

2012 ROHO Advanced Oral History Summer Institute Reading List

We urge you to buy a copy of Valerie Yow's *Recording Oral History* (Second Edition). We have included the introductory chapter in your reader, but the book as a whole is an excellent resource. A fine alternative is Donald Ritchie's *Doing Oral History*.

1. Alistair Thomson, "Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History," *The Oral History Review* 2007 34: 49-70.
2. Valerie Yow, "Introduction to the In-Depth Interview," *Recording Oral History* (Altamira Press, 2005): 1-34.
3. Charles T. Morrissey, "The Two-Sentence Format as an Interviewing Technique in Oral History Fieldwork," *The Oral History Review* 15 (Spring 1987): 43-53.
4. Richard Cândida Smith, "Analytic Strategies for Oral History Interviews," *Handbook for Interview Research* (Sage Publications: 2002):711-731.
5. Lynn Abrams, "Turning practice into theory," and "The peculiarities of oral history," *Oral History Theory* (Routledge: 2010): 1-32.
6. Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack, "Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses," *Women's Words: the Feminist Practice of Oral History*, eds. Gluck and Patai, Routledge (Routledge: 1991): 11-25.
7. Hugo Slim and Paul Thompson, with Olivia Bennett and Nigel Cross, "Ways of Listening," *The Oral History Reader* (Routledge: 1998): 114-125.
8. Daniel James, "Listening in the Cold," *Doña María's Story* (Duke University Press: 2000): 118-156.
9. Valerie Yow, "'Do I Like Them Too Much?: Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa," *The Oral History Review* (Summer 1997): 55-79.
10. Linda Shopes, "Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities," *The Journal of American History* (September 2002): 588-598.

1. Alistair Thomson, "Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History," *The Oral History Review* 2007 34: 49-70.

Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History¹

By Alistair Thomson

Abstract This paper reviews critical developments in the international history of oral history and outlines four paradigmatic revolutions in theory and practice: the postwar renaissance of memory as a source for ‘people’s history’; the development, from the late 1970s, of ‘post-positivist’ approaches to memory and subjectivity; a transformation in perceptions about the role of the oral historian as interviewer and analyst from the late 1980s; and the digital revolution of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Threaded through discussion of these paradigm shifts are reflections upon four factors that have impacted oral history and, in turn, been significantly influenced by oral historians: the growing significance of political and legal practices in which personal testimony is a central resource; the increasing interdisciplinarity of approaches to interviewing and the interpretation of memory; the proliferation from the 1980s of studies concerned with the relationship between history and memory; and the evolving internationalism of oral history.

Keywords: oral history, memory, subjectivity, interdisciplinarity, internationalism

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¹This essay derives from research conducted by myself and Rob Perks in our development of a second edition of *The Oral History Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

The theory and practice of oral history has changed profoundly since its post-World War II origins, and these changes have paralleled—and influenced—wider historiographical and methodological shifts. Our work as oral historians today can be explained and enhanced by awareness of the history of our field and of the forces that have shaped its development.

This essay reviews critical developments in the history of oral history and outlines four paradigm² transformations in theory and practice: the postwar renaissance of memory as a source for ‘people’s history’; the development, from the late 1970s, of ‘post-positivist’ approaches to memory and subjectivity; a transformation in perceptions about the role of the oral historian as interviewer and analyst from the late 1980s; and the digital revolution of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Threaded through discussion of these paradigm shifts are reflections upon four factors that have impacted oral history and, in turn, been significantly influenced by oral historians: the growing significance of political and legal practices in which personal testimony is a central resource; the increasing interdisciplinarity of approaches to interviewing and the interpretation of memory; the proliferation from the 1980s of studies concerned with the relationship between history and memory; and the evolving internationalism of oral history. I do not attempt to survey the distinctive national or regional histories of oral history, which are readily available in other publications.³ Although the points of genesis and patterns of development for oral history have varied from one country to another, particular social and intellectual forces have shaped contemporary approaches to oral history and have influenced oral historians around the world.

² The physicist Thomas Kuhn popularized the idea of paradigm change in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962). Kuhn was also a pioneering oral historian of American science: see Ronald E. Doel, “Oral History of American Science: A Forty-Year Review,” *History of Science* 41, no. 134 (December 2003): 349–78.

³ See Paul Thompson, “Historians and Oral History,” in *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 25–82; Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 19–46.

Oral History and People's History: The Renaissance of Memory as an Historical Source

The first paradigm transformation—and the genesis of contemporary oral history—was the post-World War II renaissance in the use of memory as a source for historical research. Paul Thompson, among others, charts the prehistory of the modern oral history movement, explaining that historians from ancient times relied upon eyewitness accounts of significant events, until the nineteenth-century development of an academic history discipline led to the primacy of archival research and documentary sources, and a marginalization of oral evidence.⁴ Gradual acceptance of the usefulness and validity of oral evidence, and the increasing availability of portable tape recorders, underpinned the development of oral history after the Second World War. The timing and pattern of this emergence differed markedly around the world. For example, the first organized oral history project was initiated by Allan Nevins at Columbia University in New York in 1948, and his interest in archival recordings with white male elites was representative of early oral history activity in the United States. In Britain in the 1950s and 1960s oral history pioneers were more interested in recording the experiences of so-called “ordinary” working people and had initial links with folklore studies;⁵ George Ewart Evans, for example, famously determined to “ask the fellows who cut

⁴ Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, 25–81.

⁵ The relationship between folklore studies and oral history has varied in different parts of the world. In England, despite initial links, oral history and folklore studies tended to travel different paths; Paul Thompson argues that English folklore studies “never escaped from the stigma of amateurism” (Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, 71–2). A shared interest in aurality—fuelled by digital technologies, may be bringing the two fields closer again (see Rob Perks and Jonnie Robinson, “‘The way we speak’: web-based representations of changing communities in England,” *Oral History* 33, no. 2 (2005): 79–90). The nationalist politics of Britain’s Celtic nations—Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland—have forged closer relationships between folklore studies and oral history, and in Scandinavia folklore studies has had a profound impact upon the development of oral history. Studies of memory and ‘oral tradition’ in non-Western societies and indigenous cultures have also made important contributions to our understanding of the nature and meaning of oral history accounts. See: Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Joseph Calder Miller, ed., *The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History* (Folkestone: Dawson, 1980); Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Tradition and the Verbal Arts* (London: Routledge, 1991); Isabel Hofmeyer, “We spend our

hay.”⁶ The lived experience of working class, women’s or black history was undocumented or ill-recorded and oral history was an essential source for the “history from below” fostered by politically-committed social historians in Britain and around the world from the 1960s onwards.

Paul Thompson, a social historian at the University of Essex, played a leading role in the creation of the British Oral History Society in the early 1970s and the subsequent development of an international oral history movement from the end of that decade. His pioneering book, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, became a standard textbook—and a standard-bearer—for oral historians around the world when it was first published in 1978.⁷ Thompson sought to defend oral history against critics who claimed that memory was an unreliable historical source, and determined to prove the legitimacy and value of the approach. As a socialist, he was committed to a history which drew upon the words and experiences of working-class people, and argued that oral history was transforming both the content of history—“by shifting the focus and opening new areas of inquiry, by challenging some of the assumptions and accepted judgments of historians, by bringing recognition to substantial groups of people who had been ignored”—and the processes of writing history, breaking “through the boundaries between the educational institution and the world, between the professional and the ordinary public.”⁸ For many oral historians, recording experiences which have been ignored in history and involving

years as a tale that is told”: *Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chiefdom* (London: James Currey, 1993); Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Past: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Julie Cruikshank, *The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998); Bain Attwood and Fiona Magowan, eds., *Telling Stories: Indigenous History and Memory in Australia and New Zealand* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2001); Luise White, Stephan F. Miescher and David William Cohen, eds., *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Toyin Falola and Christian Jennings, eds., *Sources and Methods in African History: Spoken, Written, Unearthed* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2003).

⁶ George Ewart Evans, *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay* (London: Faber, 1956).

⁷ Subsequent editions published in 1988 and 2000 expanded the initial chapters about the history and achievements of oral history, and explored new thinking about memory, subjectivity and psychoanalysis.

⁸ Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, 8–12.

people in exploring and making their own histories, continue to be primary justifications for the use of oral history.⁹ For example, Susan Armitage and Sherna Gluck argue that oral history retains an urgent political importance in many parts of the world where women's oppression is reinforced by the silencing of women's voices and histories.¹⁰ And in many countries oral history has developed powerful roots outside higher education, in schools, community projects and reminiscence work.¹¹

Post-Positivist Approaches to Memory and Subjectivity

The second paradigm shift in oral history was, in part, a response to positivist critics—for the most part traditional documentary historians of a conservative political persuasion—who feared the politics of people's history and who targeted the “unreliability” of memory as its weakness.¹² At the core of criticisms of oral history in the early 1970s was the assertion that memory was distorted by physical deterioration and nostalgia in old age, by the personal bias of both interviewer and interviewee, and by the influence of collective and retrospective versions of the past. For example, the Australian historian Patrick O'Farrell wrote in 1979 that oral history was moving into “the world of image, selective memory, later overlays and utter subjectivity . . . And where will it lead us? Not into history, but into

⁹ A recent example of how oral history continues to be used to recover hidden histories—as noted in a series of reviews in the June 2001 issue of the *American Historical Review*—is the use of oral history to recover African experiences of and perspectives on the First World War: Joe Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom: A Sene-galese Oral History of the First World War* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1999); Ashley Jackson, *Botswana 1939–1945: An African Country at War* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1999); Melvin E. Page, *The Chiwaya War: Malawians and the First World War* (Boulder: Westview, 2000).

¹⁰ Susan H. Armitage and Sherna B. Gluck, “Reflections on Women’s Oral History: An Exchange,” *Frontiers: Journal of Women’s Studies* 19, no. 3 (1998): 1–11.

¹¹ Joana Bornat, “Oral History as a Social Movement: Reminiscence and Older People,” *Oral History* 17, no. 2 (1989): 17.

¹² Among early critics were: William Cutler III, “Accuracy in Oral History Interviewing,” *Historical Methods Newsletter*, no. 3 (1970): 1–7; Barbara Tuchman, “Distinguishing the Significant from the Insignificant,” *Radcliffe Quarterly*, no. 56 (1972): 9–10; Enoch Powell, “Old men forget,” *The Times*, November 5, 1981. For a critique from the Left of oral historians’ naïve use of memory see Eric Hobsbawm, “On History From Below,” in *On History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997), 266–286 (written in 1985 and first published in 1988).

myth.”¹³ Goaded by these critics, early oral historians developed their own handbook guidelines to assess the reliability of oral memory (while shrewdly reminding the traditionalists that documentary sources—many of which were created as records of spoken events—were no less selective and biased). From social psychology and anthropology they showed how to determine the bias and fabulation of memory, the significance of retrospection and the effects of the interviewer upon remembering. From sociology they adopted methods of representative sampling, and from documentary history they brought rules for checking the reliability and internal consistency of their sources. These guidelines provided useful signposts for reading memories and for combining them with other historical sources to find out what happened in the past.¹⁴

In the late 1970s imaginative oral historians turned these criticisms on their head and argued that the so-called unreliability of memory was also its strength, and that the subjectivity of memory provided clues not only about the meanings of historical experience, but also about the relationships between past and present, between memory and personal identity, and between individual and collective memory. For example, Luisa Passerini’s study of Italian memories of interwar fascism highlighted the role of subjectivity in history—the conscious and unconscious meanings of experience as lived and remembered—and showed how the influences of public culture and ideology upon individual memory might be revealed in the silences, discrepancies and idiosyncrasies of personal testimony.¹⁵ Also writing in the 1970s, North American oral historian Michael Frisch argued against the attitude that oral history provided “a pure sense of how it ‘really’ was,” and asserted that memory—“personal and historical, individual and generational”—should be moved to

¹³ Patrick O’Farrell, “Oral History: Facts and Fiction,” *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, no. 5 (1982–83): 3–9 (Previously published in *Quadrant*, November 1979).

¹⁴ See, for example, the first 1978 edition of Thompson’s *The Voice of the Past* for a defense of oral history in these terms.

¹⁵ Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Luisa Passerini, “Work Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism,” *History Workshop*, no. 8 (1979): 82–108.

center stage “as the object, not merely the method, of oral history.” Used in this way, oral history could be “a powerful tool for discovering, exploring, and evaluating the nature of the process of historical memory—how people make sense of their past, how they connect individual experience and its social context, how the past becomes part of the present, and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them.”¹⁶ Memory thus became the subject as well as the source of oral history, and oral historians began to use an exhilarating array of approaches—linguistic, narrative, cultural, psychoanalytic and ethnographic—in their analysis and use of oral history interviews.

The work of Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli exemplifies the second paradigm shift in approaches to memory and oral history. In “What Makes Oral History Different,” first published in 1979, Portelli challenged the critics of “unreliable memory” head-on by arguing that “the peculiarities of oral history”—orality, narrative form, subjectivity, the ‘different credibility’ of memory, and the relationship between interviewer and interviewee—should be considered as strengths rather than as weaknesses, a resource rather than a problem. Portelli, perhaps the most influential writer about oral history and memory, has since demonstrated these strengths in a series of outstandingly imaginative oral history studies.¹⁷

Though conservative historians were the most vocal critics of oral history in the 1970s, oral history was also challenged from the Left. In the late 1970s and early 1980s some socialist

¹⁶ Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 188 (from his article “Oral history and Hard Times: A Review Essay,” first published in 1972). See also, Alistair Thomson, Michael Frisch and Paula Hamilton, “The Memory and History Debates: Some International Perspectives,” *Oral History* 22, no. 2 (1994): 33–43. Ron Grele was another notable North America critic of oral history’s theoretical naivety in the 1970s who suggested new ways of working with memory. See Ronald Grele, ed., *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History* (New York: Praeger, 1991).

¹⁷ Portelli’s seminal work includes: *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991); *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997); *The Order Has been Carried Out: History, Memory, and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). See also, the special section on “History, Memory and the Work of Alessandro Portelli” in the *Oral History Review* 32, no. 1 (2005): 1–34.

historians were particularly critical of the notion that the method of oral history was necessarily radical and democratic. Luisa Passerini cautioned against the “facile democratization” and “complacent populism” of oral history projects which encouraged members of oppressed groups to “speak for themselves” but which did not see how memories might be influenced by dominant histories and thus require critical interpretation.¹⁸ At the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, the Popular Memory Group developed a similar critique of British oral history in their writings about “popular memory.” The Group situated academic and other historical practices within the much wider process of “the social production of memory,” and argued that public struggles over the construction of the past are profoundly significant both in contemporary politics and for individual remembering. For example, oral history as used within the community and women’s history movements could be a significant resource for making more democratic and transformative histories, and might in turn enable people to tell stories that had been silenced because they did not match the dominant cultural memory.¹⁹ Yet the Popular Memory Group concluded that this radical potential was often undermined by superficial understandings of the connections in oral testimony between individual and social memory and between past and present, and by the unequal relationships between professional historians and other participants in oral history projects.

These arguments overlap with two interconnected concerns that continue to trouble some oral historians: that the increasing

¹⁸ Passerini, “Work Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism,” 84. Michael Frisch also criticized the populist ‘no history’ approach to oral history in “Oral History and *Hard Times*: A Review Essay.” Louise Tilly criticized oral historians’ atheoretical and individualist tendencies, though from a more conventional academic standpoint, in her article, “People’s History and Social Science History,” *Social Science History* 7, no. 4 (1983): 457–74, reprinted with responses from leading oral historians in the *International Journal of Oral History* 6, no. 2 (1985): 5–46. For a comparable and contemporary Australian critique see John Murphy, “The Voice of Memory: History, Autobiography and Oral Memory,” *Historical Studies* 22, no. 87 (1986): 157–75.

¹⁹ Popular Memory Group, “Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method,” in Richard Johnson et al., eds., *Making Histories: Studies in History Writing and Politics* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 206–20. A contemporary overview of oral history’s radical potential is provided in the introduction to James R. Green, “Engaging in People’s History: The Massachusetts History Workshop,” in Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 337–59.

theoretical sophistication of academic oral history is incomprehensible to, or ignored by, oral historians outside the academy, for example those working in schools, community projects and the media, and that our interviewees may be bewildered by the deconstruction of their memories.²⁰ A reflective, critical approach to memory and history undoubtedly makes for better oral history—as Linda Shopes has argued recently in the context of community history—yet at the same time oral historians who are committed to a dialogue with their interviewees and a wider public audience need to write and speak in terms that make accessible sense.²¹ Oral historians are sometimes better at this dialogue than other academic theorists: because unlike much social science research we rarely anonymize interviewees (who usually want their stories to be part of history and their names on the record); because we hope that our interviewees will understand what we write and say about their lives; and because memory is an intriguing, universal topic that can be written about in ways that will interest most people.

