

# Archival Intimacies: Empathy and Historical Practice in 2023

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ARTICLE

## Archival Intimacies: Empathy and Historical Practice in 2023

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### Abstract

This article explores the use of empathy in historical research. Using evidence collected from a number of academic historians working in UK higher education institutions in 2022, this article uses empathy as a window into historians' attitudes towards the professional self, the appearance of objectivity and their relationship to the historical subject. It explores the role of empathy in learning history, teaching history, in historical research including the selection of sources, and in the communication of historical research to different audiences. It discusses empathetic historical approaches, suggesting that these can be categorised into three distinct taxonomies: historical empathy, where the researcher engages with the historical subject using professional detachment to manage their affective response; historicised empathy, where the researcher employs deep knowledge of historical context to understand and appreciate the worldview of their historical subject; and empathy as historical approach, so person-centred (rather than system-centred) accounts of history. Finally, this article tests its hypotheses by exploring histories in which empathy is absent.

**Keywords:** Empathy; eighteenth century; archive; historical methodology; letters

The poetry of history lies in the quasi-miraculous fact that once, on this earth, once, on this familiar spot of ground, walked other men and women as actual as we are today, thinking their own thoughts, swayed by their own passions, but now all gone, one generation vanishing into another, gone as utterly as we ourselves shall shortly be gone, like ghosts at cockcrow.<sup>1</sup>

That 'this familiar spot of ground' can be occupied by people who seem at once recognisable, yet also utterly different, drives much of the study of history,

<sup>1</sup> G. M. Trevelyan, 'Autobiography of an Historian', in *An Autobiography and Other Essays* (1949), 13.

from people searching online for the lives of their predecessors, to academic historians. In seeking to gain a deeper understanding of the past, historians of all stripes have to reconcile themselves to this fundamental dichotomy, setting aside their own self and their worldview in order to attempt to understand those of another. This ‘ability to understand and appreciate another person’s feelings’, the ‘quality or power of projecting one’s personality into or mentally identifying oneself with an object of contemplation, and so fully understanding or appreciating it’, is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘empathy’. This article explores the role of empathy in academic historical research, asking the extent to which it shapes the topic of research, the way in which research is conducted, and the way that history is communicated to students, to academic audiences and to the public. It asks ‘how does the historian in 2023 understand empathy?’, presenting historians as an emotional community of sorts, and exploring historians’ attitudes towards the professional self, the appearance of objectivity and their relationship to the historical subject.

## Methodology

To explore these questions, I have gathered the reflections and experiences of eleven academic historians working in UK institutions in 2022.<sup>2</sup> These historians represent three key career stages: early career, mid-career and senior faculty. Most (though not all) specialise in histories of the eighteenth century, and all have worked with letters at some point in their careers. The letter archive is particularly fertile ground for thinking about empathy and the historical researcher. Letters are, after all, designed to create connections between a writer and reader across distance, and that distance can be temporal as well as geographical. As such, letters lend themselves to both an affective sense of connection and an empathetic methodological approach.

Each participant responded to a questionnaire containing nine questions (see Appendix). The use of questionnaires is uncommon in historical research, but has a number of advantages in collecting data on historical practice. Questionnaires allow respondents time to think about the questions being asked, prompting more reflective answers than might be obtained through conversation or interview.<sup>3</sup> The questionnaire contained entirely open questions, designed to gather narrative, qualitative information that I could then analyse. The questions were grouped thematically, covering the respondent’s initial views on what empathy in historical research might be, their thoughts on learning and teaching empathy, and the role of empathy in their research. These themes are reflected in the structure of this article. Contributors were asked if they wished to remain anonymous in this article, but I took the decision to anonymise the entire data sample. Respondents are therefore referred to numerically when referenced, using the abbreviation R# in order to cite individual responses and opinions.

<sup>2</sup> Approved by the Research Ethics Team, University of Birmingham, ERN\_2-22\_0460.

<sup>3</sup> Gill Marshall, ‘The Purpose, Design and Administration of a Questionnaire for Data Collection’, *Radiography*, 11 (2005), 131–6.

## A brief history of empathy

Empathy, writes philosopher Susan Lanzoni, is a technology of the self.<sup>4</sup> Early versions of empathy involved expanding the self to occupy an object. A translation of the German word *Einfühlung*, the term ‘empathy’ was used to describe the ‘quality or power of projecting one’s personality into or mentally identifying oneself with an object of contemplation, and so fully understanding or appreciating it’.<sup>5</sup> As such, aesthetic empathy was about expanding the self into, for example, the swell of a landscape, or the angles of a piece of furniture. In 1909, English psychologist Edward Titchener extended the basic concepts of aesthetic empathy to encompass the mind. He claimed that he not only observed gravity and modesty and pride in his patients ‘but I feel or act them in the mind’s muscles’.<sup>6</sup> Empathy therefore became the capacity to enter into the emotions of another person and to experience them in a way that reflected, if imperfectly, the emotions being observed. In 1958, psychologist Nathan Blackman suggested that empathy was the ability not to extend the self, but to put the self aside in order to more fully occupy the position of another.<sup>7</sup> Empathy then became the dominant psychological term used to denote the ability to understand the experience of others. This acquired particular importance in the post-war world of the atom bomb, and the cold war, where the threat of the self-immolation of the human race loomed, and understanding one’s enemy took on a particular prominence.<sup>8</sup> Recent work on the neurological nature of empathy has identified a biological marker in the brains of primates that responds to the appearance of emotion in another. The ‘mirror neuron’ locates empathy in the body, yet it does not negate the contextual and relational elements of empathy. Brain mechanisms make us experience (as if replicating) the emotions of another but they remain grounded in our own experience.<sup>9</sup>

Acts of emotional projection, or of recognition, demand at the very least a shared social and cultural background with the object of enquiry. ‘Reactions to the emotions of others’, suggests historian of emotion Rob Boddice, ‘are always part of a process of recognition.’<sup>10</sup> Modern empathy, he suggests, is ‘projection, reception, and internal production’ of emotion.<sup>11</sup> These three meanings and their associational experiences overlap, coexist and confuse each other, adding to a sense of slipperiness over what it means to empathise with another. Without a shared background, understanding, and therefore empathy, is difficult. Even relatively stable cultural norms such as maternity or parenthood

<sup>4</sup> Susan Lanzoni, *Empathy: A History* (New Haven, 2018), 280.

<sup>5</sup> OED 2a, <https://www-oed-com.ezproxid.bham.ac.uk/view/Entry/61284?redirectedFrom=empathy#eid>.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Lectures on the Experimental Psychology of the Thought-Process by Edward Bradford Titchener’, *Science*, 31:789 (1910), 224–6.

<sup>7</sup> Nathan Blackman, ‘The Development of Empathy in Male Schizophrenics’, *Psychiatric Quarterly*, 2 (1958), 546–53, at 547.

<sup>8</sup> Lanzoni, *Empathy*, 132.

