

# Indexing and Interpreting Emotion: Joy and Shame in Oral History

Alistair Thomson, Monash University

## Abstract

The history of emotions has been one of the most prominent historical ‘turns’ of recent years, yet oral historians have been working with emotions for decades. In this article I explore how indexing emotions recorded in Australian Generations interviews can pinpoint the range and significance of emotion in Australian lives. By linking directly to the audio recordings archived at the National Library of Australia, I show how hearing the voice and sound of personal testimony can expand and enrich our understanding of its emotional register. Focusing on joy and especially shame, I consider how this focus on emotion in Australian life stories might illuminate the historical and cultural experience of emotion, how the meanings and feelings of emotion are shaped by historical circumstance and negotiated in social lives, and how emotional registers vary across time and culture.

## Oral history and the history of emotions

[‘Life is long](#). When you’re forty-eight, there’s been a lot of stuff that’s happened (laughs). It’s got elements of comedy and there are elements of heartache and drama and thriller and it’s got so many things in it.’ (Rhonda King, born 1965)<sup>1</sup>

This statement was made by Rhonda King during her interview with Mary Hutchison for the Australian Generations Oral History Project in 2013. It highlights the prevalence and variety of emotion in oral history. Although the history of emotions has been one of the most prominent historical ‘turns’ of recent years, oral historians have been working with emotions for decades. In this article I explore how indexing emotions recorded in Australian Generations interviews can pinpoint the range and significance of emotion in Australian lives. By linking directly to the audio recordings archived at the National Library of Australia (NLA), I show how hearing the voice and sound of personal testimony can expand and enrich our understanding of its emotional register. Focusing on joy and especially shame, I consider how this focus on emotion in Australian life stories might illuminate the historical and cultural meanings of emotion, and

thus enrich our understanding of intimate lives and Australian histories.

Since the early 2000s, the history of emotions has become a central concern of historians around the world.<sup>2</sup> Books, journal articles, conferences and research centres have focused on the nature and significance of emotion in history. This literature has established the centrality of emotion in the embodied experience of human life. It has shown how human emotions are neither timeless nor universal but rather shaped by particular historical and cultural circumstances. While emotion is intimate and individual, it is also social; theorists write of emotional ‘communities’ or ‘regimes’ that prescribe and manage particular forms of emotional expression by individuals and groups.<sup>3</sup>

Oral historians have been doing histories of emotions for decades, though often without using that label. From the beginnings of the oral history movement after World War Two, researchers who recorded and used oral history interviews recognised that witnesses recalled not just the events of the past but also the meanings and feelings that were essential parts of those events. By the 1970s, oral historians such as Luisa Passerini and Alessandro Portelli were arguing that this ‘subjectivity’ was a defining feature of interviews and an invaluable contribution of oral history. For example, in her landmark study of the popular memory of Italian fascism in the 1970s, Passerini showed that gaps and silences in the remembering of interwar fascism indicated personal and collective shame, which reflected how Italian society was still struggling to deal with its recent past.<sup>4</sup>

Certainly, emotion has been a central feature of the interviews I have recorded and the oral histories I have written since the 1980s. In *Anzac Memories*, elderly war veterans like Fred Farrall or Bill Langham recalled fear in battle, affection for mates and both grief and guilt about their mates’ deaths.<sup>5</sup> They recalled the dreams and disillusionment of postwar life, the crippling effects of post-traumatic stress and different measures of pride, regret or shame. In *Ten Pound Poms* and *Moving Stories*, British postwar migrants like Dorothy Wright and Phyllis Cave recalled fervent hopes for a new life and the anguish of departure and separation.<sup>6</sup> They remembered the thrill of new sights, sounds and smells, and the confusion of a world that was both terribly familiar and awfully strange. They,

too, looked back on their life histories with pride and regret. Such powerful emotions were shaped by particular personal and historical circumstances, and in turn these emotions often influenced how individuals acted in their lives.

These examples highlight how oral historians have understood and worked with the emotional content of interviews. First, just as we have considered how individual remembering is affected by cultural narratives about the past (variously labelled popular memory, collective memory, social memory or public memory), we have also noted how individual emotions are impacted by social relations and cultural expectations. For example, it became easier for World War One veteran Fred Farrall to understand and articulate his feelings of wartime inadequacy and emasculation as Australian historical narratives about the soldier as victim rather than hero became prevalent from the 1970s.<sup>7</sup>

Second, as participants in the oral history encounter, interviewers are acutely aware of the embodiment of emotion. As an interview triggers recall of an emotional episode, and as that remembering generates a recurrence of emotion, we can see our narrator hunching over or holding her body tight, perhaps unable to speak, or we can hear the breath squeezed out of her voice, a change in pitch or pace, or a lingering sigh. Though the emotion in the room will never exactly replicate the emotion of the past, its embodiment in the present offers clues for interpretation about the nature and meanings of those past events and their emotional content. We are reminded that while human experience may be articulated in language through the brain, it is also felt and expressed through the body.<sup>8</sup>

Third, oral historians have long been alert to the two interconnected temporal histories of emotion in an oral history interview – namely the emotion of the time of the event and the emotion at the time of the telling. Our interview instruction manuals remind us to attend to the emotion in the room, to respond with sensitivity and care as recollection triggers powerful emotions, and to reflect upon the causes, nature and meanings of such emotions as we interpret the interview. We recognise that the intimate relationship of the interview helps to conjure strong feelings, and that the emotional baggage of the interviewer can sometimes affect how we behave in the interview, just as the interview might generate strong feelings for both parties during and after the recording. Our interpretation of emotions in the interview might include analysis of how and why past events continue to provoke potent feelings, and we draw upon those emotional expressions as one clue among others to interpret the nature and significance of feelings in the past.<sup>9</sup> Increasingly, we recognise that, for the oral history researcher, there is a third temporal history of emotion, namely the time of the listening. As a researcher plays a recording (which they may or may not have created), they can be moved by their interactions with the recorded narrative and the profound intersubjective experience of deep and empathetic listening.

