

Empathy and Empowerment

Elise Chenier for interracialintimacies.org

Please do not copy without author's permission.

"Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced." African American writer James Baldwin (1924-1987)

History is about more than the knowing the past. To be a good reader and researcher of history, we must approach our subjects with empathy. Reading, researching and writing history can also be a source of empowerment.

The job of the historian is to get to the root cause of historical events. In the case of interracial intimacies, the subject of the article featured on this website, the "events" are the formation of intimate relationship between men of Chinese heritage and women of non-Asian heritage. Like sociologists, anthropologists and other social scientists, historians study problems on a societal rather than individual level. What this means is that when considering the actions of one person, we strive to understand their actions in the broader social, economic and political context in which they occurred. As you will learn on this site, young white women who patronized restaurants and cafes in Toronto's Chinatown could be picked up by the police and charged with vagrancy. Why? Rather than look for the answer in the actions of the individual woman and the individual police officer, a historian asks why simply going to a café or restaurant was subject to criminal sanction, and why this applied only to women and not to men? Why did some judges uphold these charges, but not others? The answer to these questions reveals a great deal about racism and sexism in Toronto during the first half of the twentieth century.

Having empathy means trying to understand both the victims of racism and sexism, and those whose actions were racist and/or sexist. It is not enough to say something was right or wrong, harmful or helpful. We must explain why people acted the way they did. To do so means moving past judgment toward understanding.

Understanding something does not mean accepting it. Trying to understand why the police harassed and arrested white women found in Chinatown does mean that we accept their actions. It does, however, mean we have to get past whatever reaction we might have to sexism and racism and try to understand why these arrests happened. Only this way will we be able to move past judgment and toward understanding. Only with understanding can we bring about change.

Empathy

The term empathy originated in Germany at the turn of the last century. It was first used to account for our response to art and nature. How is it, philosophers wondered, that when looking at paint on canvas, or at a sunset, or a rainstorm, a feeling is aroused in us?

Germans Hermann Lotze and Robert Vischer created the word *Einfühlung* ("feeling into"), which was translated by Edward B. Titchener into the English term empathy, to account for this experience. Emmanuel Kant subsequently made the point that the judgment of beauty (and we can add its opposite, ugliness) is grounded in the subject (person) making the judgment, not in the object itself. (Kant, pp. 45-46). In short, a painting's beauty or ugliness is a reflection not of the painting, but of the viewer's judgment of the painting.

Theodor Lipps took the concept further and argued that "feeling in" or empathy also applies to our relationships with other humans. Empathy, he wrote, is the "primary basis for recognizing each other as minded creatures." In other words, we don't just "feel in" or have an empathic response to art and nature; **we also experience empathy with other people.**¹ Kant's argument applies here, too: judgments about a person's beauty or ugliness -- their worthiness or unworthiness -- reflect the point-of-view of the person making the judgment, not the person being judged.

How does empathy related to historical practice?

In the 1940s historian R.G. Collingwood proposed that "the events that historians study have both an 'outside' or observable part, and an 'inside' which can only be "described in terms of thought." By the '**outside**' of historical events, Collingwood meant those parts of an historical event that could be perceived using our senses. For example, we could read documents and look at photos that describe and depict the experience of migration, or of women working in one of the emerging industries in Toronto in the 1920s. By the '**inside**' of historical events, Collingwood referred to the thoughts and feelings of the people involved in the event. For example, the 'inside' of the experience of migrants of Chinese heritage includes their thoughts and feelings as their family planned and saved for the trip overseas, as they boarded the ship in Hong Kong, as they arrived in the Port of Vancouver, and so on. Collingwood argued that what distinguished history from science was that science relied on observable fact, history looked to both the outside/observable and the inside/unobservable.

Emotions are unquestionably a factor in **change** and **continuity**, two of the key things historians study. For example, when in Vancouver in 1907 a crowd of white men [attacked](#) the homes and businesses of residents of Chinese heritage, their actions were the result of an entrenched racism -- which itself is an emotion defined by things like hatred, anger, fear, and disgust -- [riled up by agitators](#) who used inflammatory speech to provoke the violence.

¹ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/empathy/>



“Building damaged during Vancouver riot of 1907 - 124 Powell Street, \$78,” photograph, 1907, JCPC 36.018, Japanese Canadian Research Collection, University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections, Vancouver, Canada. Reproduced with permission.