<sup>9</sup> Rob Boddice, *The History of Emotions* (Manchester, 2018), 56.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

are hugely affected by individual circumstance, as Emma Griffin has shown in her exploration of hunger and parenting in industrial England.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, in presuming to know how another human feels, those that claim empathy are also, albeit subconsciously, claiming the dominance of their own hierarchies of emotion and regimes of feeling in a way that can minimise, or reduce, the actual feelings of the person being empathised with.<sup>13</sup> It is necessary to know how to interpret an emotional dynamic in order to enter into it, and that knowledge is ingrained, learnt, practised and prescribed.<sup>14</sup> That interpretive context is essential to achieving an experiential understanding of another person.<sup>15</sup>

### Empathy in history

Historians generally have an uneasy relationship with empathy. For many, empathy is inextricably linked to a sense of attachment to the past that is at once open to criticism, yet entirely necessary. E. H. Carr highlighted the need for ‘some kind of contact’ with the mind of the historical subject when writing, to avoid what he calls ‘dry as dust factual histories’.<sup>16</sup> David Lowenthal discusses empathy as a type of deep connection to the past – a ‘more than’ approach – though he doesn’t specify precisely what he understands empathy to be.<sup>17</sup> Ludmilla Jordanova talks about ‘identification’ evoking profound connections to the past, which she links to the emotional response of many historians to the material that they study to the point where the researcher may feel ‘inside’ their sources.<sup>18</sup> For others, however, this sense of connection or recognition should be approached with caution, lest it close the gap between ‘now’ and ‘then’. John Tosh warned about the dangers of an empathetic approach to history making the past look too familiar. Using empathy to close the distance between researcher and historical subject, he suggests, distracts from the historian’s job of accessing the fundamentally different mentalities of the people that we study and whose worldview we seek to understand.<sup>19</sup>

Michael Roper’s article ‘The Unconscious Work of History’ situated empathy in experience, rather than in the mind. He defined empathy as ‘the ability to imaginatively connect with the subjectivities of people in the past’, drawing on Barbara Taylor’s notion of ‘species similarity’.<sup>20</sup> Yet this idea, of common

<sup>12</sup> Emma Griffin, ‘Diets, Hunger, and Living Standards during the British Industrial Revolution’, *Past & Present*, 239 (2011), 71–111, at 92–4.

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Saha, ‘Murder at London Zoo: Late Colonial Sympathy in Interwar Britain’, *American Historical Review*, 121 (2016), 1468–91, at 1472.

<sup>14</sup> Boddice, *Emotions*, 184.

<sup>15</sup> Lanzoni, *Empathy*, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Edward Hallett Carr, *What is History?* (1987), 15.

<sup>17</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country: Revisited* (Cambridge, 2015), 64.

<sup>18</sup> Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (2019), 45.

<sup>19</sup> John Tosh, *Why History Matters* (Basingstoke, 2008), 27.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Roper, ‘The Unconscious Work of History’, *Cultural and Social History*, 11 (2014), 169–93, at 174.

experiences across time, defined by species, is problematic. We do not experience our bodies in the same way as our historical subjects. For example, as Boddice described in his discussion of ‘sight’, the physical eye is part of a biological body and a sensory system that is historical and mutable.<sup>21</sup> Species similarity and shared experience has long been a subject of debate. As nineteenth-century physician Peter Mere Latham noted in his 1862 book on medical practice, the ‘things of life and feeling ... are different from all things in the world besides’. His enquiry into the nature of pain, explored in depth by Joanna Bourke in *The Story of Pain*, shows how even something as universally ‘felt’ as pain is experienced in layers constructed individually – psychologically, bodily and socially.<sup>22</sup> Taylor argues in her work that ‘our interpretations of past subjectivities draw on our imaginative identifications, conscious and unconscious, with the people we study’.<sup>23</sup> Yet subjectivity, particularly imagined subjectivity, is a source of some concern for historians, a hangover from post-structuralist debates about narrative and truth, traceable through the ‘social turn’ of the 1970s and 1980s, the cultural turn of the 1990s and the affective turn of current scholarship.

‘The history of objectivity’, wrote historians of science Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, ‘is the story of how and why various types of subjectivity become seen as dangerously subjective.’<sup>24</sup> In attempting to pry apart the relationship between knowledge and the self, they argue, objectivity became viewed as ‘impartiality, disinterested ontology, epistemology, and character’.<sup>25</sup> Yet they were careful to point out the close contours of the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity. Objectivity and subjectivity, they argue, are expressions of a particular historical predicament, one that seeks to erase the historian as ‘knower’ with their associated skills and judgements.<sup>26</sup> At first glance, empathy, a method of knowing grounded in feeling and in imagination, appears to exist in direct opposition to objectivity. Rosa Belvedresi noted how ‘it is generally believed that the affective bond that requires empathetic understanding puts objectivity at risk’, before arguing that the opposite is in fact true. When historians don’t pay attention to the affects in their work, she suggests, they risk confusing their own values with irrefutable data.<sup>27</sup> Stephen Gaukroger goes even further in his *Short Introduction* to objectivity. On the first page, he writes that ‘objectivity requires the ability to shift perspective’.<sup>28</sup> An objective approach to any subject requires us to stand back from our perceptions, beliefs and opinions, to reflect on them and to subject them to scrutiny and judgement, he argues.

<sup>21</sup> Boddice, *Emotions*, 132.

<sup>22</sup> Joanna Bourke, *The Story of Pain: From Prayer to Painkillers* (Oxford, 2014); see introduction, 1–25.

<sup>23</sup> Barbara Taylor, ‘Historical Subjectivity’, in *Psyche and History*, ed. S. Alexander and B. Taylor (Basingstoke, 2012), 195–9.

<sup>24</sup> Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York, 2010), 37.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 378.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Rosa E. Belvedresi, ‘Empathy and Historical Understanding’, in *Empathy: Emotional, Ethical and Epistemological Narratives*, ed. Richardo Gutierrez Aguilar (2019), 169.

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Gaukroger, *Objectivity: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2012).

Empathy, I suggest, requires the same careful delineation between self and other, an awareness of affect and of evidence. Empathy, then, straddles the narrow line between subjectivity and objectivity in a way that awakens the intellectual fear described by Daston and Galison as a driving factor in the power of objectivity as an academic ideal. Historians' attitudes to empathy reflect our concerns about errors, or challenges to our objectivity and accuracy, anxiously anticipated along with the precautions that we take to mitigate them.<sup>29</sup>

If empathy is an act of projection, grounded in affect, in experience and in culture, is it actually possible to feel empathy for historical figures? How do historians read emotion and experience in history? What are we doing when we empathise? In his overview text *The History of Emotions*, Boddice talks about packing away his own empathetic response to his subject because he could not be sure that his response, for all its empathy, was hitting the right notes.<sup>30</sup> He continues, 'to be out of time and place is to risk a failure of empathy activation or a complete misreading of another's mind'. Boddice does not advocate an absence of empathy; instead, he suggests, 'just as we have to learn empathy for ourselves in the present, so we have to learn it differently for the past'.<sup>31</sup> Empathy requires effort, and care, and must be held apart from affect. That is not to dismiss affective forms of historical engagement. That flash of feeling in the archives is often what draws historians to the discipline. It has the capacity to change us, to take our research in new and interesting directions, to tap into parts of our own lives, touching us deeply and providing us with the means to touch others. If empathy is fully understanding and appreciating another's feelings, however, it requires historians to put our own affect and emotion aside. As Belvedresi concluded, 'empathy does not suppose the uncritical identification between historian and historical agent, but it does manifest the affective load that is displayed in the process of understanding'.<sup>32</sup> To cite Susan Lanzoni, 'Empathy marks a relation between the self and the other that draws a border but also builds a bridge ... we need the self to empathise, but we also have to leave it behind'.<sup>33</sup>

What historians mean when they describe empathetic approaches to their subject varies hugely. As we shall see throughout this article, empathy is particularly personal to the researcher and to the nature of the histories they research and write. Whilst working through the responses to my survey questions, I have sought to define three empathetic approaches to historical source material. These taxonomies are particularly visible when respondents discuss empathetic approaches to teaching, learning and researching history, though they fade away when writing history is discussed. They are by no means exhaustive, nor are they clearly defined. They blur and merge at their edges, and overlap in their practices, but they provide a framework to think about the methodological uses of empathy in historical research and, I hope, launch future discussion about the nature of empathy in our discipline.

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<sup>29</sup> Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 372.

<sup>30</sup> Boddice, *Emotions*, 126.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 126–7

<sup>32</sup> Belvedresi, 'Empathy', 169.

<sup>33</sup> Lanzoni, *Empathy*, 17, 278.