Oral History and Political Memory Work in a Biographical Era

The Popular Memory Group's writing highlighted the political possibilities and contradictions for oral history projects which have a radical agenda.²² Yet in the early 1980s the political scope and impact of oral history and memory work was still comparatively limited. Since then memory has come to be used for advocacy and empowerment in an increasingly diverse range of contexts: intergenerational oral history projects with elders²³ and

²⁰ See Armitage and Gluck, "Reflections on Women's Oral History"; Perry K. Blatz, "Craftsmanship and Flexibility in Oral History: A Pluralistic Approach to Methodology and Theory," *The Public Historian* 12, no. 4 (1990): 7–22.

²¹ Linda Shopes, "Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes and Possibilities," *Journal of American History* 89, no. 2 (2002): 588–98.

²² For a critique of the Popular Memory Group, see Trevor Lummis, *Listening to History: The Authenticity of Oral Evidence* (London: Hutchinson, 1987).

²³ See Joanna Bornat, ed., *Reminiscence Reviewed: Perspectives, Evaluations, Achievements* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1994); Barbara K. Haight and Jeffrey D. Webster, eds., *The Art and Science of Reminiscing: Theory, Research, Methods and Applications* (Washington, D.C.: Taylor & Francis, 1995); Jane Lawrence and Jane Mace, *Remembering in Groups: Ideas From Reminiscence and Literacy Groups* (London: Oral History Society, 1980); Mary Breen and David Sobel, *Popular Oral History and Literacy* (Toronto: Storylinks, 1991).

young people;²⁴ health, social care and development work;²⁵ community-based projects with marginalized groups such as the homeless and refugees;²⁶ and the use of testimony in legal and political processes related to indigenous people's rights and restitution, post-conflict resolution and national truth and reconciliation.²⁷ Indeed, though oral history has often played a significant role within such projects, commentators such as Fuyuki Kurusawa

²⁴ On oral history in schools see: Barry A. Lanman and Laura M. Wendling, eds., *Preparing the Next Generation of Oral Historians: An Anthology of Oral History Education* (Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Publishers, 2006); Donald A. Ritchie, "Teaching Oral History," in *Doing Oral History*, 188–221; Glenn Whitman, *Dialogue with the Past: Engaging Students and Meeting Standards Through Oral History* (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2004); Dora Schwarzstein, *Una Introducción al Uso de la Historia Oral en el Aula* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2001); Allan Redfern, *Talking in Class: Oral History and the National Curriculum* (Colchester: Oral History Society, 1996); "Practice and Pedagogy: Oral History in the Classroom," eds. Charles R. Lee and Kathryn L. Nasstrom, special issue, *Oral History Review* 25, nos. 1–2 (1998); "Oral History and the National Curriculum," special issue, *Oral History* 20, no. 1 (1992); "Oral History, Children and Schools," special issue, *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, no. 8 (1986); Patrick Hagopian, "Voices from Vietnam: Veterans' Oral Histories in the Classroom," *Journal of American History* 87, no. 2 (2000): 593–601.

²⁵ See Joanna Bornat, Rob Perks, Paul Thompson and Jan Walmsley, eds., *Oral History, Health and Welfare* (London: Routledge, 2000); Ruth R. Martin, *Oral History in Social Work* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1995); "Health and Welfare," special issue, *Oral History* 23, no. 1 (1995). On development work see Hugo Slim and Paul Thomson, eds., *Listening For a Change: Oral History and Development* (London: Panos, 1993); Olivia Bennett, "Review article: Oral Testimony as a Tool for Overseas Development," *Oral History* 23, no. 1 (1995): 89–92; Mark Riley, "'Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay': Farm Practices, Oral History and Nature Conservation," *Oral History* 32, no. 2 (2004): 45–53; Christine Landorf, "A Sense of Identity and A Sense of Place: Oral History and Preserving the Past in the Mining Community of Broken Hill," *Oral History* 28, no. 1 (2000): 91–102.

²⁶ Daniel Kerr, "'We Know What the Problem Is': Using Video and Radio Oral History to Develop Collaborative Analysis of Homelessness," *Oral History Review* 30, no. 1 (2003): 27–45.

²⁷ On the use of personal testimony in quasi-legal contexts see: Marie-Bénédicte Dembour and Emily Haslam, "Silenced hearings? Victim-witnesses at war crimes tribunals," *European Journal of International Law* 15, no. 1 (2004): 151–177; Alessandro Portelli, "The Oral Shape of the Law: The 'April 7 Case,'" in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 241–69. On truth commissions see: Deborah Levenson, "The Past Can Be An Open Question: Oral History, Memory and Violence in Guatemala," *Words and Silences: Journal of the International Oral History Association*, n.s. 2, no. 2 (2004): 23–29; Kenneth Christie, *The South Africa Truth Commission* (London: Macmillan Press, 2000); Gary Minkley and Ciraj Ras-sool, "Orality, Memory and Social History in South Africa," in Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetze, eds., *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 89–99; Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull*:

argue that memory and testimony have become critical constituents of a more general “witnessing fever” in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, in which “bearing witness” is “a mode of ethico-political practice.”²⁸ Several factors have contributed to the development of our biographical era. The catastrophic violence of the twentieth century generated a culture of symbolic and material claims by individual and collective victims of immense suffering. A post-Freudian acceptance that talking about one’s life could have positive, therapeutic benefits has encouraged remembering for recognition and reconciliation. And the extraordinary growth and diversification of communication media has contributed to the growth and impact of commemorative practices, while also generating dominant cultural memories that both articulate and silence people’s life stories.

Two examples highlight the potent contribution that oral history can make to this politics of memory in twenty-first century nations. In Australia the contested memory of aborigines who were removed from their families and placed in foster families or state institutions—the so-called “Stolen Generation”—has been at the heart of debates about race relations, restitution and national identity. Rosanne Kennedy has noted how Stolen Generation memory is produced and treated differently in diverse contexts: oral history recordings compared with auto-biographical writing; in law courts and national inquiries or “memory commissions”; by historians and in self-help advocacy

Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998). On oral history and land rights see Christine Choo and Shawn Hollback, *History and Native Title, Contemporary Theoretical, Historiographical and Political Perspectives* (Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 2004); John A. Neuenschwander, “Native American Oral Tradition/History as Evidence in American Federal Courts,” *Words and Silences: Journal of the International Oral History Association*, n.s. 2, no. 2 (2004): 11–17; Ann Parsonson, “Stories for Land: Oral Narratives in the Maori Land Court,” in *Telling Stories*, 21–40; Ann McGrath, “‘Stories for Country’: Oral History and Aboriginal Land Claims,” *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, no. 9 (1987): 34–46; Julie Cruikshank, “Oral Tradition and Oral History: Reviewing Some Issues,” *Canadian Historical Review* 75, no. 3 (1994): 403–18.

²⁸ Fuyuki Kurasawa, “A Message in a Bottle: Bearing Witness as a Mode of Ethico-Political Practice,” <http://research.yale.edu/ccs/research/working-papers/#kurasawa> (accessed November 6, 2006).

groups.²⁹ Drawing upon theoretical approaches to Holocaust and abuse survivor testimony, she argues against the assumption that personal accounts by removed aborigines have been unduly influenced by the collective memory of a Stolen Generation, and asserts that these accounts should be regarded as sophisticated interpretative narratives that incorporate sharp social and historical insights, and not simply as evidence for interpretation (or rejection) by historical “experts.” Yet Kennedy also notes that some aboriginal witnesses “may not have had the cultural resources available to them that would enable them to interpret their own experience,” and thus highlights the important though problematic supporting role of oral historians and other memory workers.

In a second example, from Northern Ireland, Patricia Lundy and Mark McGovern explore their role as memory workers with the Ardoyne Commemoration Project (ACP) in a Catholic working-class Belfast enclave.³⁰ Lundy and McGovern explain that “in the last three decades truth-telling has come to be seen as a key element of post-conflict transition in societies throughout the world,” and they identify at least twenty-four national “truth commissions,” of which the most famous was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Despite good intentions and many positive outcomes, the political compromises required by official truth-telling sometimes marginalize memories that do not fit their conciliatory aims, and official commissions can reinforce the trauma of silence or misrecognition. Ironically, Northern Ireland has not had a truth commission because “*not confronting the causes and competing explanations*” of the northern Irish conflict “was part of a deliberate State strategy to obtain a *realpolitik* consensus” following the Good Friday Agreement that more or less ended armed conflict in 1998. In the absence of official truth-telling, Lundy and

²⁹ Rosanne Kennedy, “Stolen Generations Testimony: Trauma, Historiography and the Question of ‘Truth’,” *Aboriginal History* 25 (2001): 116–31. See also Bain Attwood, “‘Learning About the Truth.’ The Stolen Generations Narrative,” in *Telling Stories*, 183–212; Anna Haebich, *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800–2000* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000).

³⁰ Patricia Lundy and Mark McGovern, “‘You Understand Again’: Testimony and Post-Conflict Resolution in the North of Ireland,” *Words and Silences: Journal of the International Oral History Association*, n.s. 2, no. 2 (2004): 30–35.

McGovern describe how they worked with a group of Ardoyne residents to produce an oral history book commemorating local people who died in “the Troubles.” They detail the significant practical challenges of participatory oral history. For example, interviewees “had complete control to add, take out or change words in their own transcripts,” in discussion with ACP volunteers, and although participants could not change words in other people’s accounts they were encouraged to read other transcripts and raise questions or make suggestions for consideration in the final production. Through this painstaking process of recording and editing their stories, individuals were helped to deal with traumatic memories and “make peace with the past.”³¹ Furthermore, Lundy and McGovern argue, a “victim-centered approach . . . to community-based truth-telling” contributes to the wider project of “achieving truth and justice” in Northern Ireland, and offers a model “that can be transferred not only to other communities in the north but to other parts of the world.”

The Subjectivity of Oral History Relationships— Interdisciplinary Approaches

A third transformation in oral history involved a paradigmatic shift in our approach to the “objectivity” of the oral historian as interviewer and analyst. One of the primary concerns of critics of oral history in the 1970s was that historians were creating, and thus unduly influencing, their sources. By the end of that decade oral historians like Portelli and Passerini in Europe, and Frisch and Grele in North America, had begun to question the possibility of objectivity and to celebrate the subjectivity of the interview relationship. Throughout the 1980s positivist notions of researcher objectivity were increasingly questioned by feminist theorists, post-modern anthropologists and qualitative sociologists—and by oral history interviewers who were deeply reflective about the relationships they formed with their narrators. Oral historians were also influenced by developments in reminiscence work that highlighted the benefits of remembering for older

³¹ See Graham Dawson, “Trauma, Place and the Politics of Memory: Bloody Sunday, Derry, 1972–2004,” *History Workshop Journal*, issue 59 (2005): 151–178; Graham Dawson, *Making Peace with the Past? Cultural Memory, the Irish Troubles and the Peace Process* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming 2007).

people and reminded interviewers to consider the value of the exchange for both parties.³² In an article published in the *Oral History Review* in 1997, Valerie Yow argued that from the late 1980s a new oral history “paradigm . . . permits awareness and use of the interactive process of interviewer and narrator, of interviewer and content.”³³ Oral historians were increasingly alert to the ways that they were affected by their interviews and how the interviewer, in turn, affected the interview relationship, the data it generated and the interpretative process and product. Feminist oral historians have made especially important contributions in this regard, illuminating issues about oral history relationships and the interconnections between language, power and meaning.³⁴ Quoting Victor Turner, Yow called for “an objective relation to our own subjectivity,” and proposed some extremely useful questions to help oral historians develop a reflexive alertness that would enhance interviews and their interpretation:

1. What am I feeling about this narrator?
2. What similarities and differences impinge on this interpersonal situation?
3. How does my own ideology affect this process? What group outside of the process am I identifying with?
4. Why am I doing the project in the first place?
5. In selecting topics and questions, what alternatives might I have taken? Why didn’t I choose these?
6. What other possibilities are there? Why did I reject them?
7. What are the effects on me as I go about this research? How are my reactions impinging on the research?³⁵

Valerie Yow’s article also exemplifies the interdisciplinarity that has been one of the most significant features of oral history from the 1980s onwards. Though memory is now a respected historical source, history is just one of many academic disciplines

³² Bornat, “Oral History as a Social Movement.”

³³ Valerie Yow, “Do I Like Them Too Much?” Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa,” *Oral History Review* 24, no. 1 (1997): 55–79.

³⁴ The core texts for feminist oral history are Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991); and Susan H. Armitage, ed., *Women’s Oral History: The Frontiers Reader* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

³⁵ Yow, “Do I Like Them Too Much?,” 79.

and emergent intellectual fields that work with memories. Yow writes about the “trickle over effect” from other disciplines such as qualitative sociology,³⁶ anthropology,³⁷ biographical and literary studies,³⁸ and life review psychology.³⁹ To this list we could add cultural studies,⁴⁰ linguistics, communication and narrative studies,⁴¹ folklore studies⁴² and interdisciplinary work exploring the relationship between memory, narrative and

³⁶ See Daniel Bertaux, ed., *Biography and Society: The Life History Approach in the Social Sciences* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1981); Ken Plummer, *Documents of Life 2: An Invitation to Critical Humanism* (London: Sage, 2001); Prue Chamberlayne, Joann Bornat and Tom Wengraf, eds., *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2000); Brian Roberts, *Biographical Research* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001).

³⁷ See L.L. Langness and Geyla Frank, *Lives: An Anthropological Approach to Biography* (Novato, CA: Chandler & Sharp, 1981); Lawrence Craig Watson and Maria-Barbara Watson-Franke, *Interpreting Life Histories: An Anthropological Inquiry* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1985); Judith Okely and Helen Callaway, eds., *Anthropology and Autobiography* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); Jacob J. Climo and Maria G. Cattell, eds., *Social Memory and History: Anthropological Perspectives* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 2002).

³⁸ See James Olney, ed., *Studies in Autobiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Julia Swindells, ed., *The Uses of Autobiography* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1995); Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

³⁹ See William McKinley Runyan, *Life Histories and Psychobiography: Explorations in Theory and Method* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); Theodore R. Sarbin, ed., *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct* (New York: Praeger, 1986); Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Leiblich, eds., *Narrative Study of Lives* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1993).

⁴⁰ Richard Johnson et al., eds., *Making Histories: Studies in History-writing and Politics* (London: Hutchinson, 1982); Carolyn Steedman, *Past Tenses: Essays on Writing, Autobiography, History* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1992); Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1994); Molly Andrews, Shelly Day Slater, Corinne Squire and Amel Treacher, eds., *The Uses of Narrative: Explorations in Sociology, Psychology and Cultural Studies* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2004; previously published by Routledge, 2000, as *Lines of Narrative: Psychosocial Perspectives*).

⁴¹ See Eva M. McMahan, *Elite Oral History Discourse: A Study of Cooperation and Coherence* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989); Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Leiblich, eds., *Making Meaning of Narrative, Narrative Study of Lives, Vol. 6* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1999); Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson, eds., *Narrative and Genre: Contexts and Types of Communication* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2004; previously published by Routledge, 1998); Amia Leiblich, Rivka Tuval-Mashiach and Tamar Zilber, eds., *Narrative Research: Reading, Analysis and Interpretation* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1998).

⁴² William Schneider, *So They Understand: Cultural Issues in Oral History* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2002).

personal identity.⁴³ While theoretical and methodological developments in each of these fields have enriched the practice of oral history, oral historians have themselves made substantial contributions to the theory, method and politics of qualitative research through their interdisciplinary reflections on interview relationships and about the interpretation and use of recorded memories.

To cite just one recent example, Daniel James' book, *Dona María's Story: Life History, Memory and Political Identity*, published in 2000, is an exemplary work of women's oral history from South America.⁴⁴ The first half of the book comprises Dona María's own testimony, as recorded and edited by James, and vividly recalls the life and times of a working-class woman activist in a twentieth-century Argentinean industrial community. The interpretative essays that follow consider Dona María's experience and testimony, and the history and memory of her community, from cutting-edge interdisciplinary perspectives. For example, "Listening in the cold" explores the challenges of recording, hearing and comprehending testimony that is influenced by prevalent narrative forms, by the political and psychological identity of the narrator, and by an interview relationship that can enable or disable recollection. "Stories, anecdotes and other performances" draws upon narrative theory to analyze the nature and meaning of personal testimony. "Tales told out on the borderlands" reads Dona María's story for gender and argues that clues about gender tension and dissonance are found on the narrative "borderlands" between personal memory and the cultural frames of communal myth and public ideology. James argues that Dona María's oral testimony—shaped by a dynamic ongoing relationship between personal and public memory, and between narrator and interviewer—is "more messy, more paradoxical, more contradiction-laden

⁴³ George C. Rosenwald and Richard L. Ochberg, eds., *Storied Lives: The Cultural Politics of Self-Understanding* (New York and London: Yale University Press, 1992); Bruce M. Ross, *Remembering the Autobiographical Past: Descriptions of Autobiographical Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Mark Philip Freeman, *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); Charlotte Linde, *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Robyn Fivush and Catherine A. Haden, eds., *Autobiographical Memory and the Construction of a Narrative Self: Developmental and Cultural Perspectives* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2003).

