

Worlds of Emotions

A cultural historian at a psychological research institute? **Ute Frevert** considers herself an advocate of the humanities – and enjoys putting the concepts and methods of her empirically oriented colleagues from the field of natural sciences to the test time and again. To support her arguments, the Director at the **Max Planck Institute for Human Development** in Berlin occasionally calls on witnesses such as Romeo and Juliet, Frederick the Great, and even Angela Merkel.

TEXT **MARTIN TSCHECHNE**

Ah yes, the years she spent in America! It's entirely possible that Ute Frevert will incorporate an account of her own personal experiences into a symposium on quality standards in the humanities. For example, how she was appointed to Yale University in 2002, the friendly invitation she received upon her first visit, how she met the students shortly after her arrival, in a very casual setting at that, and how everyone listened to what she had to say – in the lecture hall, at lunch with colleagues, during a question-and-answer session in the library.

Her lecture didn't miss the mark. The university policy experts, research managers and foundation directors in the audience were genuinely impressed. Perhaps they were even a bit envious of the admiration with which students in the US view their lecturers, the way famous researchers appreciate their staff, politicians esteem the professors, professors in turn respect their students, and how all of them together value their academic education system.

What was even more astounding, however, was the fact that the report

was presented from a first-person perspective – very candid, very personal. But who said that discourse among researchers had to be based solely on endless lists of figures derived from empirical experiments? At the end of the day, aren't scientific facts always gathered with the express aim of developing a convincing storyline?

THE ONLY HISTORIAN AMONG MANY PSYCHOLOGISTS

Ute Frevert has fond memories of those five years she spent as a faculty member at the prestigious university on America's east coast. Her husband, sociologist Ulrich Schreiterer, and two of their three children had joined her and also settled well into their new home. Frevert talks about the transparency and fairness of the procedures, about researchers and teachers who would occasionally come over from other departments to listen to her deliberations on the history of the present age in which they were all living. And about the students – her "Yalies," handpicked and highly motivated – who read and reflected and debated

with so much enthusiasm that she soon accepted them as colleagues with whom she could see eye to eye. As future colleagues, anyway.

As Director at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin, Ute Frevert's position is an entirely different one. Being the only historian among many psychologists is a fundamental challenge that she must accept every day anew. Whatever the constellation, she is always different from the rest: on the institute's four-person Board of Directors, on the institute's various committees, and when discussing the projects of young researchers at the assembly. She is always faced with confrontations that she must rework into proposals, and as an advocate of the humanities, she must constantly defend a counter model vis-à-vis a sizeable group of colleagues who seem to show a much greater interest in the natural science aspects of their disciplines.

Does the institute's classical modern architecture, with its staircases, open bridges, nerve centers and synaptic connections, have anything to do with the fact that so many of the researchers

Ute Frevert draws on such examples as Hillary Clinton and Frederick the Great to illustrate the value of her research, thereby countering the erroneous yet widespread preconception that emotions are independent of historical events. As a matter of fact, they, too, follow the zeitgeist.





In front of her desk in her office in Berlin, Ute Frevert keeps a copy of an election poster portraying Angela Merkel along with just one single word: "Trust". The concept has degenerated into a term that serves as nothing more than a substitute for a defined electoral program.

working here are currently fascinated by brain physiology and neuroplasticity? And does she feel like a big fish in a small pond in this environment? "No," says the researcher, and laughs: "But nor am I a small female fish in a pond full of big male fish."

EDUCATION AS A SPHERE OF PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

The person who came up with this bold idea – appointing her a Director – was, of course, Paul Baltes; "of course" because the former institute Director, who passed away in 2006, based his scientific work on the principle of thinking outside the box. A person who takes a risk and is able to ensure that the methods and findings of developmental psychology, which were previously limited to toddlers and adolescents, are expanded to comprise the entire human lifespan, a person who establishes the aging of society and elderly existence as extremely urgent research fields in their own right – such a person can't help but break out of the conven-

tional pattern of thinking limited by predefined categories and cubbyholes.

And such a person would also appoint a female historian who is well versed in literature and art history, with a solid foundation in sociology and politics, to show her esteemed colleagues from the field of psychology that, outside of their laboratories and beyond the limits of their empirical research, bright and imaginative minds are working on giving reality a structure of its own.

Ute Frevert herself must have been quite surprised when she heard the news. In an interview with the German newspaper ZEIT conducted shortly thereafter, she referred to herself as a "risky appointment". Up until the day she received the phone call from the Max Planck Institute, she had never cooperated with psychologists on an academic level. Today she says: "I see myself in a continuum of innovative ideas."

And yet it seems that she was predestined for the field of educational research and human development. For Frevert, born in Germany's Lippe region in 1954 as the daughter of a tradesman

and a secretary, education has always been directed toward personal development, never merely a means to an end, always an objective and a subject in itself. She successfully worked through the educational system, soon thereafter represented it, and now works as a researcher intent on exploring that same system's potential. Upon graduating from high school at the age of 16, she was granted a scholarship from the German National Academic Foundation and studied in Münster, at the London School of Economics, and in Bielefeld, where men such as Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Niklas Luhmann, Norbert Elias and Jürgen Kocka shaped the intellectual climate, helping the subject of history gain new relevance as a social science and steering it in a new direction.

