Conducting extended life history interviews that are broad in scope has released a range of unexpected emotions for me. The process has led me to question the various ways in which stories are told among different groups of Australians, how emotions are expressed and how these are shaped by historical and cultural shifts. I concentrate on two interviews recorded with the Australian Generations Oral History Project to explore changing emotional paradigms. This article critically reflects upon the process of conducting and interpreting life history interviews, and suggests that the life history methodology might enhance our understanding of the history of emotions.

I’m becoming used to the feeling of arriving at an unfamiliar home and taking a few deep breaths in the car out the front, before hauling a heavy case of recording equipment up a garden path. There’s a long moment where the air seems to sit still as I stand at the doorstep, pause and ring the bell. I hear footsteps approaching the door. In a moment it will open and the distinctive smell of another’s home will flood out. A stranger stands in front of me. Over the course of the following hours and days, the contours and creases of their face will become an increasingly familiar map, as details of a life are revealed.

Since 2011, I have completed 24 life history interviews with the Australian Generations Oral History project. These interviews have drawn me into the details of others’ lives with an intimacy that seems to be enhanced by the presence of a microphone and audio recorder. Recording these life stories has brought into focus the shifting ways in which emotional experience is understood and expressed over several generations of Australians. It has led me to question my role as interviewer, historian, and participant in crafting and interpreting the stories that emerge. This article reflects on the insights that these life history interviews, and the process of recording them, offer, particularly in relation to the history of emotions.

The Australian Generations Oral History Project is an ARC Linkage project run through Monash and La Trobe Universities in partnership with the National Library of Australia and ABC Radio National. Interviewees for the project are self-selected. Participants have usually seen or heard about the project through radio, newspaper, email and social networks or online social media, and have completed an expression of interest in which they give a brief account of their lives. If accepted for an interview they receive written confirmation, and then a phone call. A day and time of interview is arranged.

Participants volunteer to tell their life story over two days, with about five hours of recording time. The interviews do not follow a strictly standardised format. The aim is to facilitate storytelling in the terms that participants are most comfortable with. Open-ended questions are asked, and they vary from one interview to the next.

This article looks at the life stories of Judy and Marcus, who were born 37 years apart, and whose stories illustrate two very different frameworks of feeling. Their stories reflect shifting ways of expressing and knowing that intimate aspect of human experience that is often treated as historical and unproblematic: emotion. Together, these stories illustrate ways in which emotional experience is tied to historical and social shifts across time and generations. It is important to note however, that generation is just one point of analysis, and that other categories – such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class – complicate this, and are at least as significant in forging an understanding of the way in which emotional experience is understood.

Western philosophical thought has largely treated emotion as oppositional to reason, or argued that reason is the slave of emotion: a tradition that can be traced from the Stoic philosophy of Roman times, though Hume and Freud. Until the category ‘emotions’ began to be used by writers and philosophers in the 1830s, terms such as ‘passions,’ ‘affections,’ and ‘desires’ were used in place of what would later become known as ‘emotions.’ Psychologists have argued that, from the moment this broad and nebulous term first came into use, ‘emotion’ has been a ‘key word in crisis’: a term with a plurality of constantly shifting meanings, such that a definition is elusive, and in turn its usefulness for scholars limited.1 It is precisely the nebulous, elusive and changing nature of the concept that makes ‘emotion’ ripe for study by historians who are interested in the shifting nature of everyday experience.
The life history interview is broad ranging and personal in nature. It allows for some insight into subjectivity – that is, intention, motivation, and values – that might be opaque to another methodology. It encourages inroads into a study of ‘history from the inside out’, a study of emotion and subjectivity and its changing patterns over time.2

Indeed, as I record these life histories, I am often overwhelmed by how emotionally wrought the process of telling a life can be. I try to carefully navigate a course, even as I am drawn into the emotional fabric of the story: attempting to temper professionalism with empathy, keeping a watchful eye on the urge to counsel, and reminding myself repeatedly of the limits of the oral historian’s expertise and role. Inevitably, the interview roams over ground that I can personally relate to or identify with. My memories, and my current emotional life, come bubbling to the surface. The interview isn’t the time to elaborate on my personal thoughts; withholding them however, exacerbates the unequal nature of the exchange, and there’s little doubt that my silent feelings nonetheless affect the interview at some level.