⁴⁴ Daniel James, *Dona María's Story: Life History, Memory and Political Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

[than most written autobiographies], and perhaps because of this, more faithful to the complexity of working-class lives and working-class memory.”⁴⁵

The Ascent of Memory Studies

Daniel James also considers the importance of remembering—as “embodied in cultural practices such as storytelling”—for individuals and for their communities, and poses the problem of modern memory for working-class communities faced with deindustrialization and the destruction of sites for collective memory. In this regard his work exemplifies the “ascent of ‘memory’ as an object of investigation by historians” in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Omer Bartov offers a compelling explanation for this trend, in which the memory work of oral historians has played a significant role:

The stream of “memory studies” was clearly related to the pervasive cultural sense of an end of an era, both as a chronological fact and as a reflection of rapid socioeconomic transformation. The “rediscovery” of Maurice Halbwachs’s theories on collective memory; the publication of Pierre Nora’s massive tomes on *lieux de mémoire*; the growing scholarly interest in the links between history and memory, documentation and testimony; the popularity of works of fiction and films on memory; debates among psychologists over “deep” and repressed memory; and, not least, the public controversies on forms and implications of official commemoration. All seemed to indicate that “memory” had firmly established itself as a central historical category.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ James, *Dona María’s Story*, 242.

⁴⁶ Omer Bartov, in a review of three books about the European memory of the Holocaust and World War II, in *American Historical Review* 106, no. 2 (2001): 660. Bartov also notes signs that in the new millennium “this preoccupation with memory will gradually diminish,” particularly in relation to the scholarly focus on “the Nazi occupation of Europe and the material reconstruction and identity reformation of the postwar period.” Books about history and modern memory include: David Thelen, *Memory and American History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); Richard Terdiman, *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton, eds., *Memory and History in Twentieth Century Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994); Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (London: Routledge, 1995); David Gross, *Lost Time: On Remembering and Forgetting in Late Modern Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000); Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin, eds., *Regimes of Memory* (London: Routledge, 2003).

The ascent of memory studies poses two significant challenges for oral historians. Firstly, we need to keep abreast of a daunting interdisciplinary literature in the field. Secondly, oral historians can ensure that memory studies does not retreat into an arcane intellectual world of rarified debate, but rather is informed by our relationship with the men and women who tell us their memories and by our efforts to engage memory in political debate for social change.

The Internationalism of Oral History

Our response to these challenges has been bolstered by the increasing internationalism of oral history. In 1979 a number of North American oral historians met up with their European counterparts at an International Conference on Oral History held in Essex, England. This meeting was to be the first of many international exchanges, and was a catalyst for the publication of an *International Journal of Oral History* (from 1980 until 1990) and a series of collaborative, international oral history anthologies.⁴⁷ In 1996 the international oral history conferences were formalized within a newly constituted International Oral History Association (IOHA), for which representatives from each geographical region were elected to a Council responsible for the biennial conference and a bilingual (Spanish and English) newsletter and journal, *Words and Silences/Palabras y Silencios*. The conferences and publications have sustained and propelled a cross-fertilization of ideas and practices across the different national contexts of oral history, and have shifted the center of gravity in oral history away from Europe and North

⁴⁷ Early examples included: Paul Thompson and Natasha Burchardt, eds., *Our Common History: The Transformation of Europe* (London: Pluto, 1982); Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, eds., *The Myths We Live By* (London: Routledge, 1990). There have been several successors or alternatives to the *International Journal of Oral History*, which lapsed in the late 1980s: *Life Stories/Recits de Vie*, Colchester, Biography and Society Research Committee, International Sociological Association, 1985–1989; Ronald Grele, ed., *Subjectivity and Multi-Culturalism in Oral History, The International Annual of Oral History* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992); *International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992–1996); *Memory and Narrative*, book series (London: Routledge, 1997–2004; from 2004 published by Transaction); *Words and Silences* (journal of the IOHA from 1997).

America. The recent sequence of IOHA conferences in Turkey, Brazil, South Africa and Australia (with the 2008 conference scheduled for Mexico) has showcased the rich histories and extraordinary growth of oral history in the “South.”

Indeed, Latin American oral historians are challenging the European and North American oral history hegemony. In an editorial introducing a 2003 issue of *Words and Silences* about “Oral history and the experience of politics,” the Mexican oral historian Gerardo Necochea suggested that, whereas in western Europe and the United States oral history is often “directed to problems of identity and cultural recognition within democratic regimes. . . . Latin America continues to be a space for utopia, for thinking about the far-away relatively just society and fearing the fracture of the ever fragile present. Politics there jumps at you,” and oral history is intertwined with politics.⁴⁸ In the same issue Brazilian José Sebe Bom Meihy argued that the international conference in Rio de Janeiro in 1998 was a turning point, with Latin American oral history in particular offering a more radical political context and purpose.⁴⁹

The political circumstances of countries and regions emerging from—or struggling within—political turmoil undoubtedly generate important, often transformative, memory work. And it is certainly true that different national and regional contexts make for different types of oral history, and that all oral historians gain from international dialogue and comparative insights. But there are plenty of European and North American projects where oral history is also “intertwined with politics.” For example, Daniel Kerr has shown how oral history promoted “dialogue in the streets among the homeless” of the U.S. city of Cleveland, Ohio, and how “a democratically organized project built on the framework of what Michael Frisch terms ‘shared authority’ can play a significant role in movement building.”⁵⁰ Kerr’s project started with life history interviews but then shifted away from a victim model and refocused on homeless people’s own analysis of homelessness. He brought homeless people

⁴⁸ Gerardo Necochea, “Editorial,” *Words and Silences*, n.s. 2, no. 1 (2003): 2.

⁴⁹ José Sebe Bom Meihy, “The Radicalization of Oral History,” *Words and Silences*, n.s. 2, no. 1 (2003): 31–41.

⁵⁰ Kerr, “We Know What the Problem Is.” See Frisch, *A Shared Authority*.

into a structured dialogue by presenting their video interviews in public, producing a radio program focusing each week on one person's account of homelessness, and convening workshops at a drop-in center in which participants analyzed their experiences and drew out common themes about the history and causes of homelessness. Perhaps most importantly, the project built upon and linked existing discussions among homeless people, "identified avenues of resistance," and "emboldened people" to campaign for social change. Kerr notes tensions in the oral historian's role between scholarship and advocacy and argues, perhaps controversially, that research can be *more* objective if it is more inclusive.

The Digital Revolution in Oral History

We are in the middle of a fourth, dizzying digital revolution in oral history, and its outcomes are impossible to predict. E-mail and the Internet are certainly fostering oral history's international dialogue. But, more than that, new digital technologies are transforming the ways in which we record, preserve, catalogue, interpret, share and present oral histories. Very soon we will all be recording interviews on computers, and we can already use web-cams to conduct virtual interviews with people on the other side of the world. Audio-visual digital recordings will be readily accessible in their entirety via the Internet, and sophisticated digital indexing and cataloguing tools—perhaps assisted in large projects by artificial intelligence—will enable anyone, anywhere to make extraordinary and unexpected creative connections within and across oral history collections, using sound and image as well as text. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software can already be used to support, extend and refine the interpretation of large sets of oral history interviews, and will, inevitably, become more sophisticated and powerful.

Michael Frisch argues that the digitization of sound and image will challenge the current dominance of transcription and return aurality to oral history, as digital technology makes it easier to navigate audio (and video) material, and as we extend our text-based literacy to new forms of literacy with sound and image. Furthermore, non-text-reliant digital index and search mechanisms will enable users to find and hear the

extracts they are looking for in their own interviews—and across countless interviews from other projects—and will enable imaginative, unforeseen interpretations.⁵¹ Frisch proposes the emergence of a “post-documentary sensibility” which breaks down the distinction between the oral history document source and the oral history documentary product. He offers the prosaic but instructive example of family video collections and asks whether “instead of one, two, or even a file folder full of such pre-cast movies, it wouldn’t be more interesting to imagine the material so organized and accessible that . . . a path could be instantly generated in response to any visiting relative, or a child’s birthday, or a grandparent’s funeral, or the sale of a house in the hometown, or whatever might be occasioning interest in the relevant resources found in the video record. Such a located selection could easily be displayed, saved, and worked into a presentational form, if it proved interesting. Or, it could be released to return to the database, awaiting some later inquiry or use.” Frisch suggests a comparable future for oral history recordings and productions, and concludes that “new digital tools and the rich landscape of practice they define may become powerful resources in restoring one of the original appeals of oral history—to open new dimensions of understanding and engagement through the broadly inclusive sharing and interrogation of memory.”

The future that Frisch proposes may still be years away in terms of being widely adopted. How receptive are libraries and archives to moves away from the ‘document’? Who will have the time and inclination to generate non-text-reliant digital indexing of audio and video interviews? Who will have access to the software? At what point will extensive collections of indexed audio and video oral history recordings be readily accessible and searchable via the Internet? Furthermore, our interviewees may well think rather differently about telling a story that will be instantly accessible and easily manipulated.

Throughout the past decade oral historians have been grappling with the technical, ethical and epistemological implications

⁵¹ Michael Frisch, “Towards a Post-Documentary Sensibility: Theoretical and Political Implications of New Information Technologies in Oral History,” (paper presented to the XIIIth International Oral History Conference, Rome, June 2004) and in Perks and Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd ed. (2006), 102–14.

of the digital revolution.⁵² But are we dealing with a paradigm transformation in the terms articulated by Thomas Kuhn, a profound change in understanding that revolutionizes our practice as oral historians? Is this technological revolution also a cognitive revolution? It is hard to tell, in the midst of such rapid change and when the technological changes in oral history are just a small sideshow in the global digital revolution in information and communication technologies. Personally, I find this future especially difficult to predict precisely because the global digital frontier is so foreign to someone who grew up in a pre-digital age and who feels comfortable and literate with text but profoundly uncomfortable and illiterate with these new technologies (to be honest, I was never very competent with old technologies). My children and my younger students—who have only known a digital age and instinctively understand the ways in which mobile phones and web-cams create different ways of communicating and web-logs offer new processes for making and sharing personal stories—may well have a better sense of where these technologies might take us.

But I do think that the medium is part of the message, and that digital technologies are transforming so many aspects of our work as oral historians—and indeed the ways in which people remember and narrate their lives—that they will, over time, also change the way we think about memory and personal narrative, about telling and collecting life stories, and about sharing memories and making histories. This digital revolution—the fourth paradigm transformation of oral history—is still in process, and life on the cusp of change before an ever-shifting horizon can be uncomfortable. The future of oral history, and the role of the oral historian, has never been so exciting, or so uncertain.

⁵² Sherna Berger Gluck, Donald A. Ritchie and Bret Eynon, “Reflections on Oral History in the New Millennium: Roundtable Comments,” *Oral History Review* 26, no. 2 (1999): 1–27; Mary A. Larson, “Potential, Potential, Potential: The Marriage of Oral History and the World Wide Web,” *Journal of American History* 88, no. 2 (2001): 596–603; Sherna B. Gluck, “Pitch, Pace, Performance—And Even Poetry: Returning to Orality: The CSULB Virtual Oral/Aural History Archive Model” (paper presented to the XIIIth International Oral History Conference, Rome, June 2004); Karen Brewster, “Internet Access to Oral Recordings: Finding the Issues,” www.uaf.edu/library/oralhistory/brewster1/research.html (accessed November 6, 2006).

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2. Valerie Yow, "Introduction to the In-Depth Interview," *Recording Oral History* (Altamira Press, 2005): 1-34

In the middle of writing two new chapters for this second edition, I was struck by how much I needed the critical viewpoint of other scholars, experts in the fields I was sampling. I knocked on my friends' doors and am grateful, indeed, for their help. My colleagues in oral history, Ronald Grele and Alessandro Portelli, and sociologist Brian Roberts read the chapter on analysis and interpretation. Artist Marlene Malik generously gave me permission to print her oral history, read her testimony as printed, and commented briefly on my analysis of it in that chapter. Artist Alexandra Broches considered the chapter from the point of view of a founder of the Hera Gallery. James Peacock, anthropologist, Kim Rogers and Michael Gordon, historians, and Kenneth Sufka, biopsychologist, read critically the chapter on memory. Brian Roberts graciously scrutinized still another one—the greatly revised chapter on biography. And John Wolford examined the revised first chapter and kindly offered insights. John Neuenschwander helped me with the chapter on legal concerns in oral history. And Linda Shopes read critically the chapter on community studies and gave me the benefit of her experience and of the precision in her thinking. Dialogue with these individuals has greatly improved my understanding of subjects that have relevance to oral history. Editors at AltaMira Press, Susan Walters, Susan Scharf, and Erin McKindley were not only efficient and helpful, but supportive as well. Copyeditor Jen Sorenson showed such patience and tact that I ceased to fear the process. Of course, I alone am responsible for any errors or misinterpretations that remain in this text.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction to the In-Depth Interview

Recently a development has been going on in the fields of education, anthropology, oral history, folklore, biographical literature, psychology, and humanistic sociology. This has been spurred in part by feminist psychologists, historians, and anthropologists and in part by men and women writing literary biography, humanistic sociology, and ethnography. This development is centered on a concern about the process of meaning making. Many of us who use the in-depth interview are interested in how the respondents interpret experience and how we, the questioners, interject ourselves into this process. We try to be conscious of the effects of the research process on both interviewer and narrator. Sociologist Judith Stacey described this as the realization that "ethnographic writing is not cultural reportage, but cultural construction, and always a construction of self as well as of the other."¹

We are also concerned about the ways power relationships based on knowledge, gender, race, class, status, age, and ethnicity impinge on the interview situation. We strive to be aware of when and how these conditions affect the narrator and interviewer as they interact and how this influences the testimony recorded.

In ethnographic research in general and in oral history research specifically, there has been a shift in attitude about the relationship of interviewer to narrator. Formerly, the relationship of researcher (who plays the role of authoritative scholar) to narrator (who is the passive yielder of data) was one of subject to object. In the new view, power may be unequal, but both interviewer and narrator are seen as having knowledge of the situation as well as

deficits in understanding. Although the interviewer brings to the interviewing situation a perspective based on research in a discipline, the narrator brings intimate knowledge of his or her own culture and often a different perspective. The interviewer thus sees the work as a collaboration.² This is an underlying assumption in this book; the term used to describe this dynamic is “shared authority.”³

In striving to see the world as the narrator sees it, we realize that this stance compels some degree of compassion for the narrator. We cannot—and do not wish to—pretend to complete objectivity.

The guide is intended for all who use the recorded in-depth interview in their research and are open to reflecting on ethics and interpersonal relationships as well as to gaining information about interviewing techniques. Admittedly there is an emphasis on historical research because my own work has been centered on historical issues. For example, I emphasize the life history approach rather than the present-centered interview. However, my thinking has been enriched by research and debates in other disciplines, and I draw examples from the experience of scholars in anthropology, sociology, psychology, education, and folklore. I discuss specifically issues in in-depth interviewing that concern scholars in other disciplines when they diverge from those of historians.

This first chapter contains an explanation of terms used in referring to the recorded in-depth interview. There is a brief discussion about differences between qualitative and quantitative research methods; and the in-depth interview, or oral history, is presented in the context of the general field of qualitative research. I suggest appropriate uses of the in-depth interview and its limitations, as well as ways to deal with limitations.

Brief History of the Use of Oral History

Most writers begin books on oral history by reminding readers that the first oral historian was Thucydides, who sought out people to interview and used their information in writing the history of the Peloponnesian War. Use of personal testimony in the investigation of society has never ceased. But in the twentieth century, a new technology made the recording of testimony easier. Early in the century, recording onto wax cylinders by using heavy, cumbersome recording machines, folklorists recorded not only music but short interviews with the people making music. However, widespread use of the tape-recorded interview was possible only after World War II, when portable recording machines became available. So, although the use of data from individual memory is at least as old as the fifth century B.C., the me-

chanical recording of the in-depth interview is not so old—not much more than eighty years, in fact.

In 1948 Alan Nevins, at Columbia University, began to tape-record the spoken memories of white male elites: this was the first organized oral history project.⁴ At that time, heavy, cumbersome reel-to-reel recording machines were being used. Soon lighter machines were invented and marketed, and by the 1960s the easy-to-carry tape recorder using cassettes had become the standard equipment. Also in the 1960s, an interest in recording the memories of people other than elites became paramount among academics.