## Empathetic perspective

At their simplest, empathetic methodologies for studying history focus on people, rather than systems or places. Psychoanalyst and historian Thomas Kohut has suggested that historians think about empathy as a way of knowing grounded in evidence, logic and reason, as well as in harder-to-identify tools such as imagination, insight, sensitivity to people, emotional intelligence and emotional resonance. In thinking ‘systematically and rigorously’ about the nature of historian’s empathy, Kohut premises the empathetic observational position as a way of writing empathetic history. This, he suggests, requires the researcher to write history from the perspective of the subject, rather than with the hindsight that generally characterises the discipline.<sup>34</sup> This approach is adopted by Katie Barclay in her 2018 article ‘Falling in Love with the Dead’.<sup>35</sup> Barclay uses empathy as an historical tool in her attempts to fall in love with the distinctly unlovable (from a modern perspective) Gilbert Innes of Stowe. She tests both the limits and the analytical possibilities of empathy by empathising with a figure she has no sympathy for.

## Historicised empathy

Historicised empathy requires the researcher to employ a deep knowledge of historical context in order to understand and appreciate the worldview of their historical subject. This type of knowledge is learned and cultivated over entire careers and forms the basis of all historical enquiry. Its application to empathetic approaches to history is therefore to be expected. Empathy is contingent upon knowing what is being encountered, therefore historicised empathy is contingent not just upon knowing or recognising what is being encountered but upon being also able to contextualise that knowledge through engagement with historical evidence.<sup>36</sup> It requires an immersion in the social, political, cultural and economic frameworks of the period under consideration, generally built over many years of study and research.

## Historical empathy

Historical empathy more closely reflects philosophical and psychological definitions of empathy. The researcher engages with the historical subject using professional detachment to manage their affective response. Successful historical empathy requires the researcher to cultivate the cognitive capacity to take the perspective of another (through imagination) alongside the regulatory mechanisms that tone down the self-perspective and allow for the evaluation of the other-perspective.<sup>37</sup> Fritz Breithaupt describes this type of empathetic practice as ‘co-experiencing the situation of another’,

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Kohut, *Empathy and the Historical Understanding of the Human Past* (2020), 4.

<sup>35</sup> Katie Barclay, ‘Falling in Love with the Dead’, *Rethinking History*, 22 (2018), 459–73.

<sup>36</sup> Tracey Loughran, Kate Mahoney and Daisy Payling, ‘Women’s Voices, Emotion and Empathy: Engaging Different Publics with “Everyday” Health Histories’, *Medical Humanities*, 48 (2022), 397.

<sup>37</sup> Boddice, *Emotions*, 126.



arguing that the term ‘co-experiencing’ retains a necessary sense of difference between the self and the subject.<sup>38</sup>

### How do historians ‘feel’ about empathy?

To feel empathy with an historical subject is described by many respondents as seeing or recognising another’s feelings and experiences. R8 describes empathy as ‘a recognition of, or an emotional response to, the experiences of the historical actors we study’. For R6, empathy is the sense of ‘holding a feeling in common with someone, or recreating someone’s emotional state within oneself’, whilst for R7 it is ‘a controlled act of feeling’. R9 describes empathy as ‘more than merely a feeling’ but ‘a sense of intertwining your own world view with others ... a sense of hearing the voices and experiences of those whose shoes you have not walked in’. Acknowledged but unspoken in these descriptions of empathy is the unilateral nature of this relationship. In this context, R8’s use of the term ‘recognition’ is significant in locating the emotions that might be experienced in the archive firmly within the researcher. Emotion and affect can (and do) form part of the historicisation of empathy, but they are neither essential nor even desirable. Source material and historical approach are generally seen as important in defining empathetic approaches to history. R10 extrapolates, ‘Perhaps I might do this [theorise explicitly about empathy] more if I worked on histories of emotion, or on histories that appeal to or relate on some level to the researcher?’ Academic training is the medium through which these emotional responses to source materials might be controlled. Corfield and Hitchcock have recently described empathy as ‘cool intellectual / emotional understanding without condoning or sympathising’.<sup>39</sup> As such, they suggest a level of detachment on the part of the researcher that forms part of an historian’s professional toolkit.

If empathy is a way of knowing or understanding the emotional state of an historical actor, is it fundamentally a fiction? A way of claiming to know the unknowable? The line between empathy and imagination appears, at times, vanishingly thin and draws us back towards post-structuralist debates of the mid-twentieth century in which the nature of history and historical fact was cause for some concern amongst historians. R1 suggested that empathy is an attempt ‘to understand the point of view of, including the attitudes, emotions and motivations of, the historical characters you are studying’, yet this raises questions about the difficulty of ‘knowing’ more generally. Empathising with the historical subject requires imagination. Sarah Maza has argued, in her primer *Thinking about History*, that ‘narrative and imagination are probably more central to history as a discipline than any other field of enquiry’.<sup>40</sup> Good history, she suggests, requires both a forensic attention to detail and meticulous research, coupled with a compelling narrative. It does not follow, however, that an imaginative narrative relies on an empathetic

<sup>38</sup> Fritz Breithaupt, *The Dark Sides of Empathy* (New York, 2019), 11.

<sup>39</sup> Penelope J. Corfield and Tim Hitchcock, *Becoming a Historian* (2022), 104.

<sup>40</sup> Sarah Maza, *Thinking about History* (Chicago, 2017), 233.

approach to history. In balancing the sometimes competing demands of narrative and historical evidence, historians become acutely aware of the limits of 'knowledge' and the need to be cautious in our assumptions, and critical of what we know in a way that is perhaps less marked in other disciplines. As such, empathy sharpens historical practice through both the way it is used in historical writing and as an historical tool.

The researching and writing of history encourages historians to reflect upon what survives, how insufficient the historical record can be in representing lives that have been lived, and ultimately how little we know. Archives reflect the dominant structures and hierarchies of the societies in which they are created. They are, therefore, never equal with the voices of the powerful represented at the expense of those of the oppressed. For some peoples, places or events, the archive – which is generally identified as the seat of historical knowledge – is deeply limited. In trying to access these histories, writers such as Saidiya Hartman have started to embrace imagination as a form of historical practice. Hartman seeks to 'elaborate, augment, transpose and break open archival documents so that they might yield a richer picture of the social upheaval that transformed black social life in the twentieth century'.<sup>41</sup> To understand the world as it was experienced by young black women at the turn of the century, to learn from what they knew, Hartman has 'pressed at the limits of the case file and the document, speculated about what might have been, imagined the things whispered in dark bedrooms, and amplified moments of withholding, escape, and possibility'. Hartman's imaginings and amplifications are grounded in the holdings of both institutional and personal archives, historicised and person-focused. Trial transcripts, portraits, newspaper clippings, oral histories, personal ephemera and institutional case files all contribute to her compilation of *Wayward Lives*.<sup>42</sup> 'My speculative and imaginative approach', she notes, 'is based on archival research and rigorous attention to sources.'<sup>43</sup> By grounding her imaginative narrative in the archive, Hartman creates the rich historical context on which historicised empathy is based. Hartman's willingness to discuss the imaginative elements of her work is perhaps grounded in her disciplinary background in literature and performance studies.

Empathy studies is a long-established and lively area of literary theory and research that explores empathy as an aspect of readers' responses to literature, authors' creative imagining and the textual cues that might deliberately invite or incite an affective response in the reader.<sup>44</sup> There are a number of parallels that can be drawn between literature and historical writing, not least the management of depictions of people on the page, the author as mediator of the voices of others and as director of the response of readers. Yet historians

<sup>41</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, 'Notes on Method', in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (2019), 9–10.