Emotions like fear, anger, and powerlessness were certainly part of the experience of those under attack. Paying attention to such emotions is important because it humanizes people, which is the first step toward treating people as worthy historical subjects. Racism and sexism, after all, are both dehumanizing. To regard one group of people as lesser than another group is to deny them their fundamental humanity.

Feelings, however, are not always apparent in actions, therefore we need to think creatively and imaginatively to understand things like **motive**. For example, residents of Chinatown did not organize a retaliatory campaign against the homes and businesses of people of white heritage.² Does this mean they were not angry or that they passively accepted their low status in the eyes of white Canadians? Hardly.

² The rioters attacked homes and residents of people of Japanese heritage as well, who defended themselves and their property with broken bottles and knives.

The fact that they did not retaliate shows that they managed their emotions differently. Had they lit fire to businesses and homes in almost any other section of Vancouver, the rioters would have faced severe penalties. They knew that the majority of Vancouverites shared their animosity toward “the Chinese.” Racism toward people of Chinese heritage meant that they could reasonably expect to pay little or no price for their actions, and they were right. People of Chinese heritage knew that to retaliate meant to be killed, deported, or put in prison indefinitely.

Both groups experienced and expressed emotions like hatred and rage in ways that were shaped by larger forces social forces. What happened – and what didn't happen -- during and after the 1907 riot illustrates how the expression of an emotion through an action is shaped by the (historical) circumstances in which one finds oneself.

Getting at the “inside” of past events, however, is challenging. Diaries and personal letters are helpful (although even they are not the “truth” of a person’s feelings – consider, for example, an email you might write to your parents and one you might write to a lover about how you are feeling. Which is the “truth?”), but such sources are not always available, and of course only the literate – those who could read and write -- created them.³ So how are we to access the past’s “insides”? Peter Seixas, a well-known expert in historical thinking, explains: “empathy is the ability to see and understand the world from a perspective not our own. In that sense, it requires us to **imagine ourselves** in the position of another. However - and this is crucial - such imagining must be **based firmly on historical evidence** if it is to have any meaning.”⁴

Historical evidence helps prevent us from being **presentist**, which means understanding the past from the point-of-view of the present. Historians of emotion warn us that we cannot assume that people in the past reacted to events the same way we might today. For example, women who experience sexism might use the language of feminism and equality to express their opposition, and people of colour might use the language of human rights and equality for the same purpose, but those frameworks for understanding discrimination did not exist. This is not to say that oppressed social groups did not recognize or understand their own oppression, but rather that the way in which people understood and articulated this experience, and therefore the way it was felt on the inside, was different from the way we might understand it today.

When historians say that history teaches empathy, what they mean is that it teaches us to see the world from diverse perspectives. How much we can “feel in” to the past is a matter of some debate. What is not is that: a) the ‘inside’ of events and experiences, matter, but b) we cannot assume that people in the past experienced

³ Illiterate migrants often dictated to a friend who could read and write letters to family members in China. This was an important role played by Steve Young’s father. See the full interview with Young in the Archives.

⁴ Peter Seixas, “The place of history within social studies,” in Ian Wright & Alan Sears (eds.) *Trends and Issues in Canadian Social Studies* (Vancouver: Pacific Educational Press), 123.

things the way we might experience them, and that c) any attempt to understand the insides of past experience must be firmly based on historical evidence.

Empowerment

People in the present have 'insides,' too. The way we think and feel about our subjects is shaped by the present moment.

Too often the emotion attached to learning history is boredom. Why? I think it is because so much of history can seem irrelevant to our own lives, especially if it is taught as simply facts about the past. History is actually very relevant to our lives. Scholars study it to better understand our present. Not everything in the past has a direct connection to the present, but reflecting on the past helps us to better see our own society in **critical perspective**, which essentially means to question rather than take for granted the way our society is organized.