Fourth, oral historians work with audio or video interviews, and are alert to the fact that a transcribed text of the words of the interview is a partial and inadequate rendering of the event. Interviewers are aware that much of the emotional meaning in interviews is available through the sound of the voice and the look of the face and body. Whenever possible, we listen to our audio interviews, and watch our video recordings, so that we can best interpret emotion and affect in what is being said. We also, at times, attempt to describe and explain those embodied expressions of emotion to our audience.<sup>10</sup>

Yet oral historians would be the first to admit that it is not always easy to find the emotions in our interviews, let alone to decipher and interpret them. Audio sources are hard to work with. Listening to an interview in real time can be rewarding but is enormously time consuming. Though we can quickly and effectively scan text with our eyes, when we speed up a recording we lose the aural clues of voice and narration. The different types of finding aids that we produce to help researchers navigate interviews are not always helpful in pointing to the emotional passages and qualities of the recording. A narrative summary produced by the interviewer soon after the interview might describe the emotional highlights of the interview, including the interviewer's own feelings, and might encourage the researcher to listen to that interview. However, if that summary is all that is available, the listener will need to listen to the whole interview to find those moments. A transcript might include clues about emotional context (laughter or tears might be noted in brackets), and sometimes the emotional resonance of an event will leap off the page. But the emotional depths of a passage are often expressed beneath or between the lines of text, and narrators don't often label their emotions with a term that will be located in a word search. Researchers often struggle to locate or identify emotion within one interview transcript, let alone across a set of transcripts. An interview log or 'timed summary' might be more useful in that regard if, for example, its author identifies significant emotion within a segment of an interview, or if a glossary of terms for emotion is used in a keyword section to identify specific emotions. However, timed summaries rarely include that level of emotional specificity, not least because creating a timed summary is an expensive, laborious business which favours content over form, and perhaps also because the author often hasn't thought to include details about emotion. In recent years commentators have urged researchers to take advantage of new digital technologies to include emotion, and to provide links to its audio expression, within our finding aids for oral history interviews.<sup>11</sup> In the Australian Generations project our team of oral historians took up that challenge.

## **Indexing emotion in *Australian Lives***

The Australian Generations Oral History Project utilised digital technologies that have helped

researchers find, identify and interpret emotion within recorded interviews. Australian Generations was a partnership between university historians, the National Library of Australia (NLA) and ABC Radio National.<sup>12</sup> Between 2011 and 2014 I led a team that recorded 300 life history interviews across Australia. These interviews were selected from almost 700 people who volunteered to be interviewed in response to appeals in regional media and to under-represented groups. In the selection process, my fellow selectors and I aimed to ensure the interview archive would comprise a diverse range of Australians in terms of age (about fifty born each decade from the 1930s to the 1980s, with a sprinkling born in the 1920s), social class and educational background, gender, sexuality and disability, region (roughly proportionate to the spread of people between metropolitan, regional and remote Australia and to the population of each state and territory), and indigeneity and ethnicity (just over a quarter of interviewees were born overseas, in many different countries). In total, 1221 hours of Australian Generations audio recordings have been archived at the National Library where they are available for research and public use subject to conditions stipulated by each interviewee.

Interviews averaged about four hours in length and were usually recorded over two sessions. Our life history interview approach – in which the interview follows the contours of a person’s life and the priorities of the narrator, with the interviewer gently probing and stretching the account for added detail, depth and complexity – differed from many oral history projects which instead focus on a particular topic in an interviewee’s life, such as war, employment or education. Interviewers were sometimes challenged by the difficult stories and powerful emotions evoked in intimate life histories.<sup>13</sup>

About two-thirds of the interviews are fully accessible online. Researcher access to these online interviews is enhanced by NLA technological innovations, which have been explained in detail in an article by Kevin Bradley and Anisa Puri.<sup>14</sup> In short, a ‘timed summary’ for each interview includes a summary and key words for each consecutive segment of the

interview (a segment is typically between one and five minutes in duration). Each segment is directly linked to the same point in the audio recording. A researcher searching within an interview, or across the interviews using Trove, will be directed to all points in the timed summaries that contain the search term, and can read the summary or listen to that point of the recording. The URL for each segment is available to paste into publications and thus provide a hyperlink direct to the online interview segment and audio. This article uses that facility to enable online readers to listen to the cited interview extracts – by linking direct to the NLA’s online archive – and then continue to listen to more of that interview if they wish. The same direct and searchable link between text and audio is also available for the fifty online interviews that we transcribed for use in an Australian Generations anthology. Each transcript segment (delineated as paragraphs) has a unique URL. By clicking on the ‘flag’ to the right of each segment a user reveals the URL citation details for that passage – as shown below.

Finding emotion within and across the 200 plus Australian Generations interviews that are available online is not easy. When we set up the process for interviewers to create timed summaries, we did not think to create a glossary of emotion keywords that they could use to tag relevant interview segments. Occasionally the timed summary happens to include a reference to episodes of particular emotional significance. In retrospect, tagging emotion within the timed summaries would have added another level of usefulness and searchability. For example, such tagging would have enabled a researcher to search across all the interviews for sections tagged for ‘love’, ‘hate’ or ‘grief’ and then to explain the diverse and changing historical experience of any such emotion.