<sup>42</sup> Hartman, 'Voices from the Chorus', in *Wayward Lives*, 165.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>44</sup> For an overview, see Suzanne Keen, 'Empathy Studies', in *A Companion to Literary Theory*, ed. David H. Richter (Oxford, 2018), 126–38.

appear less certain of the role of empathy in their histories, and its relationship with imagination and with objectivity. Historian Marisa Fuentes employs empathy to fill the archival silence of enslaved women in eighteenth-century Barbados. ‘History’, she writes, ‘is produced from what the archive offers. It is the historian’s job to substantiate all the pieces with more archival evidence, context, and historiography, and put them together into a coherent narrative form. The challenge this book has confronted is to write a history about what an archive does not offer.’<sup>45</sup> Fuentes questions traditional historical methods that ‘search for archival veracity, statistical substantiation, and empiricism’. The search for more sources, she suggests, and reliance on the archive simply reproduces the silences experienced by the dispossessed in the eighteenth-century world by demanding the impossible. Historians must, she argues, relinquish the archive as the site of authority and reconcile themselves ‘to allow for uncertainty, unresolvable narratives, and contradictions’.<sup>46</sup> Fuentes addresses these problems through empathy. She acknowledges the affective nature of her topic and its relation to the self: ‘confronting sources that show only terror and violence are a danger to the researcher who sees her own ancestors in these accounts’.<sup>47</sup> The ‘process of historicization’, she continues, ‘demands strategies to manage the emotional response one has to such brutality’.<sup>48</sup> This acknowledgement of her own affective response to her sources, and the setting aside of that emotion to focus on recovering the lives of her historical subjects, both demands and demonstrates historical empathy. Fuentes’s focus on the context in which archival silences are produced and reproduced, and her person-centred interpretation of the systems and structures of colonial power are empathetic approaches to archival absences. She fills these silences by reading against the grain of the documents, grounding them in the deep contextual knowledge demanded by historicised empathy. As such, both Fuentes and Hartman show that imagination and empathy can be used to acknowledge history as a production as well as an accounting of the past, and therefore as a method to challenge both historical and current power structures. In order to claim authority, historical imagination is grounded in a deep knowledge of context based upon experience and robust research. As R2 suggested, imagination ‘does not mean making things up, but offering hypotheses based on wider knowledge which will be considered convincing and likely to specialists’.

Miri Rubin has described empathetic approaches to history as being a ‘move away from trying to understand “how it was” to trying to understand “how it was for him, or her, or them”’.<sup>49</sup> Whilst such an approach lends itself to first-person narratives such as letters, diaries or oral testimonies, Hartman and Fuentes show that it can still be applied to the documents that support

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<sup>45</sup> Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia, 2016), 146.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>49</sup> Miri Rubin, ‘What Is Cultural History Now?’, in *What is History Now?*, ed. David Cannadine (Basingstoke, 2002), 80–94.

and perpetuate systems and structures of power, and indeed, to social systems and structures of power themselves. Account books, court documents, ship's records, have all been used to produce empathic accounts of the past that both centre the individual, and situate them in the structures that shape and define their lives. R1 describes this as 'reading between the lines, or against the grain of a text', to uncover the experiences of those recorded only indirectly in the sources. R2 describes this as 'putting aside our own emotions and allowing space for the perspective of another'. As such, empathetic approaches demand a level of nuance in interpretation that also makes for very messy history. It is possible to empathise with historical subjects on a number of different registers. As Sarah Maza is at pains to point out, 'History is always someone's story, layered over and likely at odds with someone else's: to recognise this does not make our chronicles of the past less reliable, but more varied, deeper and more truthful.'<sup>50</sup>

### Learning empathy

All of the contributors to this article agreed that empathy forms part of their historian's toolkit, to varying degrees. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's 2022 Subject Benchmark Statement for History expects all graduating students in the UK to:

understand how people have existed, acted and thought in the always-different context of the past. History involves encountering the past's otherness and learning to understand unfamiliar structures, cultures, and belief systems. These forms of understanding illuminate the influence of the past on the present; they also foster empathy, and respect for difference.<sup>51</sup>

The implication here is that simply studying history increases the student's capacity for empathy. It is, then, unsurprising that explicit discussion of empathy is largely absent from historical skills and methodological survey courses in the UK, though this may be changing as more institutions offer undergraduate and postgraduate courses on the history of emotions. For Sarah Maza, this is because 'historical research is impossible to teach. It is learned on the fly, just by doing it.'<sup>52</sup> Moreover, empathy is thought to be part of the human experience and therefore innate to the researcher. R6 described empathy as a skill 'in the sense that walking or whispering are skills: pretty basic to normal human functioning, even if not everyone is capable of doing it, and it can be done better or worse'. R5 called empathy 'a quality of a healthy human mind'. As such, it is reasonable to assume that students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels are able to adopt an empathetic approach to history without the need for dedicated training. Yet the key feature of the

<sup>50</sup> Maza, *Thinking about History*, 234.

<sup>51</sup> Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, Subject Benchmark Statement: History, 5th edn (Gloucester, Mar. 2022), clause 1.7P. 4.

<sup>52</sup> Maza, *Thinking about History*, 3.

historical approach to empathy is control, and an understanding of the limits of feeling and recognition. This control, and the nuanced application of empathetic approaches to history, does need to be learned, and therefore also taught.

For most of the contributors to this article, their approach to empathy was honed and developed over the course of their university studies. Dominant historiographical and institutional trends must therefore be hugely influential in the development and application of historical approaches to empathy. The arrival of social approaches to history in the mid-twentieth century really heralded the arrival of critical person-centred histories that moved beyond biography. For R5, the arrival of ‘history from below’ in university curricula meant that ‘one was presented with highly technical social science history, and narrative history’. ‘The latter’, they note, ‘has survived, while the former, not so much.’ R1, trained at a similar time, suggested that empathy was ‘embedded in my general training as a social historian ... but it was not a word that was often used’. During the social and cultural ‘turns’ of the 1990s, R10 identified a long-established tendency for historical training to insist ‘on a separation between past and present, and a reaching for some form of critical objectivity’. Perhaps this push for a form of objectivity more aligned with the social sciences arose from the ‘social turn’s’ focus on individuals, or groups of previously under-studied people, as a way of defending such an approach against the remnants of post-structuralist approaches to history, and older, sociological forms of historical enquiry.

Age and life stage emerged as being hugely formative in empathetic approaches to historical work, further emphasising the developmental and progressive nature of empathy as a professional historical tool. R3 felt that their empathetic approach to family history ‘happened by attrition, by reading more and more primary sources combined with my own life experience as I aged’. Life experience implies a level of maturity, of knowledge, and the decentering of the self that often comes with ageing. If empathetic history requires the centring of another’s perspective at the temporary expense of your own, maturity if not chronological age may well be influential on a researcher’s ability to do it well. R6 described learning empathetic historical approaches as a form of apprenticeship, suggesting that, as ‘any attempt to express yourself to others entails some attempt to imagine what other people will feel and how they’ll think’, then ‘learning some sort of empathy is part of learning to write, which I did a lot of, especially as a postgraduate student and postdoc’. R7 also raised career stage as crucial to the capacity to both feel and practise empathy, though they framed it not as academic ‘youth’ or apprenticeship, but as a response to employment security:

I suspect I developed empathy a bit later – when I was a bit older, a bit more secure in myself, and (crucially) free from the all-encompassing panic of not having a job. I suspect I found it quite hard to fully commit to the past when I wasn’t sure about my own future, and the cultivation of empathy does require some breathing space.

Of course, career stage and life stage often but do not always coincide.