Frevert completed her post-doctoral habilitation thesis on the duel in bourgeois society. She focused on the question of honor, male honor in particular, thus embarking on the path that would shape her future career: researching the history of emotions. She soon established herself as a prominent scientist in

Top: Willy Brandt kneeling in Warsaw or Hillary Clinton shedding tears – the historian studies such examples as proof of the development of emotional states. Bottom: Interior aspect of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development with its staircases and open bridges.

the field of gender research, was granted professorships in Constance, at FU Berlin and in Bielefeld, became a member of the British Academy, the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities and the Leopoldina Academy of Sciences, and authored books on masculinity and emotions, military service and civil society, gender differences in the modern age, and transitory emotions [*Vergängliche Gefühle*], which is also the title of one of her publications.

And should anyone flippantly remark that studying emotions and their historical development is a typically female endeavor, the 1998 Leibniz Prize winner will gladly quote a long list of studies on friendship and trust, shame and honor, male pride and compassion – a list of male authors that doesn't begin with Immanuel Kant and certainly doesn't end with the think tanks of modern neuroscience. This goes to show that objective science always depends in part on the subjects it studies.

ON THE PLASTICITY OF EMOTIONAL STATES

By all accounts, she is doing a very good job. Baltes had already passed away by the time she took office in Berlin in 2008. This didn't make her start at the institute any easier. Yet Ute Frevert is a woman who, first of all, knows how to gracefully assume her place in the spotlight, and secondly, enjoys controversial debates. You can tell right away by her beaming smile that she is not one to shy away from disputes, and that she takes pleasure in completing her mentor's coup.

With that same smile on her face, she recounts the day she was introduced to the Max Planck Society's Scientific Council, and how more than one member of the audience was visibly perplexed: The history of emotions? Seriously? Romeo and Juliet, Pocahontas and the British captain John Smith, or Frederick the Great and his vicissitu-

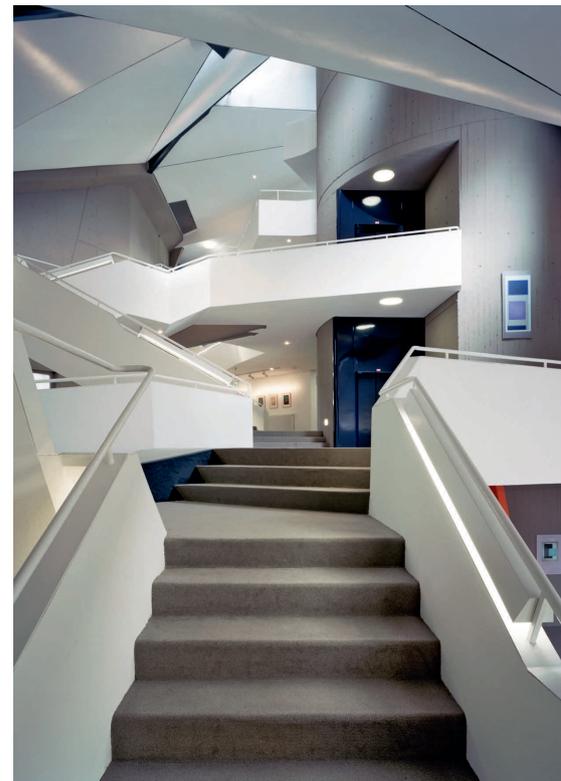
dinous relationship with his royal subjects – honestly, how is empirical research supposed to benefit from this? The way in which feelings are expressed can possibly change, they conceded, as may the event triggering such emotions. But emotional perception itself is surely independent of historic events.

Frevert assuaged her colleagues' concerns: psychological research can benefit from the ideas, from the observable fact that the concept of "being" is subject to constant change. The proven benefit, she said, lies in the historic evidence of changing mental states, of trends, norms and expectations, the zeitgeist and the influence of emotional models. In short, it lies in the realization that each emotional reaction must be studied within the context in which it occurred.

Love, pity, trust – these were and still are topics that Ute Frevert addresses, giving researchers from her own discipline as well as from other areas of study insight into the history of culture and ideas, and thus also into the plasticity of emotional states. For the Prussian king Frederick, who was still firmly rooted in the principle of absolutism, trust was perhaps a grandiose herald of a new age derived from the philosophy of the Enlightenment; sometimes it was merely a yearning, and sometimes probably also a tactical manner of dealing with his subjects.

For Angela Merkel, in the run-up to the most recent German elections, the same concept remained nothing more than a term chosen to serve as a substitute for a defined electoral program, marking the divide between the nation's government and its voters. The election posters portrayed Chancellor Merkel accompanied by just one single word: "Trust" [*Zuversicht*]. Ute Frevert keeps a copy of this poster in front of her desk in her office in Berlin, as if to say: this is what it has come to.