But in the book based upon the Australian Generations interviews and compiled by Anisa Puri and myself, *Australian Lives: An Intimate History*, we were able to index emotion.<sup>15</sup> For this book we chose a small, but still diverse, set of fifty interviews. We selected a group of this size so readers could get to know each narrator, and so the interviews would represent a wide range of Australian lives and histories. We only used

The screenshot displays the National Library of Australia's digital collection interface for an interview with James Mayol. The page is titled "James Mayol interviewed by Atem Atem in the Australian generations oral history project". The URL is [nla.gov.au/nla:oh-vn6449993](http://nla.gov.au/nla:oh-vn6449993). The interface includes a metadata sidebar on the left, a central transcript area with a timeline, and a "Citation Details" pop-up window on the right.

**Metadata Sidebar:**

- James Mayol interviewed by Atem Atem in the Australian generations oral history project
- nla:oh-vn6449993
- [View record in catalogue](#)
- Special Collections Reading Room OH ORAL TRC 6300/213
- Recorded on 23 September 2013 in Sydney, New South Wales.
- 3 sound files (approximately 272 min.)
- Catalogue record generated as part of a batch load. Timed summary and uncorrected transcript available.
- CONTRIBUTORS:**
  - Mayol, James (creator, interviewee, iiv)
  - Atem, Atem Dau 1974- (interviewer, iiv)
- ACCESS CONDITIONS:**
  - Access open for research, personal copies and public use.

**Transcript Area:**

SESSION 1 OF 3

Time	Speaker	Text
00:00:01	Atem Atem	This is an interview with ah, ah James Mayol, who will be speaking with me? Atem Atem? for the Oral ah History and Folklore Collection at the National Library of Australia. On behalf of the Director-General of the National Library I would like to thank you for ah agreeing to participate in this program. Do you understand that the Library owns copyright in the interview material and that access to this interview will only be given in accordance with the instructions you give us ah in the rights agreement?
00:00:37	James Mayol	Yes, I do.
00:00:38	Atem Atem	Thank you. We hope you will speak as frankly as possible, ah knowing that the interview material will not be released without your authority. This interview is taking place today ah on 23 September at Rivewood. Ah let's begin. Um thank you um James. Um the first thing I would like to ask you is um to introduce yourself and describe yourself.
00:01:09	James Mayol	Oh thank you very much. Ah my name's James? ah James Mayol. Um I'm from South Sudan background and I moved to, to Australia in 2003. So whereby now I'm a citizens in Australia and, and do study at Catholic University ah Stratfield. And it is my pleasure to be here with you and, and um have this time so we can chat about issues that can be raised up. Ah and I will be trying my best to answer as possible as I

**Citation Details Pop-up:**

Use the following url to begin from this point:  
<http://www.nla.gov.au/amad/nla:oh-vn6449993/0-38>

Or this url to play only the portion of audio:  
<http://www.nla.gov.au/amad/nla:oh-vn6449993/0-38-0-69>

interviews that are available online with permission from each interviewee, because we want readers to also be listeners with an option to hear each spoken extract, as we explain below.

In the book, extracts from the interviews are arranged within two types of chapters. One set of chapters traverses the life course, starting with Ancestry and then charting Childhood, Youth, Midlife and Later Life, and exploring change and continuity in each life stage from the 1930s to the 2010s. Interspersed between those chapters are thematic chapters about Faith, Migrants, Activism and, in conclusion, Telling My Story. Some chapters have sub-sections that focus on particular topics. For example, Youth canvasses high school, teen family life, youth culture, first loves, school to work, and military service. Within each section the interview extracts are usually arranged chronologically so readers can follow change across time and consider the factors that may have influenced significant personal and social transformations. For instance, First Loves starts with the glory boxes that young women in the first half of the twentieth century used to gather household items for their prospective marriage, and concludes in the 2000s with internet dating amongst straight and gay couples.

From thousands of pages of transcripts we selected extracts that illuminate change and continuity and how individuals lived with and against the economic forces, cultural expectations and legal constraints of their times. We also chose extracts that highlight how different types of Australians have managed their lives and faced distinctive challenges and opportunities. And, of course, we picked stories that evoke the humour, drama and pathos of human life.

These stories are told through voice as well as word. The texture and sound of speech convey meaning. Speakers emphasise significant words and phrases with increased volume or a well-timed pause. They speed up with excitement or emotion, or slow down as they recall a difficult moment. Silence can indicate pain or embarrassment, or the struggle to relate a memory that has no easy story. The voice can suggest warmth and pleasure, anger and disappointment, sarcasm or disapproval. Laughter can be joyous, anxious or ironic. Tears can be happy or sad. In *Australian Lives* we tried to capture some of this aural quality in our textual editing and presentation of interview extracts: emphasised words are *italicized*, laughter and sighs are noted in (parentheses), lengthy pauses are indicated by three dashes (---), while a single long dash (—) indicates an aside or afterthought.

But there is a limit to how much of this aural nuance can be captured in text. The patterns of the spoken word are different to those of written prose. Speech is ‘ragged at the edges; it twists and turns, gnaws away at meaning and coils itself up’.<sup>16</sup> Narrators zig-zag from one topic to another, as each memory triggers a connected story or feeling. There are false starts as interviewees fumble towards the story they want to tell, and most people pepper their speech with ‘um’ and ‘ah’, ‘kind of’, ‘like’

or ‘sort of’. For a linguist these might be invaluable clues, but they can be confusing and irritating for a reader.

With regard to editing each transcript extract, my co-author Anisa Puri and I sought to capture the nuance of the spoken word while also ensuring a readable and coherent text.<sup>17</sup> We removed words that didn’t add to the meaning of an extract, deleted passages that were not directly relevant to a story’s primary focus, and we merged passages from different parts of an interview which related to the same topic. We did not add words, except in [square brackets] to ensure coherence, and we did not alter words except where the repetition of a vernacular usage (such as ‘yeah’ or ‘gotta’) was distracting rather than meaningful or, in very few cases, where it was clear that the narrator had mistakenly used the wrong word. We occasionally fixed syntax to enhance readability, though we also sought to maintain the style and flow of speech. We retained interviewer questions where they made a significant impact on the narrator’s story, as a reminder that these stories were created within an interview relationship. We wanted the readers of the text to be able to ‘hear’ and appreciate the rhythms and textures of the spoken word.

