

## **Report from Workshop: Understanding Emotions: An Interdisciplinary Workshop**

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The workshop was intended to provide a forum for an intensely interdisciplinary discussion of the problems of studying human emotions, between sets of disciplines (medieval and early modern studies, experimental science) that are often seen to be so widely separated that little meaningful collaboration can take place. To this end, we invited twenty top Australian researchers, from six universities, in the fields of social and intellectual history, religious studies, English literature and cultural studies, Latin studies, philosophy, visual arts, music and performance practice, museology, philosophy, business psychology, social psychology, experimental psychology, neuropsychiatry, and population health, to a two-day symposium at the University of Western Australia, hosted by UWA's Centre for Medieval and Early Modern Studies (CMEMS). The group included three Early Career Researchers. Our funding from the ASSA enabled us also to leverage sponsorship from the Institute of Advanced Studies (UWA) and the Elizabeth Rutherford Centre for Advanced Research on the Emotions, (UWA) to invite the president of the International Society for Research on Emotion, (ISRE) Professor Gerrod Parrott (Psychology, University of Georgetown, USA) to deliver an opening public lecture, and to attend the workshop as a commentator and discussion leader.

In the last twenty years, in the words of Professor Ottmar Lipp (the opening speaker, Psychology, UQ), there has been a

renaissance of emotion as a topic of psychological research and a changed view of emotion in the context of psychological functioning. Basically, what was regarded for a long time as a hindrance for optimal psychological functioning is now regarded as a prerequisite

Hence not only has the study of the physiology and psychology of emotion intensified in recent years, but social scientists, social psychologists and historians have started to address seriously the questions of the social functioning of emotions, the extent to which even the production (let alone the expression and regulation) of emotions may be socially and culturally conditioned, and the extent to which individual and social emotions may change over time. The long-running International Society for Research on Emotion (ISRE) has in 2009 established a refereed journal, *Emotion Review*, 'to enhance debate about critical issues in emotion theory and research ... across a wide interdisciplinary field'. Two of its contributors, James A. Russell and Lisa Feldman Barrett assert that

For humans to understand their place in the world, we need to understand the nature of emotion. Such understanding will occur only when scholars from different national and cultural backgrounds, different disciplines, and different points of view can communicate their ideas and scholarly investigations to one another and consider perspectives that are different from their own. We must work toward a common language and understanding.

Yet despite these developments, there has been little dialogue in the Australian university system between practitioners working on the subject from their widely different disciplinary backgrounds.

Our workshop, then, acted to break down some of those disciplinary walls. To ensure intense cross-disciplinary discussion, the workshop was structured into sessions, each with a primary paper, posted beforehand on the website of the Centre for Medieval and Early Modern Studies at UWA. For each session, two participants from very different disciplines to the speaker were asked to provide ten-minute responses to the primary paper. Thus, the responses to Professor Lipp's opening paper, 'The state of emotions in modern psychological research' came from the disciplines of music and medieval English literature. Dr. Danijela Kambaskovic-Sawer's paper on 'The aging of love: physiology, philosophy and poetry', on readings of Plato's views on love and enthusiasm in pre-modern poetry, attracted responses from the disciplines of neuropsychiatry and philosophy. Responses to Professor Stephanie Trigg's cultural studies paper on changing emotional responses to fire over the long term from the Great Fire of London to the present day came from the disciplines of population health and history/museology. As well as these issue-and-response sessions, we scheduled four open discussion sessions around such broad topics as 'Do societies undergo changes in emotional regimes (for instance, the dominance of particular emotions, such as fear, or aggression)? If so, what drives these changes?' or 'How can scholars in the social sciences and humanities benefit from the methodologies and findings of modern scientific research into the emotions? How might the historical understanding of past mentalities relate to modern neuroscience and physiology?'

It is fair to say that some of us approached this challenging format with a degree of trepidation. Would disciplinary methodologies prove so diverse as to be mutually incomprehensible? Could we even find a common language in which to discuss the study of emotion? If (for instance) fear can now be demonstrated to manifest as a common and well-understood neurophysiological process, (involving a set of neurological pathways leading to stimulus of the amygdala), is anything significant left for historians to discover about its manifestation in pre-modern contexts? In fact, however, the format proved a brilliant success. All participants joined eagerly in the lively debates; and all reported a greatly enhanced understanding of the range of questions and approaches necessary to a full comprehension of emotion in both its individual and social contexts, with a concomitantly heightened enthusiasm and engagement in their subject. For example, the new experimental discoveries on the brain physiology of fear provided the basis of an excellent discussion of psychologists' understandings of the point at which, in emotional genesis, social and cultural constructs affect the production of emotion; and hence the considerations humanities and social science researchers might need to address in order to contribute to a full understanding of emotional genesis. As one participant subsequently wrote:

It was intellectually very stimulating particularly because of the encounter between historicist approaches (literary, historical) and those of the psychologists, who are asking philosophical questions about 'what are emotions', as distinct from the more contextual issues about how emotions might change.