R7 was the only researcher to explore gender in their response to my survey. On reflection, this is perhaps surprising. Empathy has historically been seen as a stereotypically female trait. Recent studies have suggested, however, that the roots of this perceived difference are sociocultural, with women being more inclined to acknowledge empathetic qualities than men, rather than systematically exhibiting empathetic behaviours more frequently.<sup>53</sup> It might be expected, then, that female respondents would be more likely to identify themselves with empathetic research methods, though this is not the case. Instead, R7 linked a lack of empathy in their earlier work with their efforts to develop a ‘hard-nosed professional persona’ in a male-dominated subfield of research. In raising the spectre of a work persona, R7 encourages us to think about the way in which subfield, research environment and institutional culture may impact upon individual approaches to research.<sup>54</sup> The affective turn of the noughties has perhaps removed empathetic approaches to history from an association with overtly gendered approaches to academia.

### Teaching empathy

Empathetic approaches to teaching history, it would appear, are largely implicit. Just as the contributors to this article did not learn ‘empathy’ as they might learn other methodological approaches to the study of history, most do not teach it either. Empathetic approaches to history are therefore acquired through practice or apprenticeship, rather than through guided application and teaching. Historicised empathy is grounded in a deep contextual knowledge of a period or a subject, and it therefore makes perfect sense that empathy must be developed in tandem with that deep contextual knowledge. Developed skills must, however, be built from good foundations and several respondents achieve this by encouraging their students to explore their feelings of historical empathy through their recognition of the historical subject as ‘other’, and by thinking about their subject as both similar and different to themselves. R3, for example, asks undergraduate students ‘to think about the fact that people in the past were not perfect, and that they often made irrational or impulsive decisions as we might today’; ‘I don’t actively create teaching materials or exercises that are designed to teach empathy but I do talk about them when we read primary sources.’ R1 asked students ‘to think about the person they are studying from their own point of view’, and

<sup>53</sup> Charlotte S. Loffler and Tobias Greitemeyer, ‘Are Women the More Empathetic Gender? The Effects of Gender Role Expectations’, *Current Psychology*, 42 (2021), 220–31; Michael J. Clark, Anthony D. G. Marks and Amy Lykins, ‘Bridging the Gap: The Effect of Gender Normativity on Differences in Empathy and Emotional Intelligence’, *Journal of Gender Studies*, 25 (2016), 522–39; Leonardo Christov-Moore *et al.*, ‘Empathy: Gender Effects in Brain and Behavior’, *Neuroscience & Biobehavioural Reviews*, 46 (2014), 604–27.

<sup>54</sup> Vera Troeger has shown that only 20 per cent of the professoriate, and only 30 per cent of academics in the highest pay scale, identify as female. Vera E. Troeger, ‘Productivity Takes Leave? Maternity Benefits and Career Opportunities of Women in Academia’, Social Market Foundation (2018), 2 <https://www.smf.co.uk/publications/productivity-takes-leave-maternity-benefits-career-opportunities-women-academia>, accessed 24 Feb. 2023.

advocated discussion as the best format for thinking about empathetic approaches to history. R4 ‘sometimes asks students to imagine themselves into a particular historical subject-position’. The study of primary sources is central to these teaching exercises, as they provide students with an historical subject into whose world they can imagine themselves. R2, for example, will ‘choose sources which have a particularly vivid personal event or gripping narrative that encourage students to focus closely on the person involved’. R3 also associates teaching empathy with sources, suggesting that their research focus on the history of the family demands that students think about interpersonal relationships. The prominence of sources in empathetic teaching practices mirrors respondents’ discussions about the role of empathy in the selection of research topic and source material. Teaching empathetic historical approaches is therefore founded upon modelling good behaviour, upon discussion and upon the researcher’s own empathetic approaches to history. Several contributors noted the importance of allowing time in seminars to explore ‘the personal and the affective when discussing people’s lives in the past’ (R2).

Only R9 described themselves as having a defined pedagogic approach to teaching empathy to undergraduate students grounded in materiality. They ‘buy objects on eBay and from junk shops or suppliers and then at the start of every seminar session get them to look and understand the object and the people who owned it or made it or held it for a time’. This approach encourages students to adopt an historical empathetic approach by placing themselves into the shoes of others. This imaginative approach to history can then be historicised by a discussion of context and evidence. R9’s pedagogical approach causes them to reflect upon the dangers of the empathetic approach, something that has not been touched upon by other contributors. Empathy is often presented as implicitly morally positive. To be empathetic implies understanding, an essential humanness and an ability to connect with those that we encounter.<sup>55</sup> Yet this is not always the case. Empathy and its companion concepts, sympathy and compassion, have pointed to social disintegration, exclusion, stratification and chauvinism as much as they have pointed to cohesion, reciprocity and community-building.<sup>56</sup> Fritz Breithaupt highlights the ways that empathy can be manipulated, intentionally and unintentionally, to negative effect, particularly through spotlighting an individual at the expense of others, and deepening polarised divides. R9 sounded similar notes of caution in their survey responses, listing the dangers of the empathetic approach as ‘the retreat of truth, the rise of identity politics and the mistaken sense that a single case or experience (with which we empathise) can tell us something either systematic or systemic’.

### Empathy in the archive

If, as I have argued, the distinguishing feature of historicised empathy is its grounding in deep knowledge and historical context, it must have its roots

<sup>55</sup> Breithaupt, *The Dark Side*, 7.

<sup>56</sup> Boddice, *Emotions*, 128.

in the archive. After all, the archive is, as Carolyn Steedman has suggested, the central locus of the historian's authority. 'Without the archive', she writes, 'there is no historian.'<sup>57</sup> Ludmilla Jordanova similarly highlights the place of the archive in 'making' historians. The archive, she suggests, is where 'we become historians, develop identifications with our sources and inhabit other worlds'.<sup>58</sup> It is the seat of what R5 calls 'evidential authority, [which combines] with the authority created through narrative and empathy'. Archives shape historians and the histories that we write, and, as such, are sites of particular intimacy between researcher and subject.<sup>59</sup> The archive is therefore a charged space for historical researchers. It is where we touch the documents that our historical subjects have touched, it might be where we encounter physical reminders of the lives we study; a smudge in ink, a paw print, a cockroach.<sup>60</sup> Sometimes we find bodily evidence of our subjects: a lock of hair, a caul, a tear stain.<sup>61</sup> Such findings can have an affective impact, as when Sara Hiorns was moved to tears by an image of her subject.<sup>62</sup> This affective impact might stimulate a resonance between researcher and historical subject but this is distinct from historical empathy. Indeed, it is the control and distance inherent in historical empathy that allows historians to acknowledge and manage their affective impulses in response to the archive. If empathetic approaches to history take account of the messiness of our subjects' lives, then the detachment demanded by a historical empathetic approach goes some way towards neatening (or at least acknowledging) the messiness, or perhaps the humanness, of the historian.

### *Empathy and the letter archive*

'Letters and lives are bound together,' wrote historian Claudine van Hensbergen, specifically of eighteenth-century familiar letters. Private correspondences, she suggests, offer a means for historians to 'recreate the character and opinion of the individuals who penned them'.<sup>63</sup> As R8 commented, 'there is, by the very nature of the letter's creation, separation, loneliness, longing

<sup>57</sup> Carolyn Steedman, *Dust* (Manchester, 2001), 145. See also Emily Robinson, 'Touching the Void: Affective History and the Impossible', *Rethinking History*, 14 (2010), 503–20.

<sup>58</sup> Jordanova, *History*, 209.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>60</sup> For example, Caroline Davis, 'Eighteenth-Century Cockroach Found in Slave-Trading Ship Ledger', *The Guardian*, 15 Jun. 2022; Rachel Nuwer, 'Centuries Ago, a Cat Walked across This Medieval Manuscript', *Smithsonian Magazine*, 12 Mar. 2013, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/centuries-ago-a-cat-walked-across-this-medieval-manuscript-1766202>, accessed 22 Feb. 2023.

<sup>61</sup> Vicky Iglkowski-Broad, 'A Lock of Love', The National Archives Blog (2015), <https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/lock-love>, accessed 22 Feb. 2023; Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies, DE/Lw/F114, 'Locks of hair; Sir Charles' caul'.

