



## ARTICLE

# Towards an agenda for oral history and geography: (Re)locating emotion in family narratives of domestic abuse in 1970s East Kilbride

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## Funding information

Lord Kelvin/Adam Smith (LKAS) Fund, University of Glasgow.

## Abstract

This paper sets out a research agenda for oral history in/and geography, with a particular focus on emotional historical geographies. With three families' relocation from inner-city Glasgow to the new town of East Kilbride as the empirical backdrop, I argue that oral history methodology is uniquely well placed to capture both the emotionality and spatiality of historical narratives. Whilst previous reviews across geography and oral history theory have considered important emotional markers such as tone of voice, the expression of feeling and body language, I intervene by focusing on different narrative strategies employed throughout the interview and argue that the geographical remit of an interviewee's memories is inseparable from their emotional brevity. The focus of the paper is therefore threefold. Firstly, I consider the subjective temporalities and spatialities that oral history narrators employ when seeking composure, considering how they might "re-place" their narratives (and thus themselves) in the interview setting. Secondly, I argue that how interviewees might "re-place" themselves is inextricable, and as such so is any emotional reading of the interview, from the inter-subjective relationship produced by such an encounter. Finally, I explore the implications of this methodology for carefully elaborating on the intersection between the intimate geographies of the home, and geographies of violence. How the interviewees witnessed domestic abuse among their families was moulded by the context of their relocation. Moreover, the inter-subjective relationship, an analysis of which I argue is crucial to the findings of the paper, was also distinctly moulded by that same family context – as I was conducting these interviews with members of my own family.

## KEYWORDS

domestic abuse, East Kilbride, emotion, family, home, oral history

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Us moving to East Kilbride ... beautiful garden, front and back door ... in my head made me think we were going to experience something ... kinder, more loving, a better life we thought, well I, thought we were moving to. (Pauline, interview with author, 2019)

Oral history interviews reveal emotionally complex historical-geographical narratives. To apply a geographical lens to oral history interviews is to acknowledge that what memories are discussed, how narrators discuss them, and why they select particular moments over others, often have distinctive spatialities (Cole, 2015). Additionally, oral history interviews can be illuminating in unpacking how conceptions of space shift over time, through examining how interviewees reflect on their attachment to places past and present (Andrews et al., 2006). Previous reviews of oral history methodology in geographical research have brought oral history in geography, and geographical approaches to oral history into conversation, in an attempt to produce a “mutually beneficial” research agenda for both disciplines (Riley & Harvey, 2007, p. 345). By drawing from literature across the two fields, this paper seeks to develop such an agenda, specifically for emotional historical geographies. I argue that oral history interviews are a distinctly well-suited methodology for unpacking both the emotionality and spatiality of historical narratives.

I attend to this through scrutinising exactly how human geographers might seek to locate these emotional moments, aiming to really “think with [the] method” (Latham, 2020, p. 666). The paper’s first section sets out my key theoretical contributions, establishing what it is exactly about oral history methodology that makes it well suited to critically engaging with the intricacies of emotion. Widdowfield (2000) notes that such research requires a careful engagement, acknowledging the complexity of the subject matter. Therefore, I strive not to empty emotion of its political power or importance, taking certain emotions not as definitively attached to particular contexts and bodies, but as the inter-connections between social beings; (re)made and (re)negotiated throughout the interview (Bondi, 2005; Sharp, 2009). By aligning work in feminist research methods on emotion with oral history’s own trajectories as a politicised practice emerging from particular social movements, I hope to illuminate how these literatures synthesise to create the most productive framework for considering emotional oral historical geographies.

The second section thus situates this framework, using empirical material from a set of oral history interviews I conducted with three women who moved from Glasgow, Scotland to the new town of East Kilbride in the late 1960s. The stark transition between inner-city tenements and more traditional working-class forms of community, compared with new green spaces and alternative opportunities for work and leisure, provoked conflicted and nuanced reflections from those who made the move (Abrams & Fleming, 2011). The women I interviewed echoed such thoughts not only around relocation, but also through how they imagined the move might impact their experiences of witnessing domestic abuse. How they understood the violence around them at home greatly affected how they articulated what a chance at a new life in the new town might have meant. These complicated reflections were inextricable from how the interviewees related to me as both the researcher, and as a family member. Conducting research with(in) my own family added a further situated and emotional layer to the research process and consequent findings (Harrison, 2013). This dynamic produced the unique inter-subjective relationship that makes up my core intervention in the final section of the paper. Unthreading the processes of using familial interviews in particular, highlights the rich potential in exploring the relationship between oral history methodology and emotional historical geographies.