I studied Canadian history because I believed it was important to know my nation's past, but what I was learning held little interest for me. To be honest I can't recall a single history lecture during my first and second year as an undergraduate. What I do remember with absolute clarity, however, was a single tutorial led by then teaching assistant [Penny Bryden](#). During the single week dedicated to women's history (women are 50% of the population but worth only one week of study – how's that for an example of how some groups are deemed unworthy of historical investigation?) we read an article on the conditions of women's work during the early years of industrialization in Canada. The teaching assistant asked if the topic was "labour history" or "women's history." It was the first and probably only time I had a passionate response to the course material. I insisted it was labour history. To call it women's history was to separate it from what "really" counts as history, to make it "second class" history. My nascent feminism was ignited and a deeper interest in the past was activated. I went on to learn that achieving equality required getting mainstream historians to see women's history as proper history, and not second-class history. Today I would argue that the topic is *both* labour and women's history.

From that moment on I saw history as a source of empowerment. History showed that relations between women and men were not the result of natural differences but were the product of historical forces. We know this because meanings we give to maleness and femaleness, to masculinity and femininity, change over time. The same applies to race and ethnic difference, physical/bodily difference as well as differences in sexual practices. Nature is not static, of course, but the rapidity with which attitudes toward social groups change discredits the "nature" argument.

Discovering feminism through history led to my political empowerment. Political empowerment changed my 'outside': I joined the campus women's centre, I marched in rallies to support reproductive choice and immigrant women's rights and I began taking more courses with a feminist approach. It also had an impact on my 'inside.' As a young, queer woman who was also a single mother relying on welfare to get through university I felt stronger in who I was and in my right to follow a path I chose for myself. I began to feel more proud that I was working hard

to get a degree while raising my young daughter, and felt less and less ashamed of being an unmarried mother on welfare. I also felt strong emotional connections to the other women at the women's centre who struggled with similar issues and faced similar challenges. It is a strange irony that the moment I was able to recognize and articulate my own oppression was the moment I felt most empowered.

For people whose lives and experiences are not typically represented in everyday life, histories of the lives of people like them – Asian, sex worker, child of an interracial relationship, and so on -- can be incredibly empowering. History can be a means to challenge present-day prejudices written into our laws and acted out in everyday behaviour. It can restore the sense of self-worth that gets eaten away when others judge us “ugly” or unworthy. And by taking courses, doing research and going to conferences, studying history can connect us to others who share our concerns and who face similar challenges.

Empowerment

In the case presented in this article, we need to set aside conventional judgments about interracial relationships, “racial minority groups,” and sex workers. But what if you are a member of racial minority, or in an interracial relationship, or are a sex worker, or have been shunned by your family and friends for your choice of partner? In this case, you yourself have experienced oppression and marginalization. You know what it is like to be in that position. One needs empathy in order to fairly analyse the actions, behaviours, and feelings of those different from oneself, but if the actions, behaviours, and experiences of the people you study are familiar to you, you might gain a sense of empowerment.

History, especially official history, often ignores those on the margins of society.⁵ When the story of your social group, be they indigenous or non-white, non-Christian, female, queer, or people with disabilities, is excluded, the message is clear: you don't belong. History can therefore empower those on the margins when it tells stories not just about them, but **from their perspective**.

By approaching my subjects with empathy, I hope to empower sex workers, poor, working women, people of Asian heritage, and the children of mixed-race couples by recognizing the historical significance of their experience. I have treated sexual and intimate relationships that were then considered “immoral” (and are stigmatized even today) as on par with “respectable” middle-class marriages between white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants. I recognize sex work as the result of women's limited economic options while at the same time recognizing that women who engage in sex work are not always victims of poverty and [patriarchy](#), but are often active agents – “consent girls” -- making careful, strategic choices. Finally, I also recognize that sex work is not stripped of feeling or emotion, but can lead to powerful emotional bonds with the men who pay for sex workers' services.

⁵ Since the late 1960s the study of the marginalized and oppressed is a major area of scholarly historical investigation, but most people learn history through means other than academic journals and articles.

I am a historian because I find history empowering. History gave me a way to see my own experience of sex, gender, and economic oppression as the result of forces that were both unjust and bigger than me. It allowed me to see my own actions, behaviours, and feelings in positive ways, and to feel a sense of collective empowerment with others who recognized the systemic ways that the poor, women, and queers are devalued. It also has allowed me to understand that the sexism and anti-queer sentiment I have confronted during much of my life is also the result of deeply entrenched but changeable social forces. This extends to other issues that are not part of my personal experience, but which I care deeply about such as racism, ableism, and classism. As I hope this website shows, these issues are all interlinked, and must be understood as a whole.