<sup>62</sup> Roper, 'Unconscious Work', 170; Sara Hiorns, 'Crying in the Archive: The Story of Diana Bromley', History of Emotions blog, posted 21 Dec. 2015, <https://emotionsblog.history.qmul.ac.uk/2015/12/crying-in-the-archive-the-story-of-diana-bromley>.

<sup>63</sup> Claudine van Hensbergen, 'Towards an Epistolary Discourse: Receiving the Eighteenth-Century Letter', *Literature Compass*, 7 (2010), 508–18, at 511.



and that in itself appears, in the deceptive way of personal correspondence, to carry meaning down the centuries'. William Decker recognises that published volumes of letters are valued for their ability to create the illusion of historical subjects telling their own stories, rather than for their capacity to reconstruct the past.<sup>64</sup> This, he suggests, forms part of a fundamental fiction that letters offer intimacy and immediacy. We are, he argues, 'voyeurs of lives preserved in the letter genre's continuous present tense' and, as voyeurs, must contemplate the impact of our involvement in the epistolary form.<sup>65</sup> The historian's interpretation is only one of a number of interventions that shape the modern reading of past letters.

Archival practices are influential in mediating historians' interactions with their historical subjects. Archives of letters are generally shaped by archival sorting practices, attached to certain peoples, families or places. Letter collections may also be categorised, by the religious accomplishments of the writer, or their correspondents, by their gender, by the nature of their business. These imposed categorisations and attachments, essential to good archival practice, can obscure the nature and purpose of letter-writing, and alter the researcher's engagement (empathetic or otherwise) with the archive. Moreover, archival practice can give a false sense of the temporality of letters and letter-writing. When we can move immediately on to the next letter, when we already know the outcome of the correspondence (often from the online archive notes that we have studied before we visit), we do not think enough on the space between letters, the emotions of waiting, or of a missing letter. Letters, sociologist Liz Stanley argues, are disparate and fragmented.<sup>66</sup> They do not provide us with a whole picture of a life because they are only present where there is a separation, yet the temptation, particularly when presented with a collection of letters spanning several years, is to view them as whole despite the glaring absence of half the correspondence.

The nature of the letter archive offers researchers important opportunities to explore their own position in relation to their subject. In adopting an empathetic approach to history, particularly when using letters, historians become deeply familiar with their historical subject. In order to put aside our own feelings to take account of the perspectives of another, we need to be familiar with the experiences that shaped and formed those perspectives. Contextual knowledge forms the basis of much sociocultural historical research and is essential in creating the imaginative and narrative style that characterises good history. It is the foundation for an historicised empathetic approach to the history of past lives. The letter archive, however, facilitates a layering of historicised empathy and therefore a depth that can be difficult to achieve using other sources. The researcher will likely be familiar with the social, cultural, economic and political context of the world occupied by the writers of the letters that they are studying, but by immersing themselves

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<sup>64</sup> William M. Decker, *Epistolary Practices: Letter-Writing in America before Telecommunications* (Durham, NC, 1998), 8.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>66</sup> Liz Stanley, 'The Epistolarium: On Theorizing Letters and Correspondences', *Auto/Biography*, 12 (2004), 201–35, at 204.

in letter collections they may also become familiar with the writer's authorial voice, with their specific social, financial or political situation, the challenges that those situations present, with the nuances of their interpersonal relationships, and even with their physical and emotional state through the shape and strength of their handwriting. As such, the letter archive offers opportunities to explore empathetic historical approaches with particular richness and depth.

Shared experience with an historical subject does not necessarily lead to a more empathetic, or indeed a more accurate, historical account of their lives. Indeed, shared experience can actively obstruct empathetic approaches to history by blurring the separation between the researcher's feelings and those of their historical subject. As R6 acknowledged in their survey responses, 'their world is connected to ours, but it was also very different'. Yet, upon questioning, several respondents to the survey acknowledged a relationship between the people that they studied and their own experiences. For R6, the similarity lay in class position and the cultural capital that goes alongside class identity. R8 acknowledged that they only experienced strong affective responses when confronted with events that are 'almost inconceivably sad, or events/relationships that I feel strongly echo events/relationships in my own life'. R9 drew strong parallels between their upbringing, education and family background and the lives of their historical subjects, suggesting that they 'must have had their research design framed by empathy'. These statements would suggest that researchers are drawn to stories that resonate with their own experiences of life, though this appears to be neither deliberate nor is it a methodological tool for analysis or critique using, for example, auto-ethnographical techniques. As professional historians, well paid and highly educated, this subtle or underlying familiarity with the lives of their historical subjects is often obscured, for example where the subjects of the study are poor. In these situations, the researcher's lived familiarity with their subjects remains undiscussed. This is not, in itself, problematic. As we have seen, historical empathy is founded in the setting aside of one's own perspective to make space for that of another. This approach can be applied regardless of perceived similarity to or difference with the historical subject, allowing the historian to maintain the necessary emotional distance for good historical writing, though it should, perhaps, be more explicitly theorised about. The professional persona of 'the historian' means that whilst most historians think carefully and deliberately about their own position in relation to their subject, it is reasonably rare for this to be written about outside the context of historical primers.<sup>67</sup>

### Source selection

The relationship between empathetic approaches to history and the selection of sources is a complex and intertwined one. Picking at the threads of this

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<sup>67</sup> Jessica Hamnett, Ellie Harrison and Laura King, 'Art, Collaboration and Multi-sensory Approaches to Public Microhistory: Journey with Absent Friends', *History Workshop Journal*, 89 (2020), 246–69, at 255.

relationship leads to a 'chicken and egg' type scenario. Does the nature of the eighteenth-century letter lead historians to take an empathetic approach to the histories they write? Or does the empathetic approach draw us towards letters and life-writings as a way of accessing the first-person narratives that so much social and cultural history depends upon? Both iterations are visible in the survey responses. R1 suggested that empathy shapes the questions that one asks and attempts to answer. It is the historical question for R1 that informs the nature of the historical sources that an historian chooses to consult. Similarly, R2 noted 'I am drawn by the personal narrative, though I don't doubt that many historians are. I select the sources that are required to answer my research questions.' R4 and R9 felt that empathy did not have an impact on their selection of sources. They aligned with R6, who speculated that an empathetic approach was only necessary once the nature of suitable sources for answering the research question had been identified. They explained 'There's very often a personal aspect to the documents I work with – they are almost always written by named, known individuals. That makes it possible and necessary to read them with the kinds of practices I've discussed here already, which you might call empathetic.'

Other respondents felt drawn to certain types of sources, and this affective pull shaped the nature of their research questions. R3 argued that they were 'always trying to understand people's experiences, which I suppose is empathy of some kind ... I have always been most drawn to qualitative sources like correspondence and life-writing, which appear to give a more immediate connection to the writer.' R7 expressed a similar draw towards a type of source that demanded an empathetic approach. 'There was certainly an emotional/personal element' to choosing to work with their current sources, remembering not only engaging with them as a child and a teenager, but being fascinated by the elements that now form the foundation for their research. They added, 'I strongly felt that [the sources] had been dismissed/not recognised as important sources of knowledge ... I definitely felt that these were sources that deserved to be handled more closely, read more sensitively, and that doing so also meant demonstrating respect for their readers.' R8 suggested that 'familiar letters by their very personal, intimate nature lend themselves more to empathetic responses than say the financial records of a factory, or minutes from a Church vestry meeting'. R5, however, believed that it is possible to 'squeeze empathy from any source, however apparently arid'.