The wonders of digital technology allow users of the *Australian Lives* ebook to simultaneously be reader *and* listener – to enjoy both written and spoken versions of each interview extract. In the ebook each extract is hyperlinked so that when an ebook reader clicks on the link a new website window will open showing the interview on the National Library online listening system. Click once more to accept the Library’s conditions for use and after several seconds the selected extract will start playing. While the audio extract is playing, the Library’s verbatim transcript is visible. Alternatively, the reader/listener can continue to read the edited transcript in the ebook. The audio will continue playing beyond the selected extract so the user can listen to more of that person’s story, or they can exit the Library’s online recording and continue reading, and listening, to other extracts in the ebook.<sup>18</sup>

As the ebook user reads and listens to each extract they will see how the edited text in the book is not the same as the Library’s verbatim transcript, and that neither replicates the spoken word. The book’s edited text offers a clear, focused and readable version of the narrator’s story; the audio track offers additional meanings conveyed in sound and by the way each person tells their story. For the listener, oral history becomes aural history with enriched audio access to the interviews, and to the emotions of the narrator.<sup>19</sup>

*Australian Lives* includes two indexes: a Narrator Index to enable readers to follow one narrator throughout the book, and a General Index to find extracts related to a place or subject. My co-author and I decided to include emotions in the General Index, as shown overleaf.

Indexing emotion was not a straightforward process. It was not difficult to index any extract in which the narrator used a particular word to describe emotion,

such as ‘love’ or ‘hate’ (although of course some of those index links are misleading because the term is used ironically or playfully). However, finding and identifying emotions that were not labelled in this way was much harder. We had to listen to each extract and use the evidence of context, words and voice to identify the appropriate emotion to index. This was never an exact science. It required difficult judgements about the nature and significance of emotion – both from the time of the event and the time of the telling – and it was affected by our own emotional experience and cultural understandings at the time of the listening as we responded to the stories we heard.

We had to be alert to emotions that we had not expected, and to consider how one word might convey different types of emotion. For example, ‘love of activities, places and things’ is not the same as ‘love of people’ (though we decided that love of people and love of pets were close enough to be combined). We included terms that often involve an expression of emotion (such as ‘laughter’ or ‘crying and tears’), and we realised that ‘laughter’ might signify any number of different emotions so decided to include all 55 ‘laughter’ references in one index item. I’m hoping another researcher will have fun listening to all that laughter and exploring how laughter is used and what it means.

In short, the index to emotions is a rough and ready finding aid that enables users to locate, read and listen to expressions of different types of emotion, and to consider the significance of that emotion within Australian lives and history. It is also, of course, shaped by the editors’ understanding and interpretation of different emotions. This became clearer to me as I

began to use the index to explore two sets of emotions, ‘happiness and joy’ and ‘shame’, and realised how emotional registers are historically specific and culturally bound.

## Joy and shame

Twenty-two extracts in the *Australian Lives* book are indexed for ‘happiness and joy’ (‘joy’ represents an especially intense form of happiness, but was not easy to distinguish neatly). ‘Happiness and joy’ is positioned in the index between ‘guilt’ (5 items) and ‘hate’ (8). Other related index terms include ‘excitement’ (13), ‘laughter’ (55), ‘love’ (of different varieties) and ‘pleasure and enjoyment’ (7). Listening to the 22 episodes indexed for ‘happiness and joy’ makes it clear that there are many types of happiness and joy, and that it was experienced for different reasons across the life course.

For example, Ruth Apps, who was born 1926 in Wagga Wagga and interviewed in Sydney in 2012, is indexed for four very different episodes of happiness and joy (online readers of this article can listen to each extract by clicking on the hyperlinked text at the start of the extract).

She recalls the ‘happy times’ of family holidays during the 1930s on a beach near Sydney.

[We would go to the beach](#)—and it wasn’t known in those days—my mother would cover us in coconut oil which meant we promptly fried and we would come out in blisters, but we would happily swim there in the surf. And my father

emigration *see* migration  
emotion xii, 21, 62, 115, 198, 205–6, 286–7, 382, 388  
  anger xii, 28, 59, 65, 145, 182, 264, 326, 337, 360, 363, 363, 387  
  anxiety and worry xiii, 27, 106, 116, 127, 163, 280, 302, 362, 375, 390  
*see also* mental health  
  attachment (to place) 50–1  
  attraction 28  
*see also* sex  
  bravery 128, 135, 139, 163, 269, 383, 387  
  crying and tears 19, 37, 52–3, 70, 139–42, 145–6, 172, 180, 209, 261, 286, 304, 344, 361, 363–5  
  depressed 115, 127, 168, 176, 346  
  determination 89, 334, 383  
  disappointment and dismay xiii, 182, 216–17, 224, 252  
  disapproval and approval xiii, 28, 125, 127, 135, 139, 163, 329, 332, 338, 343  
  disgust 258  
  embarrassment ix, xii, 89, 121, 136, 145, 171, 256, 268–9, 383  
  enthusiasm 86, 121  
  excitement xii, 6, 80, 127, 134, 152, 169, 205, 209, 215, 258, 356, 388  
  fear or terror 30, 57, 63, 72, 86, 99, 116, 122, 127, 132, 136, 139–40, 179, 185, 196, 209, 264, 278, 283, 286, 295, 297, 302, 305, 314, 348, 366–8, 378, 387  
  frustration 89, 224  
  grief x, 9, 19, 21, 260, 392  
  guilt, 42, 67, 142, 228, 299  
  happiness and joy xiii, 37, 76, 86, 102, 131, 145–6, 155, 177, 192–3, 250, 257, 267, 272, 277, 280, 289–90, 297, 299, 363, 374, 394  
  hate 105, 123, 155, 159, 189, 265, 279, 290  
  homesickness 50, 206  
  hope and optimism 138, 141  
  humiliation 218, 280  
  ‘it was hard’ or ‘it was tough’ 254, 291, 310