Because of this interest and technical improvements in recorders, by 1965 there were eighty-nine oral history projects ongoing in this country, and the number of projects has grown in each year since then.⁵ At the same time, the easy portability of cassette recorders enhanced the quantity and quality of interviews by folklorists, ethnographers, sociologists, and psychologists whose research was based on qualitative methodology. Although each discipline uses the in-depth interview in somewhat different ways, the practical and theoretical problems tend to cut across disciplinary boundaries. A simple search on the Internet via Google will show you the great number of oral history programs in the United States. Journals devoted to oral history and directories of oral history projects in English-speaking countries as well as Internet resources are listed at the end of the recommended reading section at the end of the chapter.

Definition of Oral History

The question, What is oral history anyway? has stymied nearly all of us at one point or another. Oral historians have probably devoted more energy to definitional issues and problems of application of this term than other disciplines. I'll venture a working definition: oral history is the recording of personal testimony delivered in oral form. Charles Morrissey, an oral historian, searched for the origin of the term *oral history* and traced it to a New York citizen of the nineteenth century.⁶ Nevins called what he was doing “oral history.”⁷ But what is the oral history? Is it the taped memoir? Is it the typewritten transcript? Is it the research method that involves in-depth interviewing? The term refers to all three. Lamentations have been heard about the inadequacy, the imprecision, the misleading character of the term, but is it possible to find a better one? In this book, I use several terms interchangeably with *oral history*. James Bennett mentioned a string of them in his speech to the annual meeting of the Oral History Association in 1982, among them, *life history*, *self-report*, *personal narrative*, *life story*, *oral biography*,

*memoir, testament.*⁸ The terms used here—such as *in-depth interview, recorded memoir, life history, life narrative, taped memories, life review*—imply that there is someone else involved who frames the topics and inspires the narrator to begin the act of remembering, jogs memory, and records and presents the narrator's words.

Most of these terms have also been used in cognate disciplines. Although theorists have proposed a set of more technically specific meanings for each term, these meanings seem not to have caught on, and the terms remain interchangeable. *Oral history* seems to be the one most frequently used to refer to the recorded in-depth interview, although *life history* is also frequently used.

Oral History: Still a New Kid on the Block

Social scientists, in general, are trained to view manufacturing the evidence as the worst thing one can do. They will permit evidence to be “massaged” and “manipulated,” but not made up. The recorded in-depth interview is a research method that is based on direct intervention by the observer and on the evocation of evidence. In the sense that the evidence was not tangible in these words exactly until the interviewer recorded it, and that the evidence is the result of the interviewer’s questioning, this is the making of evidence.

But return to the first historians, the Greeks: they were not troubled about the issue of recording these answers and considering them evidence. They cheerfully (I guess) used the accounts related for them to write their histories. Nevertheless, many historians trained in research methods rooted in the Germanic “scientific school” of the nineteenth century cast a suspicious glance at oral history. They rely mainly on written records and on a critical examination of them. In the latter part of this chapter I will suggest ways of subjecting the orally transmitted document to the same critical examination with which written documents are evaluated.

Many sociologists and other social scientists today still hold the view that quantitative research is the only way to be certain about evidence. They have grave reservations about qualitative research because they view it as uncontrolled and lacking in the rigorous procedures followed by quantitative researchers. They are uncomfortable with the subjectivity inherent in qualitative research and strive to get rid of it as much as possible. But the subjectivity of the process did not bother the Greeks: they knew that their witnesses and they themselves were human beings involved in the process of living and observing what was going on around them and to them, even as they recorded memories and observations. They realized that they could not

extract themselves from the story. I argue that awareness of our biases and preconceptions, the limitations of our experience and preferences, brings us closer to an understanding of how we influence our research and interpretation, whether it is qualitative or quantitative.

Qualitative methodology has its own body of strict standards for procedure and evaluation. Standards for the recorded in-depth interview as a research method and a critical evaluation of procedures are the subjects discussed in the chapters that follow.

Qualitative Research and Quantitative Research: Comparisons

Sharan Merriam, in the book *Case Study Research in Education: A Qualitative Approach*, explains that the quantitative researcher assesses a limited number of variables by examining researcher-controlled answers, trying to find out whether a preconceived hypothesis is operating, whether the prediction that certain variables cause certain effects will hold true.⁹ By using a questionnaire requiring short answers, a researcher can query a large number of subjects. The subjects are selected in such a way that they are representative of the population studied. Therefore, researchers can make generalizations with a degree of confidence.

Qualitative research does not involve manipulation of a few variables. Rather, Merriam argues, this kind of research is inductive, and a multiplicity of variables and their relationships are considered not in isolation but as being interrelated in the life context.¹⁰ The in-depth interview enables the researcher to give the subject leeway to answer as he or she chooses, to attribute meanings to the experiences under discussion, and to interject topics. In this way, new hypotheses may be generated.

The origins of the data used in these two ways of finding answers to questions about human society are at their foundations similar: observations of human behavior. British oral historian Paul Thompson reminds readers that the basic sources of information that statisticians use—census data, registrations of birth, marriage, and death—are suspect. Marriage registers, for example, contain false information about age because often couples did not want the official to know they were still of the age that required parental consent.¹¹ Birthdates are falsified to present a nine-month interval between marriage and birth of the first child. People give census takers false information, sometimes because they do not understand what the census taker means, sometimes because they do not trust the census taker. People answer questionnaires in a slapdash way because they are in a hurry or because they

do not value the research topic. British historian Trevor Lummis sums up this idea: "So even 'hard' contemporary statistical data is only what somebody told somebody and if they have good reason and the opportunity to conceal the truth, then the 'facts' will be erroneous."¹² All of us who study humans—whether with quantitative or qualitative methods—know that we cannot hold our conclusions with absolute certainty.

One advantage in using qualitative methodology is that, because the researcher does not adhere to an unchangeable testing instrument, he or she is open to observing the informants' choice of topics. In this way, the researcher learns new things not in the original hypothesis—in fact, many qualitative researchers do not form hypotheses at the beginning of the research. An example of finding something outside the researcher's thinking comes from sociologist Arlene Daniels, who studies organization of work, especially unwritten codes of behavior. In a project on military psychiatrists, if she had used a questionnaire whose data she could then easily quantify, she would not have asked a question about sexuality. Earlier information would not have suggested that she do so unless the subject was sexual dysfunction, which the psychiatrist would treat clinically. Instead, in the in-depth interviews she conducted, she found that narrators wanted to talk about some secret sexual practices. Daniels realized that ways to handle these were indicative of informal controls. When wives of high-ranking officers began affairs with lower-ranking officers, the local military psychiatrist would send the offender to a hospital for evaluation and possible treatment. Thus, the psychiatrist provided a short-term but effective solution to a nonpsychiatric problem. By listening and allowing her narrators to teach her, Daniels discovered an aspect of behavior in the military that was not previously in her thinking.¹³

This possibility of discovering something not even thought of before is an advantage of the method. However, in-depth interviews are time-consuming, and so the qualitative researcher cannot examine the number of cases that the quantitative researcher can. Generalizations about a wider population have to be held tentatively.

One aim in quantitative research is to reduce as much as possible the influence of the researcher's bias. However, because it is the researcher who forms the research questions, the bias is present from the beginning. The researcher interprets the mathematical results: the probability of bias is there as well. Now, with the influence of postmodernism, many researchers are likely to acknowledge that "providing figures is as much of an act of social construction as any other kind of research."¹⁴ I used to believe that subjectivity is more intrusive in qualitative research because the researcher is con-

stantly interacting with the people being studied. Yet all research is biased in its subjectivity, simply because the research begins, progresses, and ends with the researcher, who, no matter how many controls she may put on it, will nonetheless be creating a document reflecting her own assumptions. Sociologist Jack Douglas describes the way the qualitative researcher acknowledges and uses his or her bias, but what he says could equally apply to the quantitative researcher: "Rather than trying to eliminate the subjective effects, the goal must be to try to understand how they are interdependent, how different forms of subjective interaction with the people we are studying affect our conclusions about them, and so on."¹⁵ In later chapters of this book, ways to reflect on our own assumptions and biases are discussed.

The qualitative researcher learns about a way of life by studying the people who live it and asking them what they think about their experiences. The many examples they offer in their testimony are carefully studied. The term used to describe the close examination of examples that yields the hypothesis is *grounded theory*, an approach originated by sociologists Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser.¹⁶ *Thick description*, a term coined by ethnographer Clifford Geertz, is the goal—not a single view of the experience, but a large enough number of testimonies that great variety in detail is obtained.¹⁷

I do not intend to insinuate that quantitative research and qualitative research are necessarily antithetical approaches. Quantification has its appropriate use, as does qualitative research. The kind of question asked leads to the choice of research method. For example, oral historian Fern Ingersoll and anthropologist Jasper Ingersoll worked together on a project in southern Thailand, using field techniques from anthropology and oral history as well as population data gathered by sociologists. By observing behaviors and conducting in-depth interviews and focus group interviews, they sought an understanding of the way income was experienced in the daily life of the families.¹⁸ If they had chosen to do so, they could have studied quantitative data and arrived at two dimensions of the society they studied—actual level of income as well as perceived level.

Qualitative methods and quantitative methods may also be profitably used together when data from several in-depth interviews are coded and expressed mathematically. In the example given above, the Ingersolls could have analyzed the total content of all the individual interviews in terms of answers to particular questions, assigning each answer to a category and giving each category a number. Statistical analysis could have then been feasible. Researchers may also use an in-depth interviewing project to suggest hypotheses that may be tested by using a questionnaire with a larger sample drawn from the population being studied.

The In-Depth Interview as a Qualitative Research Method

The recorded in-depth interview, or oral history, is a specific research method within the general designation of qualitative methodology and is close to the basic principle of grounded theory. However, grounded theory refers to other kinds of observations of behavior besides the interview. Another important difference between oral history and grounded theory lies in the emphasis oral historians place on the formation of questions that guide the research.

Proponents of grounded theory insist on approaching research without preconceptions—that is, hypotheses. Social scientists such as Leonard Schatzman and Anselm Strauss warn against having any preconceived notions before beginning the research.¹⁹ For others, there is acceptance of the researcher's starting with articulated problems or questions that guide the interview process. This method may or may not result in the formulation of specific hypotheses during the research or at its completion. Ethnographer Renato Rosaldo describes this approach: "Ethnographers begin research with a set of questions, revise them throughout the course of inquiry, and in the end emerge with different questions than they started with. One's surprise at the answer to a question, in other words, requires one to revise the question until lessening surprises or diminishing returns indicate a stopping point."²⁰

Some historians as well as other social scientists use hypotheses based on previous knowledge—these are tested and discarded as the evidence suggests other explanations. Other historians do not test hypotheses but have in mind some questions that they pursue with the aim of finding answers so they can construct a narrative that makes sense. British historian and philosopher R. G. Collingwood stresses that the historian does not collect data without questions to guide the search: "It is only when he has a problem in his mind that he can begin to search for data bearing on it."²¹

It is important to acknowledge that there are at least assumptions—if not hypotheses or questions—that direct the researcher's attention to some aspects of behavior or testimony and not to others. If assumptions are not acknowledged, how can they be examined? The qualitative researcher must be conscious of assumptions and interests that inform the work and be aware of how and why these change during the research process.

Differences in Ways That Disciplines Approach the In-Depth Interview

Researchers from different disciplines use the in-depth interview differently, although interviewing techniques may be the same. According to your discipline,

you will no doubt combine it with other methods. For historians, this will mean a thorough search for other primary sources. For many anthropologists, it will be close observation of behaviors over a long period of living in the field. For sociologists, it will probably be fieldwork as well as analysis of aggregate data such as census reports or survey research results. But these methods may be used by all three: the strict boundaries between disciplines are artificial. Often a more helpful question is simply, Given my research question, what do I need to do to find the answer?

The kind of general research question you ask, however, is often the result of the discourse you have studied in a particular discipline, and I do not wish to obscure differences. Ethnography—that is, participant-observation research whether practiced by anthropologists, folklorists, or sociologists—and history ask somewhat different questions of narrators. For example, historians cannot stop with asking questions about how things are but also must concern themselves with the general question, How did things get to be the way they are? This catapults them into an examination of sources of information about the past. Among disciplines, there is often a difference in the way the document (tape or transcript) is handled regarding the narrator's identity. There are differences in approaches to interpretation of the document. However, in practice the lines between disciplines are often blurred as scholars in one discipline use concepts or strategies from another.²² In all of these disciplines, researchers who are using the recorded in-depth interview are seeking to understand the ways that the narrator attributes meanings to experience.

Uses of the Recorded In-Depth Interview

Whatever the particular approach or discipline, the recorded in-depth interview can offer answers to questions that no other methodology can provide. Consider here its appropriate uses.

The interview method permits questioning of the witness. In his book *Listening to History*, Trevor Lummis explains, "One precise advantage of oral evidence is that it is interactive and one is not left alone, as with documentary evidence, to divine its significance; the 'source' can reflect upon the content and offer interpretation as well as facts."²³

This is especially important when we need to know underlying reasons for a decision. The official records state the decision blandly and in the most general terms. We might read that "the motion was made, seconded, and voted," but we have no way of knowing what the participants intended when they voted a certain way because the real motivation rarely appears in official written records. An ostensible reason may be given for public consumption. The

in-depth interview is indispensable for probing behind the public-oriented statement. Once, when reading the minutes of a hospital board, I saw that a brilliant physician and creative administrator had handed in his resignation and that it had been accepted. As soon as I could interview the head of the hospital's board at the time, I asked him what happened those thirty years ago. He gave me a blow-by-blow description, explaining the underlying antithetical views of hospital administration held by the physician and the board members and the ways these views played out, as antagonism escalated. None of this was in the hospital board's minutes.²⁴

The reasons why ordinary people made decisions that in the aggregate influenced history but are nowhere written down can also be ascertained. For example, why did parents in farm families continue to limit family size from the nineteenth into the twentieth centuries? Were there material reasons? Were there psychological reasons? Social reasons? Sociologists and other social scientists seek answers to these questions in the present; historians, for the past. Asking questions that involve this kind of personal, complex decision can best be done in the in-depth interview.

The life review reveals other kinds of information that do not get into the public record. People would rather not admit some things to the census taker—such as who is living with whom. Nearly everyone underestimates the value of renovations to property when filling out forms for the county tax office. And underlying the official accounts of “accidental death” are stories of despair on both the personal and societal level. If the interviewer presents no danger and is an empathic listener, these kinds of information may be articulated.

In the twentieth century and the present, much business is transacted orally. It is not a matter of supplementing the written record or explaining it because there are no written records for some decisions. For example, important decisions are arrived at over the telephone: there may not be written records. People rarely save electronic mail messages. (The technology of faxing documents may be changing this situation.) Business deals of importance for thousands of workers are discussed over lunch. A final decision on policy is settled while two people are riding up in the elevator. Out on the course, while carefully choosing the right golf club, an executive fires his subordinate who has come along anticipating a relaxing round. There is no record of the firing: indeed, the only written record is the positive portrayal in the recommendation the executive writes for him.

Certainly an obvious (but not intrinsic) use of oral history projects is that they often involve recording life histories among all socioeconomic levels of the population. In the past, only the well-to-do documented their lives. They

not only had a sense of their own importance and were literate, but they also had the leisure and staff support to write. Because they were the ones who held power, their accounts of their lives were usually consonant with accounts in official documents. This was the situation British oral historian Bill Williams encountered when he began research among Jewish immigrants in Manchester, England. There were plenty of written records, but these had a particular slant: “Insofar as the immigrants survive in the written record they do so chiefly in accounts composed by an older-established Anglo-Jewish elite, with a vested interest in rapid assimilation, or of the majority society, where they appear most frequently either as the ‘foreign refuse’ of anti-alienism or as the pale reflection of middle-class liberalism. Written accounts by immigrants of their own experience are rare, and in the case of Manchester Jewry, all but non-existent.”²⁵

Paul Thompson comments on the paucity of written evidence for the history of working men and women: “The more personal, local, and unofficial a document, the less likely it was to survive.” He lists the official documents that were deliberately saved to shape a view of the past wanted by those in power: legal documents, correspondence of landowners, account books from private firms. He concludes, “But of the innumerable postcards, letters, diaries, and ephemera of working-class men and women, or the papers of small businesses like corner shops or hill farmers, for example, very little has been preserved anywhere.”²⁶ Oral history research thus becomes crucial to obtaining a picture of the total society because the viewpoints of the nonelite who do not leave memoirs or have biographers are presented.