R1 raised the difficulty of accessing the experiences of those who could not write letters, or produce direct written narratives of their lives. Empathy, for them, was important in 'trying to document the experiences of those at the bottom of the social scale who are often recorded only indirectly in the sources. This, then, involves reading between the lines, or against the grain, of the text.' In implying that empathy allows historians to access difficult histories, this comment again raises the spectre of imaginative approaches to history. Empathy, this suggests, can be used as a tool to fill in the silences and spaces of history. R11 also identified imaginative approaches to history, grounded in empathy and in historical context, as becoming important to their current project, noting that 'the speculative histories that recently

emerged have been useful in allowing me to consider the need to get at the experiences of others (to underline their dignity and place in the world) and the difficulty of doing so, because ego documents do not exist for them'.

### Writing empathically

Empathy was most likely to be explicitly conceived as an historical tool by respondents when discussed in relation to writing. For many, empathy was perceived as being an essential component of good communication. R1 suggested that empathy is 'about asking, and answering, the right questions, and is important in all forms of historical writing'. Ludmilla Jordanova called writing the 'most important interpretative act', as 'by crafting description and argument we integrate our ideas into an account'.<sup>68</sup> Despite not specifying *how* empathy shaped their historical writing, R5 agreed, suggesting that 'empathy is a technology that makes historical writing more powerful and effective'. R2 agrees that empathy can be an effective tool or technology, using it to 'help me focus on the people whose lives I am working on, and that can certainly be useful to drive forward the actual writing process (and, depending on the piece of writing, the narrative)'. For R2, empathy takes on a structural role by focusing the researcher's attention on the historical subject, reminding them that their empathetic approach to history is grounded in person-centred history.

Several respondents discussed the use of empathy as a way to stimulate an affective response in the reader, extending the connection between historian and historical subject to include their readers. R8 was specific about the intended affective impact of empathetic writing tools. They wrote, 'I think I tend to hinge writing around certain anecdotes I perceive that readers would find particularly shocking, or tear-jerking - I imagine I do this for dramatic effect.' R7 similarly suggested, 'I also probably do try to provoke empathy or other emotions in readers through stylistic tricks (don't we all?). I certainly admire people who are able to do this with a light touch ...' While such an approach sounds reasonably simple, it demands that the historian engage empathetically not just with their historical subject, but with their reader as well. As we saw earlier, R6 situates the development of empathetic approaches to history in writing practices, in that it requires a consideration of the reader's mindset as well as of the mindset of the historical subject. In thinking about empathy as a written practice, R6 extends their consideration of empathy in written work to explore the difficulties of encouraging a reader to engage empathetically with an historical figure:

On one hand, I want readers and audiences to be able to imagine themselves in [their historical subject's] shoes. On the other, I don't want them to 'empathise' so much with them that they don't see, or (perhaps even worse!) begin to rationalise and make excuses for their part in the defence and reproduction of class power. They were basically

<sup>68</sup> Jordanova, *History*, 208.

a bad person, a slave-owner, and an unashamed advocate of their family's interests above all other concerns.

Helen Sword, in her book on *Stylish Academic Writing*, suggested that historians were arch-manipulators of language in their written work despite a tendency to claim objective authorial stances. She suggested that 'of all the researchers in the ten disciplines that I surveyed, the historians were the most clearly subjective – manipulative even – in their use of language'.<sup>69</sup> This, she suggests, is despite historians being the least likely to openly acknowledge their authorial position through the use of personal pronouns. Hidden in this observation is, yet again, the narrow line that historians tread between creative and compelling narrative, and historical fact. Yet for David Lowenthal, 'emotional involvement enables the historian to communicate, without it his account is disjointed, insipid, unread'.<sup>70</sup> 'History bereft of shape and conviction', he suggests, 'would not be understood or attended to. Partiality and empathy warp knowledge, but distortion is essential to its conveyance – even to its very existence.'<sup>71</sup> R7 reinforced the importance of empathy to historical writing, drawing parallels between provoking empathy and the crafting of historical argument: 'In general, though, I think that provoking empathy in readers is much the same as presenting a historical argument effectively; it's about judicious selection and organisation of evidence as much as the explicitly drawn out interpretation.'

Accusations of manipulating historical sources through language can be countered by historians' ethical practices. Several researchers suggested that empathetic approaches to history helped them to maintain ethical research practices by reflecting on the way they treat the people around whom their research is focused. R4 conflated empathy with respect, arguing, 'I would say that maybe respect is a concept that shapes my writing process, in that whoever or whatever I am writing about, I would always want to treat that subject with the dignity I would have wanted to accord it if the people were still alive.' R7 also drew a comparison between writing about the living and writing about the dead. They responded, 'I try to write about people (living and dead) in ways that they would recognise as talking about their own lives, and not to over-determine my interpretation.' R3 wrote,

Empathy reminds me that the individuals I write about were not just historical subjects but that they were real. I feel a responsibility to tell their story with dignity and compassion ... and this makes me more concerned

<sup>69</sup> Helen Sword, *Stylish Academic Writing* (Cambridge, MA, 2012), 39. Sword surveyed over seventy academics from multiple disciplines on the characteristics of stylish academic writing; she analysed over 100 pieces of writing by authors considered exemplary in their field; she created a dataset of 1,000 academic articles, compiled from 100 articles each from international journals in the fields of medicine, evolutionary biology, computer science, higher education, psychology, anthropology, law, philosophy, history, and literary studies by selecting the twenty most recent articles from each of five different journals in each subject area.

<sup>70</sup> Lowenthal, *The Past*, 343.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 342.

to be not only accurate, which I hope I am anyway, but also to draw attention to subtleties in their experience.

For these respondents, empathy is not only a writing tool, it is also a method for ensuring ethical rigour in their research. The ethics of the eighteenth-century letter archive are decidedly slippery. Letter-writers are long dead, their letters freely available in archival collections. We are unable to ask the letter-writer's permission to read their work, we cannot easily trace their descendants to request these permissions, nor is there generally a requirement for us to do so.<sup>72</sup> If we could ask, would our eighteenth-century letter-writers agree to our using their correspondence in our work? Empathetic approaches to history, centred upon the letter-writer and their social world, go some way to allay historians' concerns about the ethics of using personal documents. R4 summarised this discomfort, and the role of empathy in countering it:

It feels wrong to treat people – even ones who have been dead for a long time – merely as sources of information upon which we can build our careers. If we want the things that happened to people, or the things they said about their lives, to be available to us, it should be because we feel some sort of duty of care to show the significance of those people's lives to helping us understand something about what it means to be human.

### Absent empathy

Throughout this article, I have depicted empathy as an important part of historical practice. I have suggested that empathy is a fundamental part of being human, is one element of historical training and has an important role in shaping or conveying history to our audiences. I have argued that empathy can be used as a structural tool shaping research topic, primary source selection and communication, and I have also suggested that empathy can be a method of approaching historical study. As such, I have made an argument for empathetic approaches to history being fairly central to the discipline. Is this fair, or does it reflect my own grounding in the 'affective turn', and my immersion in the letter archive? This final section of the article tests my arguments by asking: is it possible to write history without empathy?

For some respondents, empathetic approaches to history reflect the humanity of both the historian and the historical subject. As theologian John D. Wilsey wrote in a reflective article on his academic relationship to American diplomat John Foster Dulles, 'the dead do not surrender their humanity at their last breath'.<sup>73</sup> For Wilsey, the historical subject is a complex human, as is the historical researcher. As another, similarly complicated human, Wilsey argues,

<sup>72</sup> Françoise N. Hamlin, 'Historians and Ethics: Finding Anne Moody', *American Historical Review*, 125 (2020), 487–97, at 492.