## 2 | WHAT MAKES ORAL HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHIES DIFFERENT?

Our long record of self-preservation and cultural self-determination has also relied on oral traditions ... forming from ourselves and from within our community definitions of self and culture which confirm our inventiveness and our will to survive. (Bryan et al., 2018, p. 154)

Oral history interviews bring important perspectives to established historical and geographical narratives. Thus, McDonagh (2018) suggests that oral history is an important methodology for feminist historical geographers, as we seek to work *with* research participants in recentring their stories. This collaboration is crucial, as the narrator and researcher work together to explore how particular historical narratives have shaped our contemporary geographical context (Freund, 2019; Grele, 1991). This may unsettle hegemonic conceptions, or otherwise represent an important opportunity to question their ubiquity.

Oral historical geographies also “flesh out” these broader narratives through the narrators’ pursuit of composure in the interview. This is the process through which the interviewee draws on particular memories and historical discourses, in order to craft their own version of events – one which their sense of self is comfortable residing in, and that they are willing to share with the researcher (Dawson, 1994; Summerfield, 2000). Therefore, how oral history interviewees construct their retellings is simultaneously revealing of how they construct their sense of self. Consequently, research such as Rogaly and Qureshi’s (2017) work on food sector workers in Peterborough demonstrates the value in utilising oral history testimonies. Their analysis of the multifaceted contexts, emotions and life trajectories of their interviewees enriches how one might understand the wider geographies of the relationship between labour and capital, whilst simultaneously reasserting the importance of the lives and agency of the workers at the centre of these relations. The use of oral history interviews in this case helped reveal how the impact of particular labour struggles had rippled out even beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries of discretely contained disputes or events (Castree, 2007; Featherstone & Griffin, 2016).

However, this is not given merely by virtue of oral history methodology alone. Craggs’ (2018) use of oral history testimonies demonstrates that whilst there is value in using the method to enrich understandings of geopolitical relations, interviewing senior political figures deviates somewhat from oral history’s perception as a practice of history from below. This is not to suggest that there is only one way that researchers should utilise oral history, nor that some methodologies are innately political whereas others are not. Rather, simply using oral history is not evidence itself of a particular approach to research. Crafting oral historical geographies that “share authority” with those whose stories have previously been marginalised is an active process, that does not start and finish with the beginning and end of the recording (Sitzia, 1999).

Often both the researcher and the participant embark on oral history work with “sharing authority” in mind, particularly as a way to recover “hidden histories” (Rowbotham, 1973). This approach in itself has the potential to impact the production of the resulting historical source. Robinson Rhodes (2021) usefully reflects on this in her research on the relationship between bisexuality and bisexual discourse and conceptions of “radical” politics within the British Gay Liberation Front (GLF) in the 1970s. When interviewing certain members of the GLF, Robinson Rhodes noted that their desire for composure among a previously marginalised history may have affected how critical they were prepared to be of how the GLF handled multiple-sex attraction (Robinson Rhodes, 2021, p. 131). Robinson Rhodes’ reflection reveals the potential subjectivity of oral history interviews, but vitally she does not suggest this is problematic – a key characteristic of many oral historians. In fact, in his seminal text “What makes oral history different”, Portelli refutes criticism that such subjectivities make oral history testimony “unreliable” – rather that subjectivity is the business of history, and *why* narrators hold particular narratives to be true, is as much psychological truth as the “facts” of the event (Portelli, 1991, p. 50).

Understanding the *why* of oral historical geographies is therefore as important as understanding how the events unfolded. Consequently, Cole (2015) suggests that oral historians also address the *where* of oral history sources. This lens adds another emotional layer to the interview, as interviewees “re-place the past”. He argues that where narrators both temporally and spatially place themselves in relation to historical events, particularly traumatic ones, is indicative of the emotion wrapped up in the historical geographies themselves. Narrators may want to create distance between themselves and certain events, and this is articulated revealingly through this re-placing.