On the other hand, sometimes in researching contemporary history, we are overwhelmed by the abundance of written documents. Much depends on the topic. Government requirements, such as documentation for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in the United States, result in a flood of paper. Oral history testimony can help us understand what was significant to the people who made the documents or lived through the times when the documents had power. Such testimony can reveal which documents are important enough to net from the waves of paper.

Oral history testimony is the kind of information that makes other public documents understandable. For example, we may know the average wage of unskilled male workers from looking at government data. What we cannot know unless we ask is how the man supplemented the wage with other work, how the woman found seasonal and part-time jobs and grew food in a kitchen garden and processed it and made over old clothes for the children, and how the children took baby-sitting jobs and ran errands for money and did unpaid work for their parents.²⁷

Oral history reveals daily life at home and at work—the very stuff that rarely gets into any kind of public record. Thompson says that these are the areas where we can begin to see how social change is operating.²⁸ North Carolina mill workers, talking about courtship practices during and just after World War I, described not being allowed to be alone with a sweetheart. A chaperone was always in the parlor with them—one couple sat side by side and held hands under the sofa pillow. Then a few people were able to buy cars. At first, the chaperone went along, riding in the backseat. Then another couple went along—safety in numbers. Then two sweethearts started going out in the car alone.²⁹ Courting practices changed forever. Concrete details in these oral histories make understandable the textbook generalizations about the advent of the automobile changing social life.

The in-depth interview can reveal the informal, unwritten rules of relating to others that characterize any group. I reflect now on my interviewing project among artists in a women's cooperative gallery. The formal rule was that if an artist could not pay her dues after a stated length of time, she would be expelled from membership. In practice, the women were reluctant to expel anyone. They always found some strategy to keep the artist with them if she wanted to stay.³⁰ Another rule was that membership was open to both men and women, and indeed men regularly exhibited at the gallery. But when asked if they would vote for a man to become a regular member, the women hedged and finally indicated that that would be a hard decision to make.³¹ (A few years after my research project was completed, they did vote men into membership.)

The ramifications of personal relationships that do not get told in official documents are revealed. Again I am reminded of the art gallery and of a heated discussion that went on for months over the difference between art and craft. Hard positions were taken: individuals seemed unmovable. As time went by, they softened their positions. Friendships mattered too much for anyone to maintain a rigid stance; in the end, personal relationships were more important even than the definitions of their work. And only in the in-depth interviews did the interweaving of personal relationships, work, and definitions of work become clear.³²

It is through oral history that the dimensions of life within a community are illuminated. Studying the role of the two churches in the mill village of more than sixty years ago showed me how this can come about. The programs in which members offered songs and poetry emphasized family and mutual help: often my narrators sang their song for me or recited a few lines of poetry. Their testimony gave such accounts as that of taking into the house two maiden aunts when they were old and could not work. In the mill, peo-

ple also helped one another. If a spinner was trying to tie a broken thread and another thread broke, a fellow worker would leave her machines and come over to help.³³ The philosophy of what it meant to be "a good person" was linked to a commitment to help one another and was experienced in several ways and dimensions in this mill village. There was nothing about this in the mill records or in superintendents' observations of workers. Lummis sums up this important use of recorded testimony: "There is no doubt that the strength of having the account of the various dimensions of life together in one lived experience gives all the data a particular strength lacking in virtually any other source of evidence; and certainly lacking in any other widespread documentary form."³⁴

Individual testimony incorporates different aspects of experience at any moment, and these moments can be arranged chronologically to reveal development. Paul Thompson points out the use of oral history to help us understand change over time, to achieve not a static view of human experience but a dynamic view. Thompson writes, "Oral history is a connecting value which moves in all sorts of different directions. It connects the old and the young, the academic world and the world outside, but more specifically it allows us to make connections in the interpretation of history; for example, between different places, or different spheres, or different phases of life."³⁵

Personal testimony enables the researcher to understand the meaning of artifacts in the lives of people. British historian Raphael Samuel, discussing artifacts such as a measuring book and a price list, explains: "Sources like this may only come to life when there are people to explain, to comment and to elaborate on them, when there are other kinds of information to set against them, and a context of custom and practice in which they can be set."³⁶ In the mill village just before World War I, a family saved enough money to buy an organ for the two daughters. If I had seen "organ" in a list of household goods, I would have regarded this artifact as a tangible symbol of "the arts" among working-class people. For the narrator it was the symbol of the intimate bond between her sister and her as they shared the organ in their adult lives after they married and lived in separate houses.³⁷ The organ had a significance for them in a way I did not at first imagine.

The in-depth interview also reveals the images and the symbols people use to express feelings about their experiences and give them meaning. In his book *Listening to Old Voices*, Patrick Mullen describes a man (born in 1900) who had come from a background of poverty to landownership and from a wayward life to that of a lay preacher. This narrator took Mullen to the top of the highest mountain on his land, the landscape symbolizing his rise from poverty to prosperity, from sin to spiritual elevation.³⁸

The in-depth interview can reveal a psychological reality that is the basis for ideals the individual holds and for the things he or she does. There is no better way to glean information on how the subject sees and interprets her experience than to ask in the context of the life review. For past times, historians searched for a diary or personal journal, only to be disappointed by finding a daily account of weather and a brief synopsis of events. The ones that offered the writer's interpretations of the events on a psychological level were rare.

Such a situation arose during research John Bodnar conducted among Polish immigrants to the United States. He says that as a social scientist he might have seen immigration only in the context of economic and social forces. Using one of the oral histories to illustrate his point, Bodnar shows how the narrator expressed his experience in terms of the struggle to move from dependency on others to independence. In his personal psychology, independence was necessary to this narrator's sense of being a worthwhile person: the achievement of independence, rather than money, was the most important thing to him.³⁹

Oral history research may also reveal the actions of individuals who have no one to witness for history their heroism or provide for future generations the evidence of their tragedy. Alessandro Portelli's book on a World War II tragedy, *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory, and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome*, presents the evidence of German troops' retaliation for the deaths of 33 Germans by killing 335 Italians they were holding as political prisoners. Portelli gives the names of the Nazis' victims, at least fifteen to twenty in each chapter, so that by the end every individual has been named. The narrators' description of the victims makes us see them as individuals who once had a life.⁴⁰ The words of the oral histories become a memorial perhaps more potent than stone.

The Use of Narrative as a Research Strategy

From childhood, I realized that I learned from others' stories and that I liked to tell my own. For a long time I thought this was just a characteristic of my working-class culture in the American South because, growing up, I heard stories everywhere, at all times. Grown up, I learned that people tell stories in every culture although form and purpose vary. I am reminded that the theorist Roland Barthes argued that narrative is always present in human groups.⁴¹ More and more, scholars recognize that storytelling is a compelling endeavor that is universal: "The narrative gift is as distinctively human as our upright posture and our opposable thumb and forefinger," psychologist Jerome Bruner says.

Certainly narrative is an important component of oral history, along with description, explanation, and reflection. We ask our narrators questions, and they often answer in the form of stories. Of course, this has been going on for centuries, but respect for narratives as research data has waxed and waned. It waxed in the 1920s up through World War II. It waned in the years after the war up to the late 1960s.⁴² Even in 1975 when psychologist William Runyan began to study life histories, he said, "A number of people reacted to these efforts at understanding life histories with responses ranging from indifference to contempt."⁴³ Only in the last thirty years has narrative as a research method become respected again by academicians. Psychologists Amia Lieblich, Rivka Tuval-Mashiach, and Tamar Zilber, in their book *Narrative Research: Reading, Analysis, and Interpretation*, describe what they see happening: "In the fields of psychology, gender studies, education, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, law, and history, narrative studies are flourishing as a means of understanding the personal identity, lifestyle, culture and historical world of the narrator."⁴⁴

Why has this change of attitude come about? Qualitative researchers question positivistic approaches, that is, quantification of data with objectivity and certainty about results as the goal. They seek other means of learning about humans, including narratives.⁴⁵ Also, a current influence that affects acceptance of narrative research is the postmodernist view that observations of human actions are shifting, never conclusive, always the product of the culture in which they are embedded. Literary critic Robert Fulford explains why narrative is for postmodernists a deceptive practice: "The world is not a place of beginnings and endings and middles, a place of coherence—and when narrative arranges the world in that way in order to tell a story and reach out to an audience, narrative lies."⁴⁶ Actually, when we use stories to make sense of experience, and when we designate a beginning, middle, and end to an experience, that is true for us—there is no lie. In *Storied Lives*, the editors introduce their overall subject, narrative, by declaring that "coherence derives from the tacit assumptions of plausibility that shape the way each story maker weaves the fragmentary episodes of experience into history."⁴⁷ On the other hand, the postmodernist assumption that truth is not necessarily to be found in authoritative texts leads us to respect the individual account and to give serious consideration to how the individual sees her life story.

We can reflect on how we react to a life narrative and interpret it. This kind of endeavor is arresting. Linguistics scholar Harold Rosen recalls the power of telling stories about oneself and of listening to stories: "I know of someone who wrote about her childhood, setting out to recount the games

and inventive pastimes which seemed to her both inexhaustible and full of meaning. At the end of it she said thoughtfully, ‘It’s about a lonely childhood.’ Thus in the art of articulating autobiography we do not simply unmask ourselves for others, we too await to know the face under the mask.”⁴⁸

But even before the narrative form of research became acceptable, many oral historians and humanist psychologists and sociologists sought in the individual life story a specificity and a richness of experience that general accounts did not offer. Anthropologist Ruth Behar says that life histories give us the information that general studies, supposed to be typical accounts, obscure: “Rather than looking at social and cultural systems solely as they impinge on a life, shape it, and turn it into an object, a life history should allow one to see how an actor makes culturally meaningful history, how history is produced in action and in the actor’s retrospective reflections on that action.”⁴⁹

Even if scholars in the past regarded work based on narrative as simple, many believe now that narratives are not simple and they are not innocent either because there is always an agenda. Bruner asks, “Why do we naturally portray ourselves through story, so naturally indeed that selfhood itself seems like a product of our own story making?”⁵⁰ He argues that narrative expresses our deepest reasonings about ourselves and our experience. Rosen suggests that we pay attention to personal accounts “because (1) the power of narrative in general corresponds to a way of thinking and imagining, (2) it speaks with the voice of ‘commonsense,’ (3) it invites us to consider not only the results of understanding but to live through the processes of reaching it, (4) it never tears asunder ideas and feelings; it moves us by permitting us to enter the living space of another: it is perceived as testimony, (5) it specifically provides for the complicit engagement of the listener.”⁵¹

Narrative as a research tool is used by practitioners in many disciplines. Medical anthropologist Cheryl Mattingly, in her research concerning the use of narratives by occupational therapists, found that when they encouraged the patient to tell her or his life story, the patient could make sense of what was happening and fit the experience into a model, so that the story became part of a healing ritual.⁵² Psychologist Carole Cain wanted to know how alcoholics change their self-identity so that they can begin to see themselves as nondrinkers, and so she studied storytelling among members of Alcoholics Anonymous.⁵³ Sociologist Ruth Finnegan studied life stories of people living in a British city to learn the multiplicity of experiences that could not be subsumed within the kind of general story such as academics tell. She wanted to gain an understanding of how “stories in practice interact in urban contexts” and express “our visions of urban life.”⁵⁴ Historian Virginia

Yans-McLaughlin interviewed Italian and Jewish immigrants in New York City to find the stories that illustrate how culture (both ethnic and family) influences individuals’ interpretations of experience.⁵⁵ Historian Lu Ann Jones interviewed farm women and men in the South in the twentieth century to understand “broad economic and social changes in personal terms,” the “interplay between structural changes and family and community life.”⁵⁶ Former English professor, now Catholic Worker, Rosalie Riegle sought stories from people who had known Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, to understand Day’s impact on the people she worked with and to assess her legacy.⁵⁷ Of course, I have scratched only the surface with these few examples—a lode of gold awaits us.

We, as oral historians, treat the narrative we record as a highly complex document. Sociologist Catherine Riessman advises that narratives are “essential meaning-making structures,” and therefore researchers must not break them up but “respect respondents’ ways of constructing meaning and analyze how it is accomplished.”⁵⁸ You will find more information on analysis and interpretation of narratives later in this book.

Limitations of the Recorded Life Review

Narrative is a strength of oral history, but consider also the limitations of the life review and how to use these limitations. Trevor Lummis, in *Listening to History*, rightly says that oral history testimony can give us a detailed account of wages paid in a factory to a specific level of worker but may be “silent on the question of profits.” We can learn in the interview what families spent their money on, but not how profits were invested internationally. Lummis expresses this limitation concisely: “Given that so many dimensions of economic life occur at the level of institutional, national and international finance and of technology it is not surprising that those aspects are not recorded in most oral accounts.”⁵⁹

The use of life reviews may result in a picture that is narrow, idiosyncratic, or ethnocentric. Studs Terkel’s book *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* presents more than 150 testimonies of what it was like to live during the Depression years of 1929 and the 1930s.⁶⁰ The informants talked about how they survived during the Depression, rather than about the failure of capitalism to provide the necessities of life for most of the people. As historian Michael Frisch points out, the narrators saw this as a personal experience.⁶¹

And yet there is the other side to this coin of limitations. In discussing the personal views presented in *Hard Times*, Frisch reminds the reader that taken

together, the life histories reveal an important assumption in American culture: an individual can survive through hard work and ingenuity, no matter how bad the situation. He points out the advantage of learning individuals' reflections on their personal experience of history: "Anyone who has wondered why the depression crises did not produce more focused critiques of American capitalism and culture, more sustained efforts to see fundamental structural change, will find more evidence in the interior of these testimonies than in any other source I know."⁶²

The in-depth interview is not necessarily idiosyncratic. In his article "What Is Social in Oral History?" Samuel Schrager points out that often there are references to the larger community and to national and international events, that the testimony is given in relationship to others. He gives this excerpt from an interview with immigrant Anna Marie Oslund: "I was born in eighteen ninety-one. And in eighteen ninety-two, the end of that summer—it was a late summer—my father went to America to find a better life for all of us. It was hard all over and he thought he'd try, he'd come."⁶³

The narrator indicates she will offer two points of view, her own and her father's. She also refers to conditions being "hard all over" and articulates the reality of the wider society. She relates the story as she has been told it. And this is a family story, one that embodies a view of the past that sustains and guides the family in the present. It is assumed that it is in general terms like that of other families immigrating from the same place at roughly the same time. Schrager sums up the use to which this personal narrative can be put: "A migration story can be a very personal account and at the same time an incarnation of the peopling of an era, the exigencies of pioneering, and the aspirations of all who risk relocating to find a better life."⁶⁴ So the individual testimony may indeed contain references to the larger group and articulate a shared reality.

And it is possible by using the approach of grounded theory—the examination of a large sample of recorded life histories, the multiplicity of incidents that makes "thick description" possible—to make generalizations about a society. Paul Thompson and Thea Vigne did exactly this in their study of British society at the turn of the twentieth century: their project resulted in the recorded life histories of more than 900 narrators who represented contemporary occupational categories.⁶⁵ They used these interviews inductively to arrive at an understanding of several important aspects of Edwardian society.

A second limitation—one related to the ability to generalize from the testimonies—lies in the selectivity of narrators: it is the articulate who come forward to be participants. In interviewing clerical workers for a project in

Rhode Island, my fellow researchers and I found that our narrators were feisty, articulate, witty, sociable women. They had volunteered to talk.⁶⁶ Would we have gotten a different picture if those who were not enthusiastic had been represented in the collection of taped life reviews? We went on the assumption that the articulate spoke for the others, but I wish I had been more assiduous in seeking out the nonvolunteers and more persuasive when I found them. Probably, most interviewing projects are selective in that the shy or inarticulate individual—or the person valuing privacy—does not come forward.

Furthermore, as a historian interviewing the generation of mill workers who began work as children in a new North Carolina cotton mill at the beginning of the twentieth century, I only heard about those who had died. My sample was biased in the direction of the healthiest simply because they were the ones who survived. If this had been a study of safety conditions (they were nonexistent) in the mill, this selectivity of narrators would have seriously limited interviewing evidence and biased the conclusion.

A third limitation is the fact that the in-depth life review presents retrospective evidence. But before I discuss this problem, consider the questions always asked of a written document no matter how much time has elapsed: What motive does the witness have for writing this? For whom is this document intended? How close was this witness to the event itself? How informed is this witness about the event observed? What prior assumptions did the witness bring to the observation? What kinds of details have been omitted?

These are questions to be asked of any primary source, including an oral history. Traditionally trained historians see the oral history document as especially faulty because, in addition to the above questions, there is the question of how much the narrator slanted the story to make it interesting or at least acceptable to the interviewer. This is a valid question to ask. But slanting the story to make it acceptable to the receiver occurs even with the diary writer: even here the individual who writes only for him- or herself tries to protect the ego. People who write their accounts without an interviewer often make themselves heroes of the stories, justifying their actions to themselves, as they reflect on their experiences. Motivation for describing oneself in the best light is always there, no matter what the form of expression. The minute taker at a board meeting writes with a future reader in mind. The journalist's account for the morning paper is slanted to appeal to imagined readers. And letter writers always have in mind their correspondents' interests.