Each set of disciplines produced tough questions for the others to consider. On the production of fear, for example, early modernists pointed out that the word 'fear' encompassed a slightly different range of meanings in the early modern period than it does today, including the definition of fear as justified awe and respect often of the divine (as in the early 17<sup>th</sup> C King James' Bible translation, 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'). Can we be sure that this fear would also manifest as stimulation of the amygdala through certain known neurological pathways? In other words, did seventeenth-century people attribute a different meaning to the same

physiological phenomenon, or were they applying the one term (fear) to two different physical phenomena? The group decided that an approach to settling this point could be made only if experimental psychologists were to carry out tests on modern populations (Amish? devout Hindus?) who retain a sense of numinous awe. Conversely, psychologists and neuro-psychiatrists rightly challenged humanities researchers' use of the term 'emotional regimes'? What does it mean? How could an emotional regime be identified or demonstrated? Does the term connote merely a loose social and cultural norm centring around the appropriateness of emotional expression, or does it imply a sense of regulation, often of communal emotion, by the powerful of the comparatively powerless, for political ends?

The outcomes of this workshop will, we believe, encompass both comparatively short-term outputs (publications), and long-term and less tangible, but perhaps more valuable outcomes, such as more frequent and higher-level communications between researchers in different disciplines, a better appreciation of the values and limitations of each disciplinary approach by the others, and enhanced collaborative cross-disciplinary research. The three participants of one session, for instance, have been invited to submit their papers for publication in *Emotion Review*, the journal of ISRE. The workshop has enabled us to recruit Professor Gerrod Parrot's enthusiastic support of the recently-funded ARC Centre of Excellence for the History of the Emotions (Europe 1100-1800), as a member of its Advisory Board. Professor Parrott will attend the international conference on pre-modern emotions to be held at UWA in June 2011, sponsored jointly by CMEMS and the ARC Centre for the History of Emotions. Conversely, Humanities researchers will join the ISRE, and attend its forthcoming conference in Japan in July 2011. Professor Colin MacLeod (Psychology) and Professor Jane Davidson (Music Performance Practice), both participants at the workshop, will in future collaborate on research on audience emotions generated in response to music, and will both be involved in running an international symposium in 2011 on 'The Power of Music'.

In short, this workshop turned an intense interdisciplinary focus onto major research questions in the current study of emotions; set up lively cross-disciplinary discussions of fundamental understandings of emotions and the terms of the debate surrounding them; discovered research synergies between vastly different fields and methodologies; raised challenging questions for all participants; and enabled the establishment and development of collaborative research efforts for the future.

List of participants:

Prof Neal Ashkanasy	(University of Queensland, Business Psychology)
Prof Susan Broomhall	(University of Western Australia, History/Museology)
Dr Romola Bucks	(University of Western Australia, Psychology; ECR)
A/Prof Angus Cook	(University of Western Australia, Population Health)
A/Prof Nic Damnjanovic	(University of Western Australia, Philosophy; ECR)
Prof Jane Davidson	(University of Western Australia, Music, Performance Practice)
Dr Sarah Ferber	(University of Wollongong, History)
W/Prof Yasmin Haskell,	(University of Western Australia, Classics)
A/Prof Peter Holbrook	(University of Queensland, English)

A/Prof Danijela Kambaskovic-Sawers (University of Western Australia, Literature;  
ECR)

Prof Ottmar Lipp (University of Queensland, Psychology)

Prof Andrew Lynch (University of Western Australia, Literature)

Prof Colin MacLeod (University of Western Australia, Psychology)

Prof Philippa Maddern (University of Western Australia, History)

Prof Constant Mews (Monash University, Religious Studies)

Prof Richard Read (University of Western Australia, Visual Arts)

Dr Juanita Ruys (University of Sydney, Medieval Latin Studies)

Prof Sergio Starkstein (University of Western Australia, Neuropsychiatry)

Prof Stephanie Trigg (University of Melbourne, English and Cultural Studies)

Prof Charles Zika (University of Melbourne, History)

**International Visitor (funded by the Institute of Advanced Studies, UWA and the  
Elizabeth Rutherford Centre for Advanced Research on the Emotions, UWA)**

Prof Gerrod Parrott (Georgetown University, Psychology)