My position is that this “re-placing” is inextricable from the inter-subjective relationship between the interviewer and interviewee – and therefore the questions around power and subjectivity set out thus far – and is consequently crucial to revealing the reasons why particular emotional historical geographies are produced from particular oral history interviews. Feminist oral history theory and research methods have demonstrated that the positionality and emotions of both interviewee *and* interviewer, and their subsequent inter-subjective relationship, cannot be separated from the source created (Abrams, 2016; McDowell, 1992; Sangster, 1994). Young’s (2007) work on shifting masculinities in Glasgow is particularly useful here, as it provides a framework for identifying where in the transcript researchers might witness the tangible impact of the inter-subjective relationship. Young noted that to the older couples she interviewed, her subjectivity represented modern gender roles and consequently she might be judgemental of how the interviewees composed their own masculinities. At points, where participants drew on what seemed like notably “traditional” gender roles, they switched from using the first person to the third person. In doing this, they created an “authorial voice”, hoping to partially separate themselves from their own narratives (p. 78).

This illustrates the integral nature of the inter-subjective relationship, as Young’s positionality was reflected in the shifting voices her narrators crafted at different points in the interview. My own experience was similar in the interviews I conducted and, as such, my analysis of the emotional historical geographies that emerged from them centred the importance of the inter-subjective relationship. In the next section, I outline the historical-geographical context that enveloped

these oral history interviews, and how the inter-subjective relationship I had with the participants suggests new avenues for geographies of the home, relocation and violence.

### 3 | A “NEW LIFE” IN THE NEW TOWN

East Kilbride was designated Scotland's first new town in 1947, as one of the housing and planning measures enacted as part of Glasgow's post-war slum clearances. The ability to move to the new town was contingent on obtaining employment in sectors that provided “skilled labour” and evidence of this was often prerequisite for a home under the new Development Corporation's tenancy agreements (Lewis & Foord, 1984). The development of East Kilbride was part of a broader “relocation” strategy – which included the construction of peripheral housing schemes such as Pollok, Easterhouse, Castlemilk and Drumchapel – that aimed to tackle perceived housing and health crises in inner-city Glasgow, with geographically variable results (Levitt, 1997). Damer (2018) suggests that these schemes revolved around the leverage of social class, with discrepancies in funding and building regulations signalling to prospective tenants which scheme they would be able to aspire to. These ideas about residents' “aspirations” are critical to thinking through how tenants related to the possibility of housing, particularly around East Kilbride. New town discourses were perceived to signal something particularly different to Glasgow residents. With modern forms of work, homes and leisure, East Kilbride represented a break from the inner-city – not only in environmental terms, but also as a rejection of the class relations imbued in Glasgow's industrial heritage (Abrams et al., 2018, p. 582).

As the empirical material of this paper will demonstrate, the ways in which some housing came to be seen as aspirational, and others not, was inextricable from the cultural politics of emotion that contextualised the relocation. To critically think through this process, Ahmed's (2014) work on the political “stickiness” and relationality of emotions is valuable in understanding how particular emotions become attached to particular objects. Ahmed suggests that both the spatiality and the temporality of emotions is crucial. Emotions are repeatedly performed over time, through individual expression, then mirrored, produced or rejected by cultural norms and discourses. Using the example of “disgust”, Ahmed notes that the performativity of this feeling produces almost a border – between us and the “disgusting” object (p. 86). Not only does the object itself become one to reflexively jerk away from, the representational “borders” are consumed into the performance of disgust – all of which are inextricable from gendered, racialised and classed markers of what is “repulsive”. Moreover, these repeated performances render them as accumulative – thus, what makes them “stick” to certain bodies, and thinking geographically, to certain spaces (Massey, 1994). Therefore, a discussion of what emotional geographies are produced by oral histories cannot and does not exist in a political vacuum (Wright, 2010). The emotions wrapped up in what was an “aspirational” new home when residents looked to relocate, were sticky with post-war discourses on social class.

Subsequent literature exploring the relationship between class, community and emotion in both the schemes and new towns reveals a “sticky” picture in a different sense. The emotional and historical landscape of relocation in post-war Glasgow is complex. In their study on short- and long-term outcomes of these relocation processes, Kearns et al. (2019) note that relocation itself does not operate well as an explanatory category, nor is it useful to see it as a one-time event. Thus, approaching it as process, shaped both by the spatial and historical context, compounded by individual agency, is more revealing of how residents actually experienced their new homes and communities. Ideas around what it meant to live in either Glasgow or East Kilbride were (re)negotiated throughout the lives of those interviewed, and oral history interviews were adept at capturing these complicated reflections, whilst aiming to centre the agency of the participants. This sense of ongoing (re)negotiation was replicated in my own interviews. Articulations of home in both places drew out conflicted reflections from each interviewee. Each site comprised a challenging geography, both intensely personal to each of the three women, whilst also embedded in their collective experiences as young, working-class women in post-war Scotland. Feminist geographers and scholars have long fought to situate the home as crucial space, precisely due to how its complexities are materially and affectively revealing of broader social and spatial relations (Blunt, 2005; Domosh, 1998). In addition to asserting its significance, feminist theory and activism has also unsettled the home as an automatic site of safety, noting that it is a space that might exemplify patriarchal relations, rather than acting as a buffer from them (Manzo, 2003). Brickell (2012) notes that to truly *both* “map” and “do” critical geographies of home, researchers must consider what it really means to consider the implications of these spaces as sites of danger and violence. Through a careful exploration of how geographies of home emotionally present themselves through oral histories, this paper seeks to contribute to such a critical geography – notably through interviewing a member of my own family, my aunty Shirley Anne.