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Memories are imbued with the emotional experiences with which they were created. Memory and emotion cannot be separated. Oral historians before me have shown that the emotional texture of the interview and the interplay between interviewee and interviewer are central to the meaning created in the exchange. To ignore this is to ignore a fundamental part of the communication.3

Oral historian Joanna Bornat argues that acknowledging and respecting the interviewee’s emotional experience as it arises through the interview is integral to developing a trusting relationship, and creating a safe space for the narrator to explore and reflect on their memories.4 The approach that I bring to oral history interviewing is informed by Bornat and other feminist oral historians, who emphasise listening for subjective accounts that may otherwise be muted by louder voices and dominant discourses that describe familiar or ‘known’ experiences and boundaries, but that may not reflect the subjective truth of individual narrators.5

Listening to a variety of the 300 interviews recorded for the Australian Generations Project by interviewers of different generations, gender, education, interests, and cultural and linguistic backgrounds, has highlighted how profoundly the identity of the interviewer shapes the content of the interview. My age, gender, generation, and education encouraged accounts that are attuned to changing paradigms of emotional expression. Interviews conducted by other oral historians involved in this project have emphasised entirely different facets of daily life.

Judy told me, ‘I like to think these days, I’ve risen out of the gutter, that’s basically the way I feel’. The central thread of Judy’s narrative was that of survival and upward mobility in the face of successive difficulties. She is proud of her achievements, and those of her children, which have been won through education and hard work. Her expression of interest to be interviewed for the project suggests how her changing experience of class underlies the sense of pride that she brings to narrating.

There is nothing like poverty to make you want to achieve! I was from a disadvantaged family home before it became ‘fashionable’ – my mother left our country home with a boarder who eventually left her … I wanted a better life, but didn’t know how to achieve this without an education … I worked in peri-operative nursing, working shifts that paid the best rates (night duty, late nights on weekends etcetera) to ensure my children had the best opportunities. I worked until I was 75, when ill-health forced my retirement. My children are magnificent, well-qualified – either with a tertiary education or a trade – and I am very proud of them all.6

At the beginning of our two-day interview, Judy told me that she thought that her life was fundamentally shaped by her childhood. She attended Catholic school and was exposed to its moral strictures every day. Her mother was a hard worker, who had several men in her life over the years, and Saturday was a day for drinking at the pub. She felt that she was presented with a decision, and describes her emerging worldview as one of ‘mixed messages,’ a moral dilemma.

You’re at school – it was a religious school – we were taught one thing and we were going home and seeing another. It was just, you know, there’s this life, and there’s that life … And my sister Faye was quite religious. She actually entered the convent when she was 17. And I asked her years later why she decided to enter the convent. And she said, ‘Well I was either going to be very, very good or very, very bad.’ And I could understand exactly what she was saying.7

At the end of our first day together, 77-year-old Judy likened her interview to a confession. She reflected.

It’s been great, and it’s like a confessional getting it all off your brain, sort of thing. Not that I don’t...
talk about things. I mean I do talk to people. But I never talk much about having a termination, I just – it’s such a terrible time in my life, it’s such a guilt feeling. It took me years and years to stop crying over it, years and years. Ah, but you do have to go on. And when I ah, lost the last baby, I felt as though God was punishing me.\(^8\)

After speaking at length about experiences which still have a deep and lasting emotional impact on her, Judy concluded our interview by reflecting on those experiences in language directed by the teachings of the Catholic Church. It is significant that Judy compares talking about these memories, candidly and at length, to a Catholic confession. Narrators of a younger generation more commonly relate the interview experience to the catharsis of therapy, or the kind of autobiographical disclosure that is inherent to everyday engagement with social media.