On the other hand, like other interviewers, I have found that people tend with the passage of time to be more, rather than less, candid. When a career is in progress, there is much to lose by an untoward admission. Near the end

of a life, there is a need to look at things as honestly as possible to make sense of experiences over a lifetime: this need to understand what happened strongly competes with the need to make oneself look good.

As for deliberate omissions, this is as likely to happen with official documents such as government press releases or personal documents, letters, for example, as with oral histories. Perhaps the omissions are less likely with oral histories if the interviewer keeps probing.

And now to the issue of retrospective evidence. This is especially problematic for historians, who are the most concerned about the past and who evaluate the reliability of evidence according to the amount of time that elapses between the event and its written description. A journal entry on the day the event occurred is considered more reliable than the event remembered twenty years later and recounted in a memoir. Actually, research indicates that people forget more about a specific event in the first hour after it happens than during any other time and that much forgetting continues to go on nine hours afterward; in other words, more is forgotten the first day than in the succeeding weeks, months, and years.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, although much has been forgotten a couple of hours later when the diarist writes, some more has been forgotten after twenty years. All of us who have used the in-depth interview in research realize that ability to recall depends on the individual's health, on the topic under consideration, on the way the question is asked, on the degree of pain (or pleasure) required to dredge the topic up, and on the willingness of the narrator to participate in the interview in a helpful way. We notice that memories of childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood may be more easily recalled than those from middle and late years. Memory researchers have found that if the event or situation was significant to the individual, it will likely be remembered in some detail, especially if its associated feelings were intense. However, the narrator's interpretation may reflect current circumstances and needs. That old cliché about memory playing tricks has some truth to it. The next chapter is focused on an exploration of studies on memory relevant to oral history research.

Given the situation that human memory is selective and sometimes faulty in what is remembered, two aspects of the critical approach to the oral history are involved here: consistency in the testimony (or reliability) and accuracy in relating factual information (or validity). Consistency within the testimony can be easily checked, and questions about inconsistency pursued. Accuracy (the degree of conformity with other accounts) can be checked by consulting other sources and comparing accounts.⁶⁸

After subjecting the oral history to such scrutiny, we may see that it does indeed offer information about an event that is consistent within the docu-

ment and with other accounts. In other words, social scientists recognize that some "facts" have a shared reality with multiple means of verifying their facticity, no matter their interpretative frame.⁶⁹ And everyone views some facts as more reliable than others, and so a degree of acceptance is occurring, dependent on the means of verifying.

By accumulating sources of information and comparing them, we can arrive at an approximate understanding of what happened or is happening and hold this information with some certainty. But there is never absolute certainty about any event, about any fact, no matter what sources are used. No single source or combination of them can ever give a picture of the total complexity of the reality. We cannot reconstruct a past event, no matter how recent, in its entirety.

Another consideration is that the interpretation of the evidence depends on the interpreter. If we place kinds of evidence on a continuum, starting with the least mediation and ending with the most, such artifacts as vases, ditches in the land, tombs, and so on have had the least "mediation." A personal account has the most. A vase is what the researcher makes of it: a human being's past experience is what he or she makes of it before the researcher begins to interpret it.

We can, however, base a tentative conclusion on what the critical review of the evidence indicates. R. G. Collingwood describes this process: "For historical thinking means nothing else than interpreting all the available evidence with the maximum degree of critical skill."⁷⁰ This implies there is always the possibility that new evidence may appear, that new skills may be developed. Although Collingwood was referring to historical research, interpreting the available evidence with critical skill is applicable to any research that social scientists carry out.

And yet, is it not the meaning attributed to the facts that makes them significant or not? After all, history—or society—does not exist outside human consciousness. History is what the people who lived it make of it and what the others who observe the participants or listen to them or study their records make of it. And present society is what we make of it. Sociologist W. I. Thomas discusses "definition of the situation," arguing, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences."⁷¹

Special Strengths of Oral History

So, what if the narrator is dead wrong about a number, a date, or an event? The factual information may be incorrect, but look more closely at the document to discover what significance the discrepancy may reveal. Oral historian

Alessandro Portelli reminds us that “untrue” statements are psychologically “true” and that errors in fact may be more revealing than factually accurate accounts. He insists that the “importance of oral testimony may often lie not in its adherence to facts but rather in its divergence from them, where imagination, symbolism, desire break in.”⁷²

To illustrate this, Portelli shows how narrators might get dates incorrect but hold steadfastly to an account of a historical event that fits their view of history. For example, over half of the workers interviewed in the industrial town of Terni, in telling the story of their postwar strikes, place the killing of a worker by the police in 1953 rather than, as it really happened, in 1949; they also shift it from one context to another (from a peace demonstration to the urban guerrilla struggle that followed mass layoffs at the local steelworks). This testimony is useful even though incorrect about the actual chronology and context. These factual matters, as well as dates, are easy to check. But discrepancy forces us to rearrange our interpretation of events in order to recognize the collective processes of symbolization and mythmaking in the Terni working class—which sees those years as one uninterrupted struggle expressed by a unifying symbol (the dead comrade), rather than as a succession of separate events.⁷³

Portelli asked the question, Why is there discrepancy between dates recorded elsewhere and dates given in the oral histories? The researcher can use this discrepancy to learn something important by asking about the narrator’s self-serving account: How does he construct this view? Where do his concepts come from? Why does he build this persona and not another? What are the consequences for this individual?

Closely related to this symbolization is the use of oral history to discover habitual thinking (often below the level of conscious thinking), which comes from the evolving culture in which individuals live. Although the term *culture* has differing shades of meaning according to its interpreter, most students of human society would accept the definition given by Charles Stephenson that culture is “a reality of shared values, common patterns of thought, behavior, and association.”⁷⁴ Ethnographer Clifford Geertz says: “Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs.”⁷⁵

French historian Jacques Le Goff explains the concept this way: “Automatic gestures, spontaneous words, which seem to lack any origins and to be the fruits of improvisation and reflex, in fact possess deep roots in the long reverberation of systems of thought.”⁷⁶ The example he gives is from medieval history but is definitely applicable to the work of the scholar engaged

in the search for an understanding of contemporary society. Pope Gregory the Great, in his *Dialogues* (written between 590 and 600), recounts the story of a monk who, on his deathbed, confessed to have kept for himself three gold coins. Keeping material possessions to oneself was against the rules of the order. Pope Gregory refused to let the man have the last rites, insisted on neglect of the dying man, and after the culprit’s death, punished him still again by having his body thrown on the garbage heap. His stated reason was that he wanted to show other monks they must adhere to the order’s rules, but this was definitely a negation of Christian ideology, which would have been to forgive. Le Goff concludes, “The barbarian custom of physical punishment (brought by the Goths or a throwback to some psychic depths?) proves stronger than the monastic rule.”⁷⁷

In the recounting of events, the deeper layers of our thinking may be revealed, indicating the centuries-long development of the culture in which we have our being. For this, oral history testimony is a research method par excellence. We cannot drag Pope Gregory from his tomb, prop him up, and ask, “What were you saying to yourself when you threw that monk in the garbage?” But we surely can ask a living witness.

Summary

Oral history is inevitably subjective: its subjectivity is at once inescapable and crucial to an understanding of the meanings we give our past and present. To reveal the meanings of lived experience is the great task of qualitative research and specifically oral history interviews. The in-depth interview offers the benefit of seeing in its full complexity the world of another. And in collating in-depth interviews and using the insights to be gained from them as well as different kinds of information from other kinds of records, we can come to some understanding of the process by which we got to be the way we are.

Recommended Reading

HEADS UP: Each chapter has a list of recommended readings, but be aware that these lists are incomplete. It would be impossible to list all of the good works on oral history, this rich field, without turning this book into a long bibliography. You will find in each recommended article or book leads to still other sources. The few lines accompanying each entry can give you a hint about the work but never do it justice.

Discussions on Research Methods

Denzin, Norman K. *Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997. See especially chapter 9, "The Sixth Moment," pp. 250–89, in which Denzin discusses postmodernism's influence on views of the researcher-researched relationship.

—. *The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989. This book presents a discussion of qualitative methods that is focused on participant observation; there is information useful not only to the interviewer in the field of sociology but in other fields as well. You might also want to consult Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *Landscape of Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003) and Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *Turning Points in Qualitative Research* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2003).

Douglas, Jack D. *Investigative Social Research*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1976. This is a general guide to fieldwork research; it presents a comparison of quantitative and qualitative methods in the introduction. Although it is not focused exclusively on the in-depth interview, it offers discussion on such concerns as self-deception and biases.

Glaser, Barney, and Anselm Strauss. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1967. This is the original source for discussions about grounded theory. An early statement can be found in their article "The Discovery of Substantive Theory: A Basic Strategy Underlying Qualitative Research," *American Behavioral Scientist* 8, no. 6 (February 1965): 5–12.

Jensen, Richard. "Oral History, Quantification and the New Social History." *Oral History Review* 9 (1981): 13–25. The author states that the use of a questionnaire offers the advantage of providing systematic answers to identical questions, but it gives up the richness of narrative detail offered by the in-depth interview.

Merriam, Sharan B. *Case Study Research in Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998. A lucid treatise, slanted toward scholars in education but containing information on using the in-depth interview applicable to other disciplines.

Price, Richard. *Ethnographic History, Caribbean Pasts*. Working Papers no. 9, Department of Spanish and Portuguese, University of Maryland, College Park, 1990. Insightful brief essay—and witty.

Sharpless, Rebecca. "The Numbers Game: Oral History Compared with Quantitative Methodology." *International Journal of Oral History* 7, no. 2 (June 1986): 93–108. The author suggests ways in which oral history and a testing instrument for quantification can be used together, and she compares intrusion of the interviewer in both methods.

General Works on Oral History

Allen, Barbara, and W. Lynwood Montell. *From Memory to History: Using Oral Sources in Local Historical Research*. Nashville, TN: American Association for State

and Local History, 1981. See this book for discussions of the combined use of history and folklore and for the evaluation of an oral history.

Dunaway, David K., and Willa K. Baum, eds. *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 1996. This collection of articles from journals covers many aspects of oral history research; each article provides a quick overview of specific topics and an accompanying bibliography.

Friedlander, Peter. Introduction to *The Emergence of a UAW Local, 1936–1939: A Study in Class and Culture*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973. The author discusses the ways that narrators construct the narrative and, therefore, a view of history. The essay offers a convincing example of the benefits of repeated in-depth interviews with the same narrator.

Grelle, Ronald, ed. *Envelopes of Sound: Six Practitioners Discuss the Method, Theory and Practice of Oral History and Oral Testimony*. 2nd ed. Chicago: Precedent Publishing, 1992. These articles contain numerous insights, such as why stories are revealing, how attitude affects memory, and how oral history affects the interviewer.

Henige, David. *Oral Historiography*. London: Longman, 1982. This is an especially helpful guide for researchers going into field research in non-Western cultures.

Lummis, Trevor. *Listening to History: The Authenticity of Oral Evidence*. London: Hutchinson, 1987. See especially the chapters on assessing interviews and on memory and theory.

Perks, Robert, and Alistair Thompson, eds. *The Oral History Reader*. London: Routledge, 1998. Collection of outstanding articles under these headings: "Critical Developments," "Interviewing," "Advocacy and Empowerment," "Interpreting Memories," and "Making Histories."

Portelli, Alessandro. *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991. This is a collection of journal articles (several of which I have mentioned singly) that have helped to define the purposes of oral history.

Thompson, Paul. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. This is an insightful account of the uses of oral history by a veteran interviewer.

Oral History and Folklore

Davis, Susan G. "Review Essay: Storytelling Rights." *Oral History Review* 16, no. 2 (Fall 1988): 109–15. This article briefly discusses how oral history and folklore are different but can be used together.

Dorson, Richard. "The Oral Historian and the Folklorist." In *Selections of the Fifth and Sixth National Colloquia on Oral History*. New York: Oral History Association, 1972. This is a treatment of folklore's distinguishing characteristics and its differences from oral history. See also his book *American Folklore and the Historian* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

Ives, Edward D. *The Tape-Recorded Interview: A Manual for Fieldworkers in Folklore and Oral History*. 2nd ed. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995. A classic

study, now updated, with useful information delivered with a sense of humor. Ives talks about other subjects as well as oral history, such as recording music, using photographs, and carrying out interviews with groups.

Montell, William Lynwood. *The Saga of Coe Ridge: A Study in Oral History*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1970. See the preface for a discussion of the ways that historians can use folklore. Montell argues that a folk tradition is itself a historical fact.

Schneider, William. *So They Understand: Cultural Issues in Oral History*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2002. Schneider, an anthropologist and folklorist, divides his book into three main parts: "How Stories Work," "Types of Stories," and "Issues Raised by Stories." Chapter 4, "Sorting Out Oral Tradition and Oral History," pp. 53–66, gives a folklorist's point of view. He raises important questions about the way oral history is used in chapter 8, "Life Histories: The Constructed Genre," pp. 109–21.

Works on the Interviewer–Narrator Relationship and Subjectivity in Research

Anderson, Kathryn, Susan Armitage, Dana Jack, and Judith Wittner. "Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History." *Oral History Review* 15 (Spring 1987): 103–27. This is a discussion by a psychologist, sociologist, and two historians about the influence of "particular and limited interests, perspectives, and experience of white males" on research.

Cottle, Thomas. "The Life Study: On Mutual Recognition and the Subjective Inquiry." *Urban Life and Culture* 2, no. 3 (October 1973): 344–60. The author reflects on the "new selves" of researchers emerging because of the research.

Daniels, Arlene. "Self-Deception and Self-Discovery in Field Work." *Qualitative Sociology* 6, no. 3 (1983): 195–214. This is a candid, searching account of the author's behavior as an interviewer.

Gluck, Sherna Berger, and Daphne Patai. *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*. New York: Routledge, 1991. This collection of articles discusses listening, using words, relating to narrators, looking critically at one's work, and interviewing Third World women.

Kleinman, Sherryl. "Field-Workers' Feelings: What We Feel, Who We Are, How We Analyze." In *Experiencing Fieldwork: An Inside View of Qualitative Research*, ed. William B. Shaffir and Robert A. Stebbins. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1991. This is a sociologist's exploration of how the field researcher's feelings affect a study and how failure to recognize feelings affects a study.

Lebeaux, Richard. "Thoreau's Lives, Lebeaux's Lives." In *Introspection in Biography: The Biographer's Quest for Self-Awareness*, ed. Samuel H. Baron and Carl Pletsch. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press, 1985. The entire collection is interesting in the questions it raises about the effects on the researcher of studying an individual life.

Patai, Daphne. *Brazilian Women Speak*. Rutgers, NJ: State University Press, 1988. In her discussion of methodology, the author explores her feelings about research

among women in Brazil, pointing out how her intervention affected both researcher and the researched.

Yow, Valerie R. "Do I Like Them Too Much? Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa." *Oral History Review* 24, no. 1 (Summer 1997): 55–79. This article traces changes in the social sciences regarding the recognition and use of subjectivity in research.

Studies on the Philosophy of History and on Ethnography

Clifford, James. "Introduction: Partial Truths." In *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George Marcus, 1–26. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986. This is a perceptive and influential essay on the "webs" of culture.

Collingwood, R. G. *Autobiography*. London: Oxford University Press, 1939. This uncommon autobiography presents the intellectual journey taken by an important theorist of historical research.

_____. *Essays in the Philosophy of History*. Ed. William Debbins. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965. See especially "The Limits of Historical Knowledge" and "The Philosophy of History."

Geertz, Clifford. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture." In *The Interpretation of Culture*, 3–30. New York: Basic Books, 1973. This is an early, provocative discussion of the use of "thick description" in researching a culture.

Hay, Cynthia. "What Is Sociological History?" In *Interpreting the Past, Understanding the Present*, ed. Stephen Kendrick and Pat Straw, 20–37. New York: St. Martin's, 1990. Hay presents a brief essay on the relationship of history to the social sciences of sociology and anthropology.

Le Goff, Jacques, and Pierre Nora. *Constructing the Past: Essays in Historical Methodology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. See especially the chapter "Mentalities: A History of Ambiguities" by Le Goff.

Rosaldo, Renato. *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989. In this provocative study of ethnographic research, the author discusses his own fieldwork to illustrate the importance of acknowledging and using one's own feelings and assumptions in the process of researching and analyzing.