laughter 13, 15, 32–3, 39–40, 63, 65, 68, 73–4, 80, 99, 106, 109, 114, 116, 136, 140–1, 143–4, 148–50, 156–8, 161, 163–4, 167, 170–2, 176, 186, 190, 194–5, 206, 209, 211, 213–14, 224–5, 228–9, 232, 252–3, 263, 272, 274, 278, 280, 284–6, 288–91, 301, 304, 307–8, 314–15, 318, 333, 335–6, 356–7, 360, 366, 370, 375–7, 391–3  
loneliness, exclusion and inclusion 88, 129, 136, 150, 169, 206, 211, 218–19, 293  
love of activities, places and things 6, 53, 105, 128, 136, 157, 184, 290, 307, 313, 315, 318, 356, 367, 370, 374  
love of people (and pets) ix, 57, 80, 99, 123, 125, 127, 133, 141, 142, 144, 146–7, 153, 162, 164, 167, 170, 219, 257, 260–2, 264, 279, 286, 288, 298, 316, 352, 360, 362, 371  
pain and hurt 66–7, 115, 205–6, 221, 252, 268–9, 288, 340, 362, 378, 383  
pleasure and enjoyment 259, 280, 291, 299, 310, 387, 391–2  
pride 3, 9, 44, 63, 128–30, 135, 159, 307, 344  
regret 126, 145, 172–3, 178, 206, 258, 355  
relief 198, 205, 272, 288  
resentment 123, 144  
respect 257  
sadness or unhappiness 15–16, 52–3, 58–60, 142, 147, 153, 264, 288, 297, 392  
safe, feeling 319  
shame 2–3, 93, 126, 174, 192, 228, 276, 279, 383, 394  
shock 205, 258, 292, 388  
shyness 66, 93, 179, 192, 265, 268–9  
sorrow 9, 62, 72, 374  
stress and distress 289, 294  
trauma 126, 173, 186  
*see also* danger, humour, mental health, senses, violence  
employment *see* work  
engineering and engineers 183–4  
England and English 2, 19, 38, 195, 208, 255, 354, 371  
environment *see* natural world, politics  
Eritrea 230

was a good swimmer and he would take us out and it was very enjoyable. My parents must've had to make sacrifices to do that for us, but it was such a happy time.<sup>20</sup>

Later in the interview, Ruth thinks she remembers rejoicing about the advent of the contraceptive pill ('I think I rejoiced' suggests that perhaps that feeling became stronger over time and is now her predominant emotion).

So I had my second and third children with that [basic family planning](#). Then after the third one was born, I said, 'I didn't want any more' and that happily coincided with the introduction of the Pill. I think I rejoiced.<sup>21</sup>

Ruth had enjoyed secretarial work before she started a family. She remembered how much she enjoyed her return to work once her children reached school age.

[They rang me after Christmas](#) and said, 'That position that you were doing casually is available, would you like it?' I said, 'Yes please' and I went back to work. I'm now glad I did. I thoroughly enjoyed it. It made a lot of financial difference to the house. I started in a stenographers' pool and then I became the secretary to the engineer and then I worked for the Mayor.<sup>22</sup>

Most poignantly, in her old age and with friends suffering from dementia, 86-year-old Ruth reflects on the importance of remembering, and thus continuing to experience, both joy and sorrow.

[Memory is terribly important](#).... if you can't remember what you did as a child you've lost that joy, or sorrow, whichever it happens to be.<sup>23</sup>

In each of those examples we get a sense of what made Ruth happy at different points in her life: quality time spent with parents and siblings; a fulfilling career; and reminiscing about a life well-lived. We also get a sense of how happiness was impacted by social relations and historical circumstances. In the 1930s, it was the comparatively affluent Apps family could afford a car and a family holiday, and Ruth's father could afford to spend time with his children that was fondly remembered; in the 1960s, the Pill made a career an option for a talented, ambitious yet frustrated housewife and mother of three.

I'm sure it would be possible to study happiness and joy within these interviews in more depth, but it strikes me that powerful negative emotions are often more revealing about people's lives and how emotional lives are shaped by historical circumstances. 'Shame' is a case in point.

Ten extracts in the *Australian Lives* book are indexed for 'shame'. Related emotions include 'disapproval and approval' (11 items), 'embarrassment' (10), 'humiliation' (2) and 'guilt' (5). A number of historians have written about the power of shame. In *Struggletown*

– the acclaimed oral history of Melbourne's working-class inner-suburb Richmond – Janet McCalman identifies shame as a core emotion experienced by many unemployed men who felt they had failed their families during the Depression of the 1930s, or by women and children of poor families who could not afford to keep up appearances.<sup>24</sup> Writing of 'Shame and its histories in the 20<sup>th</sup> century', New Zealand historian Barbara Brookes also identifies the shame of the failed male breadwinner, especially in times of economic crisis. Brookes identifies overlapping emotional communities, within which emotional values and rules tie individual behaviour to social norms. She shows how social shaming is often underpinned by moral and legal force.<sup>25</sup>

Among the narrators of *Australian Lives*, shame was often an explicit, named category of potent emotion. Narrators recalled past episodes of shame during which they had felt like a 'bad person'; in a number of cases they still felt 'ashamed' about the episode, which often related to experience of mental health, sexuality, unemployment or addiction. Usually these experiences of shamefulness involved a process of shaming, in which a person was perceived to breach social norms and was 'shamed' by family members or the wider community. Some narrators still felt ashamed about an episode in the past which carried a continuing emotional resonance. In other cases, historical shame was recalled but had lost its emotional charge; the feeling of shame was no longer felt, or it was replaced by a different type of emotion. Sometimes the very process of articulating a past episode of shame with an empathetic listener induced a new understanding and different feelings. Social norms about what was 'shameful' had sometimes changed over time, and many narrators looked back on their past shaming with anger about unfairness or mistreatment. Thus the items indexed for 'shame' in *Australian Lives* demonstrate types of behaviour that were deemed 'shameful' in the past and the ways in which behaviour was policed through shaming, yet they also show how the categorisation of shame has changed over time.