Her experiences of class, religion and gender fundamentally shape the emotional and material realities of Judy’s experience. Judy is well aware that she has lived through huge shifts affecting the position of women in society. She has engaged with and benefited from these changes. After asking her about some of the biggest changes she has witnessed in her lifetime, she exclaimed, ‘Gough Whitlam came into power and life changed. Women’s lives changed! We were given a power we never had before’.\(^9\)

No fault divorce was introduced in 1975.\(^10\) Judy got a divorce shortly after. She then went on to remarry. When free tertiary education was introduced under Gough Whitlam she went to university. The rise of second wave feminism and a raft of other social changes brought new discourses and language with which to articulate intimate relationships. Experiences like domestic violence and termination were being acknowledged, named in new ways, and openly addressed. This was exemplified in the 1974 Royal Commission into Human Relationships, another progressive government initiative of the Whitlam government, undertaken as part of an effort to reform abortion laws. It revealed the prevalence of domestic violence and provided an unprecedented public avenue through which these stories were sought out, listened to and acknowledged.\(^11\)

Sociologist Katie Wright considers the 1974 Royal Commission, among other developments such as the introduction of the first telephone counselling service Life Line in 1963, as part of the rise of a ‘therapeutic culture.’ Therapeutic culture refers to the cultural shift away from emotional reticence and self-censorship towards speaking out about private and emotional experiences in a public realm. Therapeutic culture has often been negatively associated with a narcissistic society directing attention inwards towards self-fulfilment, self-improvement, and self-gratification. However, Wright argues that the rise of therapeutic culture has much broader and more positive effects and has facilitated the growing recognition of once private emotional experiences in underrepresented and less privileged groups, particularly women.\(^12\)

The rise of ‘therapeutic culture,’ alongside oral history and second wave feminism, among other social movements, has increasingly made space for such events and emotions to be acknowledged as shared experiences that have a legitimate space in the public arena.

Judy revealed in our interview that she didn’t speak about terminating her pregnancy when it happened, and remained silent about it for many years after. Only in recent years has she begun to acknowledge, even among family members what happened at that time:
her experience of domestic violence, which led her to terminate her second pregnancy. In this interview she spoke about those experiences at length. Therapeutic culture may have helped to facilitate Judy’s account, however she does not simply or easily employ the values and language inherent in that culture.

Oral historian Alessandro Portelli discusses how the chasm between lived reality and possibility – between what actually happened, and what could have happened – is a recurring feature of personal narrative, which has much to say about the historical moment of its making. Judy reflected several times on how she witnessed new possibilities opening up for women over the course of her lifetime. She took advantage of some of them. Her age and generation meant that some others were just beyond her grasp. There are choices that she has encouraged her children to make in her place: gaining an education, and living with a partner and getting to know them well before committing to marriage and children, for instance. The availability of those new possibilities for women seemed to emphasise the predicaments of her own life, many of which were created by contemporary historical circumstances. The choices that she encourages her daughters to make, like establishing a career before settling with a partner, reflect their access to a level of emotional freedom that is the product of financial independence available. This points to a broader change. As marriage becomes less about economic dependence, the meaning of marriage and love itself shift.

For Judy, the main subjects of her story were the events of her life. The emotions that arose from these events are mentioned, but they are largely treated as incidental products of her circumstances. By comparison, a younger generation of narrators often shows confidence in speaking about their inner emotional experience as a subject of interest in and of itself. These experiences may become a central focus of the interview in which the younger narrator employs an extensive language with which to identify and analyse their feelings.

Marcus, aged 41 at the time of the interview, explained that he felt it was important to speak openly about his experience of mental illness as a way of beginning to break down the taboo surrounding this issue. In his expression of interest Marcus mentioned his credentials as a person who could speak eloquently about the challenges of living with mental illness. He wrote:

I am a happy, generally healthy person who can provide the insights of someone who lives with mental illness, and lives with the legacy of successful and ongoing treatment. My mental illness has not stopped me from being successful in my life or my career.

We spent a significant part of Marcus’ interview discussing his experience of mental health. He described ongoing relationships with psychiatrists, the effects of medication, how he feels without medication, the tools he has learnt to draw on to help manage his condition (such as keeping a mood diary) and the stigma he faces. He acknowledged that there is a pressure to be shamed by his condition.

It is a pressure that he tries to resist. His familiarity with articulating the intimate nature of his emotional and psychological experience was striking. While words such as ‘anxiety’ and ‘mental health’ flow from Marcus’ lips, they are terms that an older generation rarely, if ever, voice.