Studies on the Use of Narrative in Research

Finnegan, Ruth. *Tales of the City: A Study of Narrative and Urban Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. See especially the first chapter for an illuminating definition of story. In subsequent chapters, the author presents oral histories and analyzes them. She shows the way narrative heightens "our understanding not only of urban theory but of our own lives and culture" (p. 3).

Fulford, Robert. *The Triumph of Narrative: Storytelling in the Age of Mass Culture*. New York: Broadway Books, 2000. Fulford, described as a "cultural journalist," sets out to critique master narratives like Toynbee's, works that feature the "unreliable

narrator," model literary narratives like those of Sir Walter Scott, and news programs and films as takeoffs of the narratives of Western culture.

Josselson, Ruthellen, and Amia Lieblich. "Fettering the Mind in the Name of Science." *American Psychologist* 51, no. 6 (1996): 651–52. Authors argue that psychology is between paradigms as logical, positivistic research gives way to narrative-based psychology.

—, eds. *The Narrative Study of Lives*. Vol. 5. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997. The variety of articles attests to the range of uses of narrative in research.

Mattingly, Cheryl. *Healing Dramas and Clinical Plots: The Narrative Structure of Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. This is a beautifully written account of Mattingly's ethnographic research among occupational therapists in a large Boston hospital, but the discussion of narrative gives it universal application. Mattingly's theme is this: "The need to narrate the strange experience of illness is part of the very human need to be understood by others, to be in communication even if from the margins" (p. 1).

Montalbano-Phelps, Lori L. *Taking Narrative Risk: The Empowerment of Abuse Survivors*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004. With these narratives of abuse survivors, the author assesses the relationship between narration and the empowerment of the narrator.

Peacock, James, and Dorothy Holland. "The Narrative Self: Life Stories in Process." *Ethos* 21 (1993): 367–83. This review article treats various approaches to using life histories, stressing the importance of narratives as conveying the dynamic, rather than static, view of a life. The authors critique ways to interpret the life history, arguing that each discipline's approach is limited and that a more creative, interdisciplinary approach is needed.

Watson, Lawrence, and Maria-Barbara Watson-Franke. *Interpreting Life Histories: An Anthropological Inquiry*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1985. An informative, thought-provoking book, now a classic. Read chapter 1 for a historical survey of the use of life history research by anthropologists.

Journals Devoted to Oral History

Historia antropología y fuentes orales. Universitat de Barcelona. Ed. Mercedes Vilanova I. Ribas. Access information about this journal on the web at www.hayfo.com/credits.html.

Oral History Association of Australia Journal. Published by the State Library of New South Wales, Sydney. One issue per year.

Oral History Forum. (Previously the *Canadian Oral History Forum/Journal*.) Published with assistance from Brescia University College of London, Ontario. One issue per year.

Oral History: Journal of the Oral History Society. University of Essex. Two issues per year.

Oral History Review. Published by the Oral History Association. Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA. Two issues per year.

And major journals that have sections devoted to oral history:

Journal of American History. Four issues annually; see September issue for oral history section.

Radical History Review. Published three times a year by the Tantement Library, New York University, and printed by the Duke University Press. Oral history section in each issue.

Bibliographies of Publications in Oral History and Oral History Collections

Cook, Pat, ed. *Oral History Guide: Bibliographic Listing of the Memoirs in the Micropublished Collections*. Sanford, NC: New York Times Oral History Program and Microfilm Corporation of America, 1983. See the review by Ronald J. Grele, "On Using Oral History Collections: An Introduction," *Journal of American History* 74 (September 1987): 570–78.

Havlice, Patricia Pate, ed. *Oral History: A Reference Guide and Annotated Bibliography*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishing Company, 1985. This volume includes books, articles, and dissertations on oral history published from 1950 to late 1983. Annotations give brief summaries of content; entries are arranged alphabetically by author.

Meckler, Alan M., and Ruth McMullins, eds. *Oral History Collections*. New York: R. R. Bowker Company, 1975. Find by name and subject. Detailed information in each entry.

National Catalog of Manuscript Collections. United States government publication, last published in 1993. Citations give you the number that will enable you to locate each description. For example, looking at "oral history" in the index, you see 91-365, which sends you to volume 1991, entry number 365, "Eleanor Roosevelt oral history transcriptions."

Oral History Index: An International Directory of Oral History Interviews. Westport, CT: Meckler Publishing Company, 1990. The first section lists in alphabetical order the narrator's name and supplies a code for locating the tapes. The second section lists the codes and directs you to the oral history's location. This can only be a partial listing because many of the oral history archives queried did not reply. (This company has been sold, and a succeeding volume is unlikely to appear in this form.)

Perks, Robert. *Oral History: An Annotated Bibliography*. London: British Library National Sound Archives, 1990. Author does well with a task made difficult by the immense amount of sources. He focuses on Great Britain and includes both published works and references to archives containing interviews.

Smith, Allan, ed. *Directory of Oral History Collections*. Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1988. More a directory of institutions that hold oral history collections than a directory of individual collections, according to the review by William Moss in the *Oral History Review*, Fall 1988, pp. 173–74.

Please note: None of these can be inclusive because many collections are not reported to these editors. However, continue to search, seeking, for example, regional directories like *Oral History Collections in the Southwest Region: A Directory and Subject*

Guide, edited by Cathryn A. Gallacher (Los Angeles: Southwest Oral History Association, 1986).

Internet Resources

Indexes and Directories

Oral History Directory. Internet resource offered by Alexander Street Press at wwwalexanderstreet2.com/oralhist/. Free resource that gives details of approximately 570 oral history collections in English.

Oral History Online. Internet resource offered by Alexander Street Press at wwwalexanderstreet.com/products/orhi.htm. The press claims to index all important oral history collections in English available on the web or in archives. Fee required to access.

Oral History List Service. www.h-net.org/~oralhist. Free, nontechnical, user friendly. See especially for discussions of current issues and bibliography. See discussion log for past discussions.

Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN). See RLG Union Catalog, Recordings. This is an international, not-for-profit organization that serves libraries, archives, and museums. It shows location of collections of oral histories. There is a hefty fee for membership—it is not intended for individuals—so use this source in one of these institutions.

Notes

1. Judith Stacey, "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?" in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, ed. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, 111–19 (New York: Routledge, 1991); see p. 115.

2. I am indebted to Jane Adams for dialogue with me on this subject; Jane Adams, communication to author, June 22, 1993. And I draw from Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 19–21, 50.

3. Phrase which Michael Frisch uses and which sums up the underlying theme in Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

4. Louis Starr, "Oral History," in *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, ed. David Dunaway and Willa K. Baum, 3–26 (Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1996); see pp. 10–12.

5. Starr, "Oral History."

6. Charles Morrissey, "Why Call It Oral History? Searching for Early Usage of a Generic Term," *Oral History Review* 8 (1980): 20–48; see p. 35.

7. Morrissey, "Why Call It Oral History?" 35.

8. James Bennett, "Human Values in Oral History," *Oral History Review* 11 (1983): 1–15; see p. 14.

9. Sharan Merriam, *Case Study Research in Education: A Qualitative Approach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988), 6–7.
10. Merriam, *Case Study Research in Education*, 16.
11. Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 6.
12. Trevor Lummis, *Listening to History: The Authenticity of Oral Evidence* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), 75.
13. Arlene Daniels, "Self-Deception and Self-Discovery in Field Work," *Qualitative Sociology* 6, no. 3 (1983): 195–214; see p. 197.
14. Mary Maynard, "Methods, Practice and Epistemology: The Debate about Feminism and Research," in *Researching Women's Lives from a Feminist Perspective*, ed. Mary Maynard and June Purvis, 10–26 (London: Taylor and Francis, 1994); see p. 13.
15. Jack D. Douglas, *Investigative Social Research* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1976), 25.
16. Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, "The Discovery of Substantive Theory: A Basic Strategy Underlying Qualitative Research," *American Behavioral Scientist* 8, no. 6 (February 1965): 5–12.
17. Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Culture*, 3–30 (New York: Basic Books, 1973); see also a later discussion in this book, pp. 203–5.
18. Fern Ingersoll and Jasper Ingersoll, "Both a Borrower and a Lender Be: Ethnography, Oral History, and Grounded Theory," *Oral History Review* 15 (Spring 1987): 81–102; see p. 83.
19. Leonard Schatzman and Anselm L. Strauss, *Field Research: Strategies for a Natural Sociology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 19.
20. Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth*, 7.
21. R. G. Collingwood, "The Philosophy of History," in *Essays in the Philosophy of History*, ed. William Debbins, 121–39 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985); see p. 137.
22. See, for example, Dennis Smith, "Social History and Sociology—More Than Just Good Friends," *Sociological Review* 30, no. 2 (1982): 286–308.
23. Lummis, *Listening to History*, 43.
24. Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Patient Care: A History of Butler Hospital* (Providence, RI: Butler Hospital, 1994); see chapter 2, "A New Kind of Hospital."
25. Bill Williams, "The Jewish Immigrant in Manchester: The Contribution of Oral History," *Oral History* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 43.
26. Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 4.
27. Paraphrase of Lummis, *Listening to History*, 150.
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CHAPTER TWO



Oral History and Memory

For oral historians, memory is a vital concern. As in-depth interviewers, we provide an opportunity for the narrator to remember, to convey details, to provide explanation, and to reflect, because we listen. Of course, not all memories are positive; negative memories are also recalled and puzzled over, grieved over. Researcher Daniel Schacter remarks, "It has been observed that the act of remembering sad episodes can bring people to tears within moments, and remembering happy incidents can induce an almost immediate sense of elation. Why does memory have such power in our lives?"¹

Remembering, an Important Act for the Narrator

It is clear now that we construct narratives from our memories. Even children as young as preschool age make stories of their experiences.² We use such stories not only to make sense of our experiences, but also to justify decisions, to profit from past experience in making current decisions about present and future, and to reassure ourselves that we have come through life's challenges and have learned something.

Psychologist David Rubin found that people begin reminiscing in their forties, but that from age fifty on this is an important and continuing endeavor. His research indicates that from middle age on, most people have more memories from childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood than from the most recent years of their lives. Why do these memories come back to us? He theorizes that they are especially important because they define us.³

3. Charles T. Morrissey, "The Two-Sentence Format as an Interviewing Technique in Oral History Fieldwork," *The Oral History Review* 15 (Spring 1987): 43-53.

The Two-Sentence Format as an Interviewing Technique in Oral History Fieldwork

CHARLES T. MORRISSEY

At Lake Arrowhead in 1966 I cast bread upon the waters.

To posture as a messiah was an easy task during that First National Colloquium on Oral History. At that meeting we were all neophytes, even the most experienced and evangelical among us. Before September of 1966 the published literature about oral history was paltry, and equally modest was the number of scholarly and professional panels held at historical and archival meetings about doing oral history. The Arrowhead gospel according to

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Morrissey was a didactic litany of dos and don'ts about interviewing techniques, preached at the request of UCLA's James V. Mink as part of the scheduled proceedings, and drawn from what I had learned since 1962 from conducting tape-recorded interviews for the Harry S. Truman Library and the John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Projects. Twenty years ago the injunctions seemed fresh; in 1986 these strictures are stale. Today the bread is mostly soggy.

Mostly soggy—but not completely.

As preparation for composing this essay in commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the Arrowhead Colloquium, I read anew the transcribed talk I made at that mountain-top hideaway in the San Bernardino Mountains of southern California.¹ My sermonizing in 1966 emphasized pointers that have since become familiar among oral history interviewers—phrase questions in open-ended language, avoid jargon, pursue in detail, ask for examples, defer sensitive questions until rapport is solid, let the interviewee set the pace of the interview and speak whatever explanations are foremost in the volunteered version of what occurred. These and similar tenets are humdrum dogma in 1986. But to my surprise I discovered—rediscovered, actually—that at Lake Arrowhead I had advocated the virtues of the two-sentence format. Frankly, I had forgotten that at Arrowhead I had even mentioned the two-sentence format for structuring questions; all I can conclude is that prophetic bread always drifts shoreward.

In the past twenty years the virtues of the two-sentence format have proven themselves repeatedly in my oral history interviewing. Now I find myself thinking almost automatically in a two-sentence sequence when formulating questions during fieldwork. Other oral historians may find this technique is equally helpful in their interviewing.

Most useful about the two-sentence format is the way it continually affirms essential elements in the relationship between interviewer and interviewee as co-creators of an oral history

¹Charles T. Morrissey, "On Oral History Interviewing," in *Elite and Specialized Interviewing*, ed. Lewis A. Dexter (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 109–12, as reprinted from *Oral History at Arrowhead: Proceedings of the First National Colloquium on Oral History*, ed. Elizabeth L. Dixon and James V. Mink (Los Angeles: Oral History Association, 1967), 68–77.

document—the questions and answers that constitute the product of this joint endeavor. Crucial for the success of any oral history interview are two basic qualities, rapport and collaboration, and the two-sentence format vitalizes each of these fundamentals. In fact, specimens of the two-sentence format are amply present in standard guides to oral history interviewing. Willa K. Baum provides this example: "I understand your grandfather came around the Horn to California. What did he tell you about the trip?"² And Cullom Davis and his two associates, Kathryn Back and Kay MacLean, offer others, among them: "Here is a program for the 1939 World's Fair. How did you get it?"³ But none of the authors of the most popular how-to-do-it manuals for oral history even mention the two-sentence format *per se* as a deliberate design for phrasing questions, and none explicate the uses of this two-part structure for formulating and verbalizing questions.

An adversary relationship might be fruitful in other types of interview situations—Mike Wallace on television's "Sixty Minutes" or a trial lawyer interrogating a witness in a courtroom trial, trying to destroy the credibility of the witness. But collegiality is effective in an oral history relationship if for no other reason than the fact that the witness in this exchange is not compelled to grant an interview. Participation is usually voluntary, and a discomfited respondent can withdraw his/her cooperation if so inclined. In modern American culture, nobody is obliged to answer a historian's questions. Reliance on the two-sentence format, accordingly, provides the interviewer with a recurring opportunity to explain, in the first sentence, why a particular question deserves an informative answer from the interviewee. Here is an example:

While we know the outcome of those talks about merging the two business firms, we don't know how this agreement was reached. Because you participated in those talks, can you explain how the merger agreement was discussed?

²Willa K. Baum, *Oral History for the Local Historical Society*, 2d ed. (Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State and Local History, 1977), 32.

³Cullom Davis, Kathryn Back, and Kay MacLean, *Oral History: From Tape to Type* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1977), 21.

Notice how the first sentence is, in effect, a mutual acknowledgment of existing historical data about the prevailing topic at hand, the merger of two business firms. Notice how the second sentence, which in the two-sentence format almost always ends with a question mark, pursues the topic by posing a "how" question on top of an answered "what" question—i.e., we know what happened but not how it happened. The next question might be phrased this way:

Knowing as we do what happened and how it happened, we need to consider why the merger happened. Would you recount the reasons why you supported the merger?

Notice how the wording in the second sentence often repeats closely the wordage in the first sentence. This is done deliberately in an effort to leave no doubt in the interviewee's mind about the question being posed. Similarly, the second sentence always asks one question and only one question, practicing the credo that respondents can deal most responsively—and unavoidably—with one question at a time. If several questions are embodied in a single sentence, the typical interviewee is likely to choose one particular question to answer, ignoring the others. Worse, the typical interviewee will often choose among alternatives in such a way as to discard the difficult or sensitive question and isolate the one easiest or most ego building to answer. All of this echoes the cogent advice of England's Paul Thompson: "[I]n principle, the clearer you are about what is worth asking and how best to ask it, the more you can draw from any kind of informant."⁴

The two-sentence format provides an interviewer with an opportunity to involve the interviewee in the co-creation of the document—the tape and/or the transcript—resulting from their interaction:

In oral history interviews, after asking a person why a decision was made, we often ask next why a different result didn't occur. During the merger discussions, did you at anytime expect a different result to occur?

⁴Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 172.

Or:

In this interview we have determined who decided what, how, and why, but we haven't yet considered when the decision was made. Because the timing is worth knowing about, would you explain when the decision was made?

The two-sentence format also allows the interviewer to explain how scholars with different academic interests can benefit from the document being co-created:

Popular folklore in Vermont claims that Tom Watson located an IBM plant in this state so he would have a ready excuse to ski nearby at Stowe. A folklorist using this interview in the future would want me to ask you about this view of Watson's decision.

Similarly:

A researcher from the School of Business Administration would like to hear you discuss this decision to locate your plant in Vermont as a case study of the process of plant location. Why did you decide where to locate your plant?