For example, David Cooper was born in 1955 and grew up in a working-class Melbourne family. David has never forgotten the difficulty and shame of not being able to read during his 1960s primary schooling. He believes that nowadays a boy like him would be diagnosed as dyslexic and that his learning difficulty would be supported rather than shamed.

[It took a long time for me to learn to read](#). What I remember about that is how frustrated I would be able to make people when they were trying to teach me to read. You'd have, you know, 'This is John, this is Betty.' And then you turn the page over and they'd go, 'This is?' and I wouldn't remember John's name. And they'd go, 'It's the same word on the other page.' How could it be the same word on the other page, 'cause it's on a different page. My mum would end up getting so frustrated. She'd yell at me. People were thinking I was taking the mickey

out of them, that I wouldn't remember these words. So I remember getting yelled at a lot, and I remember being frustrated and I didn't like school because of that. [...] I gave up and became determined not to learn it, a little bit, I think. You know, I'll teach you that I don't need it.<sup>26</sup>

Shame and shaming can also be shaped by gendered social expectations about appropriate behaviour. For example, when David Cooper was interviewed in 2013, he recalled how unmarried mothers were shamed until at least the 1970s. He regrets the long term intergenerational scars:

Then [I look back when I trace my family](#) tree and you find out that your own mother was pregnant when she got married, and that my grandmother and her and her sisters left Tasmania to come to Melbourne so that you wouldn't disgrace the family's name because you were pregnant.<sup>27</sup>

Women have often been the victims of shaming. Trish Barrkman was born in rural Victoria in 1933 and interviewed in 2011. Trish recalls how in the Brisbane suburbs of the early 1970s she was made to feel ashamed as a divorced working mum with 'latchkey children':

Children were called '[latchkey children](#)'. I used to go to school meetings and these people would get up and talk about latchkey children. [...] A latchkey child was someone that came home to an empty house, from school. There was that stigma. There was that moral undertone that you were leaving your children. What else were we supposed to do? How else were we supposed...?<sup>28</sup>

Shame can have ethnic or racial connotations. Milica Stoikovic was born in 1985 in Perth. During her interview in Adelaide in 2011, she recalled how, at her 1990s Adelaide school, her Serbian migrant heritage became shameful because of the Yugoslav civil wars:

I have one really vivid memory—and I'll never forget this. So this was Year 9 for me. I was walking down the corridor out of drama class and a boy started running down the corridor and he was saying, 'Arkan is dead! Arkan is dead! Thank God, I hate all Serbians. I hate all Serbian people, Thank God he's dead.' Then he turned around to me and one of my friends was like, 'You know, she's Serbian. Shut up.' And then he's like, 'Oh are you Serbian?' And I said, 'Well yeah, sort of.' And then he's like, 'Well I don't wish you were dead but I wish everyone else was.' [...] I always felt very guilty. I felt very ashamed of being Serbian because of everything that was said to me about those people and about that time. But I shouldn't have been made to feel that way.<sup>29</sup>

Sometimes the power of shame reverberates in the voice of a narrator. Former school-teacher Lynne

Sanders-Braithwaite (born 1949) was a drug user and heavy drinker for most of the 1970s and up until 1987, when she left her husband, and for a time her children, on the north coast of New South Wales, in order to get clean in Sydney. Lynne's feelings of shame are apparent in the following extract. However, listening to her voice reveals a layer of aural clues. Her husky, hard-lived voice and its shifting emotional register contrast with bird song in the bush outside:

I had these [two beautiful children](#) that I adored but it was caravan parks and farm houses and evictions, lots of violence within the home, lots of fear. A constant feeling of failing at everything that I'd ever believed in or wanted. [...] <sup>30</sup>

1987—just before [I left my marriage and took off to Sydney](#) to get clean and sober—we had to go to Coffs Hospital. They had ear surgery coming up and something went wrong with the equipment. One of the doctors said, 'Even children of women like this deserve better treatment.' I realised then that it was beginning to impact on them. I knew if they were to stay in the world that I was offering them, they would become children of the local drunk or the local junkie. I hated that. I've never forgotten that day, that burnt into my memory. [...] But that was one of the days I can—I was gone within two days of that.<sup>31</sup>

Lynne's voice conveys the physical and emotional effects of a tough life. The shame she felt when a doctor said that 'Even children of women like this deserve better treatment' is 'burnt' into her memory. Lynne's tone suggests that she still feels some shame about her failings as a mother, while also finding explanatory relief through her articulation of external causes such as domestic violence and homelessness. A second passage highlights how Lynne has struggled to make a positive sense of her decision to leave her children, and how her composure has been hard-won and yet is still vulnerable:

[I knew nothing about life without drugs by then](#). Certainly knew nothing about life without alcohol because all the family had drunk. Well not mum, everyone except mum. But that was the beginning of life turning a corner completely. I still think—in later years I was still ashamed of leaving the children and an old lady in Maroubra said to me that she'd left her son and it was the single most honourable thing she'd ever done. That was a real gift. 'Cause I knew they—where I'd left them—they were going to be safe and they were going to be loved. There wouldn't be danger any more, you know, and they'd be fed and clothed and all those sort of things, which they were of course.<sup>32</sup>