The ways in which my interviewees reflected on this larger scale relocation, and the smaller journeys that characterised it, were imbued with emotion. For example, they were often aware of the gap between perception and reality when it came to the various distances between certain sites or events. The distance between Glasgow, where all the interviewees were born, and East Kilbride, could not have been more than 11 miles. But to Sharon, the travel between the two places felt always “like a day’s journey”. For Shirley Anne, the buses seemed to “crawl up the hill” to her new house in East Kilbride from her mum’s work in Glasgow, prolonging the journey for what seemed like hours. There appeared to be an element of reflexivity in these recollections. Both women noted that really, it could not have taken more than 30 minutes to get home from Glasgow, but the perceived geographical distance was a stronger memory for them than what was factually accurate. This speaks to the women’s thoughts about their new lives, and how drastically different it felt to what they had experienced before in inner-city Glasgow. How the interviewees articulated distance, where they *re*-placed themselves (Cole, 2015), was crucial to the production of their oral historical geographies.

This was exemplified as the interviews moved onto themes of conflict and domestic abuse. The narrative strategies that the interviewees employed as they articulated what the distance emotionally really felt like became much more pronounced. This was true in Shirley Anne’s case especially, notably as the conversation changed from lamenting the journey between Glasgow and East Kilbride, to discussing family difficulties and instances of abuse. After we had spoken about the interpersonal relationship and “affinities” among her, her mum and her friends that had kept her afloat throughout these periods of witnessing domestic abuse, she mentioned how difficult it had been to move away from her mum. She remembered that “I was only about 3 miles away from her, and I had a car and I drove and all that but ... I felt a sense of like I was abandoning her.” The same awareness of the gap between perception and reality is there, but the emotional stakes of this moment affected where Shirley Anne believed herself to be in the narrative geographically. This is similarly exemplified through how she perceived how her mum’s and her own mobility was constrained in the context of domestic abuse. Warrington (2001) explains that women who have experienced and fled domestic abuse can experience a particularly restricted geographical mobility, since the anxiety surrounding the perpetrator affects them even in places far from where the abuse had taken place. This same fear was relevant to Shirley Anne’s anxieties around abandonment, as it obstructed how far she was willing to move from her mum in case she needed support.

The emotion gleaned from this reflective moment in the interview is crucial to revealing another layer of the narrative, facilitated through oral historical geographies in a way that would likely be much trickier from solely conducting archival research. Moreover, the nature of the oral history interviews, conducted between family members, provoked another important moment for reflection. Ultimately, my own connection to the research meant that I was also seeking composure. In the final section of this paper, I explore how both the interviewees and my own desires to achieve this coalesced.

#### 4 | “DOING” A CRITICAL GEOGRAPHY OF (MY FAMILY) HOME

Being in the presence of my aunty generated new opportunities through which I was able to access flashes of emotion that might have been hidden, or perhaps even contradicted, in archival sources. Ratnam (2019) suggests that a crucial part of using “listening” as methodology in geographical research is examining the embodiment of emotion in the interview, through non-verbal cues such as body language, coupled with how this relates to *where* the interview was taking place. This was exemplified in the interview with my aunty, as since the interview took place in the family home, I was not the only observer. My cousin, and her daughter, also sat in on the interview. All three of us indicated through non-verbal cues who we might be seeking composure from, as we collectively crafted our family’s historical geography. The quieter moments, pauses for laughter, to refill the kettle, would either allow one of us to find joy in what had been said, or would offer an important moment of comfort.