Former German Chancellor Willy Brandt kneeling in Warsaw, Hillary Clin-





As an advocate of the humanities, Ute Frevert reminds her colleagues from the natural sciences that the world isn't always as clear and unambiguous as they make it out to be in their labs.

ton shedding tears, and Vladimir Putin embracing the victims' families after the plane crash in Smolensk in 2010: the historian studies examples like these as proof of how emotional states develop, how they unfold, then spread, and later become precisely calculated "politics of emotion" [*Gefühlspolitik*], as Ute Frevert called one of her books.

Last year she published a book titled *Vertrauensfragen* [questions of trust], outlining the history of a major emotion that springs from the autonomy of the enlightened human being, an emotion that has become an obsession of the modern age – and that ultimately loses its meaning due to the fact that it is all too often misused in the world of politics, finance and cheap advertising. Using the concept of trust to advertise an insurance company or a blend of coffee is downright nonsense.

By interacting with their parents, children acquire a sense of basic trust that will significantly impact their sense of "being." But is it possible to trust an institution in principle? In her book, the historian doesn't shy away from discussing the case of Gerold Becker, the head of the German Odenwald boarding school who sexually abused young boys. Several decades passed before his crimes finally became public knowledge.

Naturally, all of the debates that ensued focused not only on promiscuity, pedophilia and pedagogical eros, but also on one concept in particular: trust. Trust that was placed in someone, that

was demanded, betrayed, trampled on and forfeited. The fact that the educational researcher Hellmut Becker, the founder of the very same Max Planck Institute at which Ute Frevert now works, played a less than reputable role in the affair makes her questions of trust appear in an even more controversial light.

DIPLOMACY: A NECESSARY AND PRUDENT VIRTUE

Frevert conducts her research using sources that are grippingly honest: books, letters, newspapers. Everything that historians have commonly used as source material: documents, certificates, accounts by contemporary witnesses, even artwork, poetry, fiction and music. She puts Goethe, Wagner and Shakespeare up for discussion, Rodin, Kafka, Bach and Dostoyevsky – are they not all ideal witnesses of the states of mind and the cognitive structures that defined their respective eras? Did they not express certainties and convictions, passions, intuitions and sentiments that carry on to this day? Were they not true psychologists in these matters? And why, oh why, is modern psychology so reluctant to acknowledge these facts?

Incidentally, the issue of taking a risk with her appointment has, for the most part, resolved itself. The bridges that she is called to build at her institute must be walked onto from both ends, after all, and Ute Frevert considers this

a good opportunity. Together with Tania Singer, Director at the Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences in Leipzig, for example, she attempted to approach the concept of emotional plasticity from two fundamentally different vantage points.

Seeing the synapses light up in the MRI scan left an impression on her, Frevert later admits, but her view of science has remained intact for now. Instead, she recommended her colleague read up on what Adam Smith or David Hume had to say on the subject of sympathy. And Tania Singer was truly impressed, says Frevert.

So does that mean it's possible to study emotions and how they are influenced by external factors without having to use an outrageously expensive laser scanner to analyze the brain? Once again, Ute Frevert smiles and says nothing. In her position, diplomacy, or in other words, the politics of emotion, is a necessary and very prudent virtue to have.

Not that she is withholding any objections. That is, after all, the reason she was appointed. What does worry her a little, however, is that the piece of advice she keeps giving young psychologists – with their strictly controlled studies from which any inkling of uncertainty has been expunged – could eventually start to get on her colleagues' nerves: "Allow your views to be more complex!" she reminds them. "The world is not as clear and unambiguous as you make it out to be in your labs."

Of course, she is also aware of the constraints and customs governing the work of many young researchers. Their "presentist" perspective, as she calls it, is mired in the present and bound by it alone. "Historical amnesia," she says, while having lunch with her colleagues. And the institute's other Directors believe she may be right, because at the end of the day, they are all agreed: as a result of the pressure to compute, evaluate and present their findings, experimentally oriented psychologists simply don't have the time to concern themselves with the cultural, historical or political contexts of their concepts.

» Empathy, morality, openness, curiosity and sentimental education – these are all educational goals.

Yet on the other hand, Frevert criticizes, the psychologists wouldn't even think to do such a thing. Instead, she praises the research cycles of her own discipline, where rounded out, argumentatively sound books – classic masterpieces – remain the measure of a scientist's work and success.

Frevert therefore also develops models to be applied outside of her institute – models that go beyond the lab results her colleagues observe in psychology, complementing or specifying

these findings, often even defining entirely different paths and objectives altogether. Every now and then, she thinks back to the warmth and the sense of community she experienced during her stay in the US. She envisages fostering vocational training and making it more attractive, as well as gearing academic studies toward individuals who not only possess the necessary skills, but who also demonstrate a strong and unwavering will to think and reflect.

She envisions promoting the long-term exchange of ideas, cultures and social backgrounds between schools – the same experience her children enjoyed and benefited from during their years in America. And with regard to education, Frevert isn't afraid to define goals that her colleagues from the empirical departments probably consider much too historical: empathy, morality, openness, curiosity and, yes, sentimental education. ◀



In the humanities, published books remain the measure of all things, which is why libraries – as here at Yale University, Frevert's former domain – are of such prime importance.