A final example illustrates how shame is both cultural and historical. [Arthur Hunter](#), a young Aboriginal man born in the Kimberley in 1989, was interviewed in 2012

by Elaine Rabbitt in Broome. At the time, Arthur was working as a sound recording technician with Goolarri Media Enterprises.<sup>33</sup> ‘Shame’ features prominently in Arthur’s life story (13 passages within the transcript include the word ‘shame’) and it carries distinctive cultural meanings within his Kimberley Aboriginal world and in his experience with non-Aboriginal Australia. Arthur’s early education was split between public schooling in Wyndham (where his father lived) and the Aboriginal cattle station where his mother’s family lived. At the cattle station, Hunter loved being ‘home-schooled’ by his mum and relatives who taught him about country, culture and language.

[My mum’s side](#)—like we have a cattle station in the family. That’s been in the family since I was very, very young or since I was born. That’s between Halls Creek and Fitzroy, about thirty, forty k’s out of Halls Creek and on Fitzroy Road, Fitzroy Crossing. It’s about 10 k’s dirt road into the bush, which is pretty good, spectacular. Since I was young I spent times in Wyndham and at our station called Lamboo Station.

My mum and dad split when I was very young, well I think when I was a baby. They split and so I’ve just been going back and forward to Lamboo, Lamboo and Wyndham. Zoom back and forward and when I’m out in the bush like with my mum, on the station is like mustering, getting cattle, waking up in the morning, all that stuff. Like I miss it now you know. I wish that I could have stayed back there and worked on the land with the family and my grandparents. The bush life, for me growing up, I knew my food and I knew my bush fruits. I know what time to leave for hunting and where to go and how to track down certain food source or animals to get. And I just had fun as I was growing up there. You just walk down to the bush. We went hunting for goannas. It was the best times.<sup>34</sup>

[My uncles taught me a lot](#) and my mum and aunties and, especially my grandparents. They try to teach me stuff about you know—well they do, and they did—teach me stuff about skin groups and my language and where I’m from, which country that they are from. They taught me a *lot*, my *juja* and *jabbi*—that’s from down Halls Creek side—we call our grandparents, *juja* is nanna and *jabbi*, that’s grandpa. That’s Djaru side I think. Or *Kija*—one of them two. But I’ve learnt a lot from my grandparents. They took me out bush when I was very young. They practically was my second parents. They taught me stuff, they took me places that I’ve never been to.<sup>35</sup>

For Arthur, living between two worlds, town schooling in Wyndham was shameful.

And then [we went into town and went to school there](#). [...] And I was a really, really quiet boy, really shy. I didn’t really get along with people.

I’m not a people’s person. But maybe when I want to be I can be. Back in the days where you couldn’t get a good conversation out of me like what I’m doing now with you. So it was really—for me back then—it was really, I think I was shame. And I don’t know what the meaning ‘shame’ is, I think is just being ignorant I reckon. I reckon when I was back then I was being ignorant.<sup>36</sup>

2005 [I wanted to quit school](#) and go work in the station with my family or, you know, do something, because I thought I was dumb and I couldn’t learn much. My teacher telling me, ‘Arthur stick into it. Next year will be a good year for you.’ You know, ‘You’ll really love it.’ But for me I was really shy. I couldn’t really talk and when he telling me about this place called Goolarri that we are in now—Goolarri Media in Broome, Goolarri Media Enterprises—back in 2006, he said, ‘We gonna go to Broome, do school-based training. We gonna go into radio.’ I was like, ‘What? Radio? That’s gonna be shame.’<sup>37</sup>

Feeling ‘dumb’ and being shamed at school is not an uncommon experience among those interviewed for the Australian Generations project. Like David Cooper and Arthur Hunter, narrators from many different backgrounds and cultures recall being shamed at school. Arthur Hunter’s shame at school was exacerbated by the gulf between the sociable, loving experience of family learning on country, and his isolation and perceived ignorance in the town school. A self-perception of shameful ignorance contributed to his shyness (why talk if that might show you up) and his determination to leave school. When a sympathetic teacher recognised that conventional schooling was undermining Arthur’s confidence and talents and suggested an alternative of ‘school-based training’ (where Arthur would learn skills on the job within an Aboriginal media organisation), Arthur worried that the new opportunity was also ‘gonna be shame’.

For Arthur Hunter, shame has distinctive Kimberley Aboriginal qualities. Anthropologists have shown that shame is one of the strongest emotions within Indigenous communities across Australia, and that the operation and meanings of shame can vary across different Aboriginal communities. For example, Philip Adgemis has shown how for the Yanyuwa people of north Queensland, after more than a century of colonisation and adaptation, shame is centred on knowing, and especially not knowing, the Law, and is critical for intergenerational knowledge transmission to young Yanyuwa men and women.<sup>38</sup> Shame is used by elders in many Aboriginal communities to teach children how to behave appropriately, and to monitor and control appropriate behaviour.<sup>39</sup> It is central to the forging of well-socialised and responsible community members. It can be culturally inappropriate and shameful to speak directly about difficult matters.<sup>40</sup> Being singled out from the mob can be a cause for shame, as it was for Arthur as a Black country kid in

the town school, or as he anticipated becoming the new boy at Goolarri Media in Broome. The potential for shame can generate a range of emotions and behaviours, such as shyness, embarrassment or modesty. Shame is central to the 'organisation of feelings' by which kinship and community relations are maintained.

