Houses of History. A Critical Reader in Twentieth-Century History and Theory*, New York 1999; PETER LAMBERT, PHILLIPP SCHOFIELD, *Making History. An Introduction to the History and Practices of a Discipline*, London and New York 2004; PETER BURKE, *History and Social Theory*, Cambridge 2005.

Historians of emotion have rarely addressed emotions in relation to memory and rarely asked what happens to emotions between the moment they are experienced and the moment they are expressed (written down or spoken about). In this article I have appealed for historians to have greater awareness of these questions when working with retrospective genres and have suggested a starting point for new interdisciplinary areas of research.