Marcus reflected in the interview on the self-consciousness and familiarity that he brought to the task of narrating. Some of the central events of his
life are the experiences of his inner life, which in turn create other experiences and shape his personal identity. He reflected:

I find that by writing I have an opportunity to construct my identity in detail, perhaps a little bit too much so. I get to edit very carefully what gets called the truth, and what doesn’t. I guess what I’m trying to do at the moment is reflect on that little bit, and perhaps relax a little and not meditate that question of identity quite as heavily as I have in the past … I think there’s some value in just relaxing a little and letting something emerge, rather than so determinedly building something … and I’ll give you a very small example, in my journal last night I just put some notes down about the specific forms of medication that I’m taking and specifically what they did to me physically, and I named the medication and I named the side effect, and briefly discussed the withdrawal symptom when it runs down in my system. So these are very intimate details in some ways because apart from anything else, and we’ve discussed this, apart from anything else there’s a stigma associated with mental health issues and there’s certainly a stigma associated with mental health medication and taking mental health medication. And as I was writing that I felt a little bit exposed actually, even though this is just a journal for my benefit, and it felt good to press up against that, and to say, no I’m going to talk about those details, and I’m going to put that down in writing. 

The increasing importance of psychology and psychoanalysis in the second half of the twentieth century is manifested not only in the rise of therapeutic culture, but also through effects on literature, pop culture, film and other forms of storytelling. Autobiographical narratives proliferate where they were once rarely found: from journalism, to documentary, academic work, and current affairs. The highly developed language with which to unpick and analyse internal life, both in these published forms, and in the private records of individual existence, such as those Marcus mentions, is indicative of psychological and psychoanalytic frameworks of feeling and thinking permeating everyday life.

The life history methodology, which gives so-called ‘ordinary’ individuals license to speak about themselves at length for the purposes of history, is itself indicative of a broad cultural movement. The ease with which different generations narrate their life stories may also represent this shift.

A tension underlines Judy’s narrative, as there are obvious challenges in speaking openly about experiences that have long been silenced. She knows now that these were not experiences that she was alone in, although for many years it felt that way.

In contrast, Marcus comments on how familiar he is with the process of crafting an autobiographical narrative in his own terms. It is something he has practised consistently throughout his life, in therapy, in diary and journal keeping, and writing. He confidently uses language and narrative tools that have developed alongside the rise of advocacy movements, that is, movements that aim to destigmatise marginalised experiences such as living with a mental illness, by publicly talking about them. His fluency in speaking about the internal aspects of his emotional and psychological life reflect his ability to situate his experience among a broad community of relatable stories.

Their contrasting modes of narrating reflect a shift towards a culture of confession and self-telling. Judy’s experience as a woman living through a period of momentous social change for her gender has certainly played into her shifting understanding of her life experience and the way she tells it. Similarly, Marcus’ experience with mental illness not only became a reason for telling his story, but also defined the way he told it. Using a self-selecting methodology has attracted interviewees who feel they have a story to tell. Their comments suggest that there is some level of personal catharsis to be gained from this process. They might also be motivated by the purpose of setting the historical record straight. The themes that individuals have identified with in order to make meaning in their lives are ones that could not have been articulated a generation earlier – or if they were, the story would have unfolded differently. These are both stories that occur at a time of social change. Their narrators are interested in articulating their experience because they know themselves to be part of active historical change.

By the time I leave the interviewee’s home, after several days of recording their life story, fatigue is setting in. A unique emotional bond based on the trust that has developed around a largely one-sided personal disclosure has also been established. The emotion generated by these stories and the very different ways in which they are expressed has encouraged me to think more closely about the emotional fabric of the interview.
The life history interview is itself a peculiar beast – a product of its time and context – and that lends itself to a unique kind of emotional disclosure. Its comparison to a Catholic confession on the one hand, and the catharsis of therapy on the other, suggest the different cultural contexts that are brought to the interview, and that define its tone. These comparisons also suggest that a consideration of emotion – and its intersection with other categories of analysis such as gender, religion, class, and generation – can bring a more nuanced appreciation of subjective experience, particularly for groups whose experience may lie outside of dominant discourse.

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Notes
4 ibid, pp. 48–50.
8 Australian Generations Oral History Project, ORAL TRC 6300/2.
9 Australian Generations Oral History Project, ORAL TRC 6300/2.