In Arthur Hunter's interview, shame is used in relation to several different but related situations and behaviours. Shame refers to not speaking directly about difficult things. It refers to a fear of being singled-out or rejected, but also a fear of behaving inappropriately, of cultural shame. In the course of her interview with Arthur, Elaine Rabbitt, who has lived in Broome for many years and worked alongside local Aborigines in oral history and other community projects, asks Arthur to explain behaviour that might not be comprehensible to an outsider. Shortly after starting his school-based training with Goolarri Media in Broome, Arthur was involved in setting up the stage for the Kimberley Girl competition.

[Broome had this this competition](#) called Kimberley Girl in 2006. Oh, me and my mate and my teacher, we built this black border for the staging, to help the Goolarri mob set up. And there was one girl that in the competition. Her name was Anjay Phillips. She was checking me out, from what she telling me. Then on the finals night she got someone to come up and ask me, you know, if you want to go out or hook up or something. I was a good boy. The girl came up to me and said like, 'Oh this girl want to know.' I'm thinking, 'Fuck.' I was thinking, 'Gee.' Then I asked this other dude here—my cousin—but I was shocked that the girl wanted to go out with me or something, like go out with me. I was speechless. I was shaking ---

Elaine Rabbitt: *Can you explain that that's a bit of Broome style or Kimberley style—about how Anjay didn't come up to you direct.*

Up here in the Kimberleys we don't—well some people do but most people don't—they get someone to, they get a friend or a cousin to ask a girl or a guy out. So they don't go directly to that person and ask them because they're scared to get shut down or get rejected and people don't like that—getting rejected. So she did that to me and she got someone else to do it for her. And I said, 'Yeah okay, might as well.' I was really shy, and a little good boy.<sup>41</sup>

As a 'good boy' Arthur knows how to behave within the cultural norms of his people, and the fear of shame shadows his emotions and shapes his behaviour.

For a White listener the shameful of courting a girl directly may be surprising, and had Elaine Rabbitt not asked Arthur to explain his 'Kimberley style' I would not have recognised and indexed this episode as one of shame. After listening to Arthur more closely and reflecting on the emotion in his interview, I began to realise how my understanding of various emotions

was limited by my own cultural background. To take another example, the distinction I made in the index between 'love of activities, places and things' and 'love of people and pets' might not make sense for Aboriginal people who have maintained a deep connection with the land of their forbears. They perceive Country as alive, so that their love of their place or Country is comparable with their love of people and animals.<sup>42</sup> In short, emotions such as love or shame manifest in different ways across different cultures. They may have different feelings and meanings and they may generate different bodily responses.

Arthur is aware that even telling his life story in an interview might be regarded as 'shameful'. By speaking in public he forgoes a cultural preference for reticence and transcends his deep-rooted though fading identity as a shy and quiet young man. He knows that it might not be deemed culturally appropriate for a young Kimberley Aboriginal man to talk about himself in this context and in this way. But in the course of the interview he explains that through his education and work with an Aboriginal media company he has developed confidence in himself and in his own words. More than that, he has developed an imperative to talk about his community and his culture, to use his own story to contribute to a storied understanding of his people and their history. And, informed by his experience of living across different cultures, and through the process of reflecting on his life in the interview, Arthur has begun to think and feel differently about shame.

[I've been waiting for this interview](#) but I didn't think it would be now or in this form. But I'm really glad I'm doing this. To get my word out there and save me saying it all the time to my mate—talking about my culture and my history. I'm talking about it, is actually a step forward for me so I can maybe do something later on. So it's been pretty good. I don't find a shame in doing it. I just feel, I feel happy 'cause I'm doing it because I'm getting my story out there for people to actually look at or listen to.<sup>43</sup>

## Conclusion

Listening to the complex layers and meanings of shame in Arthur Hunter's account has shown me how emotion is both cultural and historical, shaped by distinctive cultural expectations and historical circumstances. Along with other interviews from our Australian Generations project, it shows how emotional registers can change across time within a person's life and within the wider community. These interviews confirm that oral history offers rich potential to record and interpret the diverse emotional qualities of historical experience.

Yet oral historians of emotion need to be alert to a number of methodological and epistemological challenges. We need to consider how emotions at the time of the event are always entangled with the narrator's emotions at the time of the telling and the interviewer's – and

future listeners' – emotions at the time of listening. As researchers, we need to disentangle those emotional threads and thus distinguish the feelings and meanings of emotional experiences at different points of time. When we record an interview we need to consider how our own emotions intersect with and impact upon the narrator's emotions and their story-telling. When we listen to interviews we need to be aware of our own historically and culturally-specific emotional registers so that we can listen hard and carefully for the feeling and meaning of emotions from other, temporally or culturally foreign contexts. We need to accept that the labels we draw from our own cultural context to index and identify emotion might not work for other contexts and times, and that they are, at best, a guide for listening and interpretation. And, of course, we need to use text as no more than a starting point for interpretation, and to listen (and watch) for the aural and visual clues of embodied emotion.

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## Endnotes

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  - 41 Hunter interview, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-219957349/listen/0-3408>
  - 42 See Deborah Bird Rose, *Country of the Heart: An Indigenous Australian Homeland*, Canberra, Aboriginal Studies Press, 2002; Deborah Bird Rose, *Dingo Makes us Human: Life and Land in an Aboriginal Australian Culture*, Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1992; Deborah Bird Rose, 'On history, trees and ethical proximity', *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2008, pp. 157–67; Elizabeth Povinelli, 'Do Rocks Listen? The Cultural Politics of Apprehending Australian Aboriginal Labor', *American Anthropology*, vol. 97, no. 3, 1995, pp. 505–18.
  - 43 Hunter interview, [http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-219957349/listen/1-2814parent:%2\(AuCNL\)5973925%22&iknowwhatimean=1&filter\[\]=access\\_type:%22All%20online%22](http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-219957349/listen/1-2814parent:%2(AuCNL)5973925%22&iknowwhatimean=1&filter[]=access_type:%22All%20online%22)