Additionally, acknowledging not only the relationship, but the tension between the words of an interviewee and their body language is often equally revealing as to the emotional gravity of the interview topic. Hume (2007) notes in her work on researching violence in El Salvador, that whilst one interviewee responded that violence was not used against her, her shifting body language perhaps indicated differently (p. 153). This reiterates that how interviewees craft the historical geographies of their lives, either consciously or subconsciously, is not done solely verbally. The interview privileges the researcher with access to important embodiments of emotion that may reveal the complicated disparity between what is said and what is felt. Therefore, it is hard not to feel anxious when participants voice one emotion, but the researcher opts to privilege their own non-verbal reading from the interview moment (Holmes, 2017).

If this then becomes apparent to the interviewee, this interpretive conflict can understandably lead to emotional discomfort (Borland, 1991). Thus, when interviewees might look to “re-place themselves” in the narrative, researchers

must be aware that at points, they may seek to re-place themselves away from us, defending the characters in their narratives from the researcher's potential "skeletal representations" of them (Borland, 2018). I experienced this pulling away at different points during the interview. Importantly, however, for the nature of the research topic, I read this distancing as protective rather than defensive. The conversations often revolved around instances of domestic abuse that were witnessed in the family home, which emphasised a poignant aspect of the inter-subjective familial relationship. In the beginning of the interview with my aunty, she recalled biographical information about the early years of her life in Glasgow before she had moved to East Kilbride. The memories revolved around her parents' lives and families, none of which I had heard in depth before. Noting a pause in the conversation at the end of her story, she turned to me and asked, "Have you learned anything about your Gran and Grandpa Bud yet?" Throughout the story, she had referred to them in familial terms as she would as their daughter. Noting that she was referencing events and spaces – such as long bus journeys, their flat in Glasgow, her own grandparents' house where she spent a lot of time – that I was not aware of, she closed that historical and geographical distance to include me, by using the names I would have known her parents by. This abruptly changed once she began to discuss the period after the family had moved to East Kilbride, and the "bittersweet memories" of the "lovely house" where heightened domestic abuse took place flooded into the interview. Referencing this location at one point, she had stopped referring to her parents as "Gran and Grandpa Bud" entirely, and when describing where they had lived as a family noted it as "close to where I live now." This was significant in that not only was where she lived now where the interview was taking place, but also in that her daughter was sitting in on the interview – but she omitted to say where "we" live now. This signals perhaps a need to accentuate, to "re-place", the distance between the painful geographies of her life narrative, and the potential geographies of my and my cousin's lives now. The construction of an authorial voice, like in Young's interviews, was an important barrier between her own experiences and what she envisioned for us. Those moments of violence and conflict that she had witnessed needed to be kept within strict historical and geographical boundaries, and the realisation of this through the oral history interview setting revealed a more complex level of emotion wrapped up in our collective family historical geography.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

Oral history interviews provide unique opportunities for researchers to reflect on how interviewees craft spatial and emotional narratives, in ways that are difficult to replicate through purely written sources. Therefore, strengthening the relationship between historical geographical research and oral history theory is an important task for scholars working within and across both fields – igniting a dialogue around the necessary tools for a careful and generous engagement with emotional historical geographies in particular.

This paper has contributed to these emerging discussions through three important avenues. Firstly, through building an agenda for oral historians and historical geographers to locate emotion in the interview, that complements more well-documented methodologies that scrutinise the orality of the interview itself. Rather, observing where and when the narrator might re-place themselves in their memories is emotionally revealing and also inextricable from the inter-subjective relationship that moulds the interview setting. As such, I offer that reflecting on this relationship must form an integral part of examining the consequent historical-geographical source. Secondly, this paper has demonstrated how utilising this framework to approach oral history interviews can illuminate the fluctuating emotional geographies of relocation. In line with oral history theory that scrutinises the subjective temporalities of an interviewee's memories, bringing a geographical perspective to this literature highlights that the subjective *spatialities* of how one might remember different spaces is equally enlightening. Finally, this paper has offered new pathways for exploring emotional geographies of the home and violence. Conducting oral history interviews on this topic carries high stakes – not least when your own family history is revealed and implicated in an academic setting. But, with a delicate framework that treads lightly where the interviewer and interviewee's emotions come to face each other, (re)locating these feelings can be a rich and validating pursuit for composure – for both (familial) parties involved.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sincere thanks to Diarmaid Kelliher, Dave Featherstone and Lazaros Karaliotas for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper, and to the interviewees for their time and valued insights.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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**How to cite this article:** Levine Hampton, R. (2022) Towards an agenda for oral history and geography: (Re)locating emotion in family narratives of domestic abuse in 1970s East Kilbride. *Area*, 54, 468–475. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12806>