<sup>73</sup> John D. Wilsey, 'A Lock of Hair, a Ruined Cabin, and a Party with Hitler: The Ethics of Communing with Dead People We Come to Love', *Fides et historia*, 52 (2020), 116–25, at 125.

empathy is owed by the researcher to the subject. As such, it is not possible to write history without empathy. R7 expressed very similar views when reflecting on the possibility of writing history without empathy:

At a very basic level, I don't think it is possible to research and write history to a high level without some empathy, in the same way that it is not possible to participate in a satisfying human relationship without some degree of empathy. History is a human relationship. As the study of the human past, History is always in some way about people and what they did, felt, and thought. To attempt to reconstruct any aspect of the human past, we need to try to relate to what happened in human terms, and that surely must involve empathy in some way. That doesn't mean that researchers necessarily need to reflect much on empathy, to consciously explore it or try to provoke it, to display it, or even to acknowledge its value. But empathy has to be present in their endeavours to some degree to make the results of that research worthwhile. Otherwise, what do we have? A list of dates? An account of what happened devoid of meaning? How can we call that history in any meaningful sense?

R2 and R11 both raised the historian's duty to pay proper attention to the lives and experiences of their historical subjects. As such, they draw lines from empathetic history to ethical historical practice. R2 argued that

Historical work without empathy would flatten the depth, range and wonder of past human experience; it would be unconvincing because it imposes a present-centred perspective onto the lives of those in the past; it would be inattentive to the lives of people in the past as they experienced them, an act that (if not of actual harm or violence) is at odds with the values that underpin our humanities discipline.

Of course, sometimes histories have the potential to be harmful and traumatic. R11 wrote:

I think it [empathy] really matters in histories of enslavement, for example. As historians we need to understand that histories are often forms of trauma and violence, they unleash and animate a past which is deeply hurtful and atrocious. We must understand this to work with care and caution, we must know this power in our communication.

R10 also urged caution that 'contested, uncomfortable and challenging histories call perhaps for greater empathy in understanding how the past can shape the present and its ongoing legacies'. Historical trauma, and the narratives through which it has been told, has been shown to be 'a potential source of both distress and resilience' particularly for racial and ethnic minority populations and groups that experience significant health

disparities.<sup>74</sup> Empathetic approaches to history, then, allow historians to ensure that the past and those that populate it are being treated carefully, fulfilling a duty of care not only to our historical subjects, but to those who read our histories.

Other respondents, however, suggested that the presence or absence of empathy is driven by the nature of the history being written, and the historian's engagement with it. R6 pointed out that:

not all history is about capturing people's experience. No historian can do everything at once. There's also a lot of danger in 'empathetic' approaches that risk reifying the perspectives of particular actors (especially those with good sources) ... I'd go so far as to say that sometimes it's better to leave empathy out of the picture altogether.

R8 also raised the possibility that empathetic approaches to history run the risk of distorting the historian's necessary objectivity:

I don't think I treat historical actors that I don't empathise with that differently – indeed, it is possible that I am more likely to misrepresent those I empathise with, because I perhaps read too much into certain situations. So personally, I don't think it matters if empathy is absent, because if it is present, it is likely misplaced.

This comment suggests that, for R8, empathy that is rooted in emotion has the potential to mislead. Their reflection reiterates the importance of explicit reflection about the relationship between the historian and their subject, and the need to ground empathetic approaches to history with a deep contextual knowledge. That contextual knowledge, for R10, is what allows historians to decide whether an empathetic methodology is appropriate for the histories they are trying to write:

Good historical work shifts perspective, knows the limits of what the evidence can carry, is driven by effective questions and deeply aware of entangled contexts etc. Empathy may figure, but there are also circumstances in which empathy is inappropriate or can even become self-indulgent.

To some extent, it would appear that the puzzle of absent empathy returns us to our initial enquiry: how does the historian in 2023 understand empathy? When asked the question 'what is empathy?' most respondents gave answers that were slightly fuzzy at the edges. Empathy was described by many respondents using two or three different terms, particularly that it was a skill (in that it could be learned) and that it was a quality (in that most humans possess the capacity to empathise). Exploring absent empathy gives these answers much sharper edges. In the answers to this question,

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<sup>74</sup> Nathaniel Vincent Mohatt *et al.*, 'Historical Trauma as Public Narrative: A Conceptual Review of How History Impacts Present-Day Health', *Social Science and Medicine*, 106 (2014), 128–36.



empathy was described in methodological terms, as a tool to be deployed in the correct circumstances and as a quality, or a marker of humanness.

## Conclusion

So, how does the historian in 2023 understand empathy? It would appear that, as a profession, we're not entirely sure. Empathy is described as intimacy with the lives and minds of those we write about, but also distance. It can be, at once, a learnable, and transferable skill, an innate human quality, and a methodological approach to our academic discipline. Respondents described it as a tool that can be manipulated and bent to our purpose, and as a duty that we as historians owe to the past. Empathy is, it transpires, very personal. Historians' views of empathy are shaped by the histories that we study, by the prevalent school of thought at our institution, or in the discipline when we were trained, and by our own lives. Our gender, our age, our upbringing, our stage in the life cycle all have the potential to influence what we understand empathetic approaches to history to be. As Jordanova has suggested, 'historians' skills are developed and refined over a lifetime, becoming an integral part of the person'.<sup>75</sup>

Some historians conceptualise history as an historical tool, the professional detachment that we employ when we wish to understand the lives and actions of our historical subjects. It offers us a way of accessing histories that might be unpleasant, or difficult, or that fall outside traditional archival collections. As Richard Evans asked in *In Defence of History*, how can one 'understand' Hitler without a detached mode of cognition, a faculty of self-criticism and an ability to understand another's point of view?<sup>76</sup> Here the dichotomies of historical approaches to empathy become particularly marked. Empathy is described by respondents as a tool that allows them to stand alongside their historical subjects to try and understand their worldview. Yet, as Thomas Haskell has written, empathy is also distance, and 'the ability not to put oneself at the centre of a view of the world' where 'one's own self is just one object among many'.<sup>77</sup>

Empathy can be a type of historical knowledge, or a perspective of the past. To cite Tracy Loughran, 'a properly historicised empathy depends on the contextualisation that precedes and follows from engagement with historical evidence – in other words, from the fusion of "facts", interpretation, and imagination'. 'It is', she continues, 'an essential aspect of how historians engage with sources – how we respond to traces of the past'.<sup>78</sup> Finally, empathy can also be a methodological position, or an historical approach. Historians generally see empathetic histories as histories with people at their heart rather than systems or structures. Through their focus on people, empathetic histories can contradict system- or structure-based histories, but it would be

<sup>75</sup> Jordanova, *History*, 197.

<sup>76</sup> Richard Evans, *In Defence of History* (2018), 155.

<sup>77</sup> Thomas L. Haskell, 'Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Rhetoric and Practice in Peter Nock's *That Noble Dream*', *History and Theory*, 29 (1990), 129–57, at 132.

<sup>78</sup> Loughran, Mahoney and Payling, 'Women's Voices', 397.

naive to suggest that empathetic histories sit outside social structures. The tendency of respondents to associate empathy with subjective, personal, human-centred histories reflects an interesting separation in the way historians have been trained to think about the relationship between emotion, the individual, and social structure that warrants further consideration and discussion.

As a profession, historians lack a general consensus on the role of empathy in historical research and in the practices of our discipline. Understandings of empathy in historical research are shaped by multifarious factors from the moment a historian's training begins as an undergraduate, and they shift and change throughout the professional life cycle. As such, understandings of empathy can be seen as reflective of the professional figure of the historian, the changing nature of the discipline, and our ongoing engagements with our historical subjects.

## Appendix

1. What is empathy in your opinion, within the context of historical work/ your work as an historian?
2. Is empathy a skill? Or is it something different? A quality? Or a virtue?
3. Did you develop or learn empathy as part of your historian's training? How and when?
4. Do you teach empathy to your students? If so, how?
5. How does empathy shape your research?
6. How does empathy have an impact on the types of sources that you work with?
7. What role do you think empathy plays in your writing processes?
8. How is empathy important in communicating your research a) to academics? b) to other audiences?
9. What happens to historical work when empathy is absent? Does it matter?

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