Unifying all these examples is a persistent pattern designed to achieve what two British authorities on oral history call a "right relationship" between interviewers and interviewees, a pattern in which oral historians gain the trust of their respondents while maintaining "their position as detached critics."⁵ This duality recurs frequently in the literature of oral history interviewing: James Hoopes urges interviewers to "try to develop some emotional rapport but to maintain a neutral stance towards the interviewee's ideas"; Ronald J. Grele recommends that memory-collectors "provide a sympathetic ear while maintaining critical distance."⁶ Optimally, on the front lines of oral history interrogation these

⁵Anthony Seldon and Joanna Pappworth, *By Word of Mouth: "Elite" Oral History* (London; New York: Methuen, 1983), 29.

⁶James Hoopes, *Oral History: An Introduction for Students* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 96; Ronald J. Grele, "Private Memories and Public Presentations: The Art of Oral History," in *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History*, ed. Ronald J. Grele, 2d ed. (Chicago: Precedent Publishing, 1985), 261.

linkages can be translated into practical advice: if you explain why a question is relevant and worth asking, a typical interviewee will understand why it is worth answering and accordingly contribute a more informative response. Reduced further, the advice is even more concise: explain the question before you ask it.

Most rewarding about the two-sentence format is the way it can be employed to prompt collaboration from three types of difficult interviewees: the present-minded person who wants to talk about today or tomorrow but not the past; the ahistorical person who thinks any discussion of the past is irrelevant; and the skittish person who wants to avoid sensitive questions. The first of these three difficult interviewees I label the "Fulbright Syndrome," because my interview with the longtime U.S. senator from Arkansas, J. William Fulbright, was a classic presentation of the problem. Fulbright was interviewed in his law office in Washington, D.C., after he had been defeated by the Arkansas voters in his re-election campaign and had become—by necessity, not by personal choice—ex-Senator Fulbright from Arkansas.⁷ During this interview it became painfully clear that the man was still mentally and psychologically perceiving himself to be sitting in the U.S. Senate and chairing the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. On four occasions in this interview he responded to history-focused questions by discussing current international problems as reported in the daily press in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Angola, and in the United Nations, even quoting from a copy of that morning's *Washington Post* within handy reach on his desk. On two more occasions he diverted his responses into commentaries on the passing political scene: John Connally's carping criticisms of President Jimmy Carter and Gaylord Nelson's current stature among his peers as a Wisconsin senator on Capitol Hill. From this interviewing ordeal came a two-sentence solution to problems posed by a present-minded activist who wants to discuss today's news:

There is much concern today about American policy in southeast Asia with respect to Vietnam's role in securing American military strength in that region. Going back to 1966, when you chaired the hearings of your

⁷J. William Fulbright, interview by Charles T. Morrissey, 5 March 1979, transcript, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

committee about our involvement in Vietnam, would you explain how Vietnam was perceived at that time by you in your role as committee chairman in 1966?

In other words, the two-sentence format allows the interviewer a chance to use a present-minded reference to justify the history-centered questions that the interviewee is qualified to address. One can move adeptly from present to past by structuring questions in a way that establishes relevance while focusing attention on the historical topic.

Relevance has to be reiterated with the ahistorical interviewee who is convinced that history is only so much water over the dam, water under the bridge, a bucket of ashes, or the remote province where the deceased should be allowed to bury their own dead. An oral historian has to be prepared for assaults of such similes and metaphors from activists who equate their importance in the world with being *au courant*. When one senses this frame of mind in an interviewee, the two-sentence format can be employed to meet a passion for contemporaneous concern while encouraging attention to historical issues:

A school administrator today trying to determine how much to spend for acquiring computer hardware for student users would benefit by knowing how, back in the 1950s, you confronted the similar problem of trying to determine how much to spend on television hardware for classroom use. Focusing on your choices with respect to educational television in the 1950s, how did you decide how to invest your money?

Relevance can be deftly utilized to soften the resistance of an interviewee who is apprehensive about prospective questions you both know, in unstated awareness, need to be addressed. The rule of thumb here—some of the bread cast upon the waters at Lake Arrowhead—is to anticipate what questions might be sensitive as part of your preparation before the interview and to defer those questions until the rapport underlying your interview cannot be disrupted by introducing the tough questions. But if the interviewee volunteers a reference to what you suppose to be a sensitive question, the indirect admission can be utilized for pursuing the sensitive question:

You mentioned a moment ago how political charges made against you in your successful campaign for election in 1970 were bothersome again in your re-election campaign in 1976. With respect to the 1976 campaign, how did you deal with those political charges?

Or, in order to deflect any accusatory tone or mode and reaffirm the collaborative nature of the oral history relationship, a sensitive question might be phrased in this style:

A future historian would want me to ask you how you dealt with that allegation when it was launched against you. Would you like this opportunity to inform the future historian about the problem as you dealt with it so the history of this event will benefit from your view of it?

This tendency to abstract or objectify the phrasing of questions—"A future historian consulting this interview would want me to ask you . . ."—works effectively for me in asking sensitive questions, although people with therapeutic and/or psychiatric training as interviewers of clients with emotional problems tell me they often were taught the opposite: emote with the patient when painful memories are disclosed instead of assuming a dispassionate, clinical stance. I find policy makers can deal more informatively with policy mistakes—a political blunder on the campaign trail, a philanthropic grant that had unexpected adverse consequences, a business venture that failed blatantly—if the questions are defused. For example:

You mentioned a moment ago that you had no financial resources when you decided to run for the U.S. Senate in 1946. What advice can you offer a person in similar circumstances whose goal is to run a statewide campaign but lacks the wherewithal to do so?

Since money is the most sensitive subject in American culture, even more sensitive than sex, and the funding of political campaigns is a shameful disgrace in our society, the worst way an interviewer can pose such a sensitive question would be a blunt and testy formulation like this:

Where did you get the money?

The answer might be a sharp rejoinder:

That's none of your business.

A public figure, especially in the United States, might deflect such a probing question by countering that it unjustly invades the sphere of private or personal life and therefore can be rejected as an unacceptable intrusion. "For personal reasons" is often the cryptic explanation voiced by public personages for resigning from public positions of public significance funded with public monies, and the proprieties of American culture allow them to retreat securely behind this defense. Jan Vansina has astutely noted how many cultures allow their members to create two portraits of themselves—a public image that masks the private face visible only to intimates (and even that is sometimes shrouded). "The distinction between the mask and the face varies from culture to culture according to current notions of individuality," he writes. "In some cultures, such as Japan or Central Africa, the distinction is weak. In others, such as the United States today, the gap becomes a chasm."⁸ An oral history interviewer who senses a need to cross this chasm, apprehensive that questions asking for an explanation of a public action might be dismissed as trespassing on private turf, can use the two-sentence format to justify this foray:

To journalists at the time of your resignation you cited "personal reasons" as prompting your decision. For the future historian could you now elucidate what precisely caused the action that historically had long-lasting impact?

Whenever an interviewer knows or suspects that an interviewee chose discretion over disclosure in public portrayals of public actions, the two-sentence format allows a ready opportunity to probe candidly but sympathetically the internal structure of the decision:

It is understandable why you chose discretion over disclosure when that decision was announced, but now that need no longer persists. What did cause that decision?

Other ways of utilizing the two-sentence format in order to buttress the rapport and collaboration in effective interviewing-for-history are readily apparent:

⁸Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 8.

While the circulated minutes of that meeting record the motion made and seconded and voted, the formal minutes do not convey the way discussion occurred. Since you were present, how did people express themselves about the motion?

Documentation leading up to that decision is very informative, and a historian can reconstruct how the issue was emerging, but the records are totally blank when it comes to explaining how the issue was resolved at the top. You were there; how was it resolved at the top?

These questions entail the interviewee sharing the historian's search for unraveling the mysteries of the past, and they also allow the interviewer to affirm earnest preparations and serious pursuit as commitments to thorough interviewing:

The published literature on this topic cites examples from southern New England to illustrate how farm families dealt with this problem, but no examples from northern New England. Because you can provide a Vermont perspective on this problem, would you . . . ?

An interviewer can also bolster the interviewee's confidence as a historical source, especially in instances where the interviewee's socioeconomic status might induce self-doubt about "importance" as a figure in the processes of history and worthiness as a memoirist:

Your memories of that encounter are historically valuable because you are the only person who saw events from the standpoint you describe, and consequently you tremendously enrich our knowledge of that complex occurrence. Can you help us by describing what you saw?

You are the first woman, to the best of my knowledge after studying this issue in detail, who has ever expressed a female viewpoint of what, until now, has been recorded solely in the records of men who were there at the time. Continuing with your memories, can you . . . ?

Sometimes the two-sentence format is handy simply to reaffirm the interviewee's attentiveness and pursuit of detailed recollections:

That's interesting. Can you give an example of that?

Neophytes in oral history beginning to master interviewing skills will be heartened by being assured that the two-sentence format serves dependably for surmounting what inexperienced interrogators confide is often their foremost fear: awkward silences that balloon ominously and seem to persist forever. But having explained the rationale for the question and then having asked it, the beginning oral historian can endure an ensuing silence by knowing all has been done that needs to be done, and silence is the timely function for further inviting the invited response. The human impulse to blather needlessly is constrained when the interviewer knows the format fulfills the question-asking function, and a question mark is best emphasized by soundlessly letting upper-teeth bite the lower lip. Silence is golden, as a popular aphorism proclaims; in oral history the two-sentence format transforms silence into a golden opportunity.

That is the gospel according to Morrissey—mostly, but not completely—with respect to the two-sentence format as an interviewing technique in oral history fieldwork. It works for me; it may work for you. Nonetheless, the appeal of this modality needs to be tempered by reminders from experienced oral historians that interviewing is best practiced by flexible and adaptable interviewers, and strategies should vary with particular circumstances. As William Warner Moss has contended, "Just as no two interviewees are alike, so no two interviewers are alike, and success depends to a great extent on the capability and interest of the people involved rather than on structured application of designed questions."⁹ He is echoed by Willa K. Baum, the "Mother Spock" of the Oral History Association: "As in any art, interviewing can be done in many ways by many different sorts of people, and although the results may be different, they can all be good."¹⁰

But for this oral historian the satisfaction of casting bread upon the waters is an enduring legacy of the Lake Arrowhead Colloquium of 1966. Messianic zeal about perfecting oral history skills continues to provide its own reward, even if the bread is soggy.

⁹William W. Moss, *Oral History Program Manual* (New York: Praeger Pub., 1974), 45.

¹⁰Baum, *Oral History for the Local Historical Society*, 32.

4. Richard Cándida Smith, "Analytic Strategies for Oral History Interviews," *Handbook for Interview Research* (Sage Publications: 2002): 711-731.

ANALYTIC STRATEGIES FOR ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS

◆ Richard Cândida Smith

Two understandings of the past confront each other across the tape recorder. In the encounter between scholar and informant, oral history interviews juxtapose the oldest and newest forms of historical method. For millennia, communities created and preserved their understanding of the past through spoken accounts passed entirely by word of mouth. No less today than in the past, people create and sustain a shared imaginative life wherever they gather and converse, be it at the kitchen table, the tavern counter, the street corner, the wedding reception, or the office lunchroom. Oral history interviews tap into a continuous outpouring of words that provide matrices defining both community and individual identity.¹ Informal collective modes of knowledge permeate the background of contemporary oral history

interviews, even though academic researchers conduct interviews primarily to collect firsthand testimony that may assist them in describing historical events or the experience of social processes. In the unusual exchange that occurs specifically for an oral history interview, collectively generated popular understandings of the past enter scholarly discourse in a verbatim record accessible for scholarly analysis.²

In this chapter, I explore how scholars have used narrative analysis to understand more fully the historical foundations of the personal experience documented in oral history interviews. I begin with Luisa Passerini's (1987b) now classic model of interviews as drawing upon preexisting oral cultural forms that translate historical processes into symbolically mediated experiences. In the second section, I discuss how

scholars have explored tensions and contradictions within narrative structures as the starting points for their analyses. In conclusion, I look at efforts to rethink the ways in which memory encodes historical processes into experience and the consequent possibilities for oral history interviews to augment historical understanding.

In common with other types of evidence, interviews contain a mix of true and false, reliable and unreliable, verifiable and unverifiable information. Details of accounts can often be incorrect. Interviews may contradict each other, and, occasionally, interviewees provide inconsistent accounts in different interview situations. Researchers need to approach oral sources with cautious skepticism. A good starting point for evaluating the veracity of oral testimony can be found in Paul Thompson's (1988:240-41) extrapolation to interviews of three basic principles fundamental to all historical research: (a) Assess each interview for internal consistency; (b) cross-check information found in interviews with as many other published, oral, and archival sources as possible; and (c) read the interview with as wide a historical and theoretical understanding of relevant subjects as possible.³

Narrative analysis allows for a historical interpretation of interview-based source material that is not dependent upon the ultimate veracity of the accounts provided. Even if only tacitly expressed, explanatory assumptions affect every aspect of an interview, from the organization of the story line or the plot to the presentation of personalities and events, to patterns of factual errors, omissions, and contradictions. The stories that interviewees share provide insight into the narrative and symbolic frameworks they use to explain why things turned out as they did. The first step in using interviews to reconstruct links among personal experience, collective memory, and broad historical processes is to address the role of storytelling in popular consciousness.

◆ *Popular Memory and Oral Narratives: The Translation of History into Experience*

In approaching interviews, whether unearthed in the course of archival research or taped specifically for one's own project, making them speak intelligibly can initially prove a frustrating challenge. Confronting the transcripts of the 67 interviews that constituted the core set of sources for the study reported in her book *Fascism in Popular Memory*, Luisa Passerini (1987b: 10-16) at first felt that there was an impassable gulf separating popular expression from scientific historical understanding. The interviews were full of anecdotes, irrelevancies, inaccuracies, contradictions, silences, and self-censorship, as well as out-and-out lies. The interviews contained plenty of colorful material, but the scattered recollections offered few immediately clear insights into the period or the effects of the fascist dictatorship on the lives of working-class Italians.

Passerini addressed her problem of making her interviews speak historically by doing some reading in anthropology and folklore. The perspectives she acquired helped her to think about how people use language to synthesize their experience into memorable images that make for interesting, often dramatic conversation. She looked for recurrent motifs in her interviews, many of which had documentable roots in Italian peasant folktales and folk songs. Everyday storytelling conventions might in themselves be historical evidence of past social relations.

Although the interviews were ostensibly firsthand testimony, personal experience dissolved into deeply rooted oral cultural forms that provided a ready set of stereotypes for structuring memories and filling them with meaning (see Narayan and George, Chapter 39, this volume). The in-

terviews, Passerini concluded, provided evidence of how communities had talked about the past and arrived at collective conclusions as to what had happened to them all. With these insights, Passerini advanced a sophisticated reconstruction of recurrent patterns within her subjects' representations. Different interviewees used the same narrative structures to recount the stories of their lives, an understanding that syntagmatic analysis could decode. The same metaphors occurred across interviews, used to emphasize conclusions about the meanings of past events. The personalities narrators ascribed to themselves and to others involved stereotyped character traits. Through analysis of these and other paradigmatic elements, Passerini (1987b:1-4, 8-11, 51-52) focused on narrative forms present in all interviews and used to express judgments and relationships (see also Passerini 1988; Portelli 1991:1-26).

Passerini no longer viewed interviews as products of narrators' immediate, personal memories. They provided no privileged access to actual historical experiences. Without external supporting evidence, one could never be certain that even deeply emotional accounts were factual firsthand reports of events the interviewee had undergone. Narrators often borrowed available mythic forms to articulate emotional truths they had formed about their pasts. For all intents and purposes, the past disappeared into a narrative structure of plot turns and symbolic motifs that embedded speakers in a particular discursive community.

THE RECORD OF A CULTURAL FORM

The cornerstone of Passerini's (1987b) textual analysis is her definition of the oral history interview as the record of a cultural form. "When someone is asked for his

life-story," she writes, "his memory draws on pre-existing storylines and ways of telling stories" (p. 8). Thus *memory*, as the term is used in the title of her book, is not a psychological category but the "transmission and elaboration of stories handed down and kept alive through small-scale social networks—stories which can be adapted every so often in a variety of social interactions, including the interview" (p. 19). Three critical elements follow from this definition:

1. Interviews are windows into collective thought processes; incidents and characters, even if presented in an individualized performative style, are conventionalized and shaped by a long history of responses to previous tellings.
2. Interviews draw upon a repertoire of oral-narrative sources that affect interviewees' selection of form and imagery; these sources include conversational storytelling, jokes, church sermons, political speeches, and testimonies given at Bible study groups and political party training schools.
3. Silences and other ruptures point to aspects of experience not fully mediated by group interpretation of past events.

The ideas, images, and linguistic strategies found in oral narratives constitute what Passerini (1987b) calls the "symbolic order of everyday life" (p. 67). What she means by this concept might be illustrated by an anecdote a woman factory worker recounted to Passerini about defending, in the years after World War II, her right to wear red overalls:

[The management] asked me, "And is it because you like red or is it because you are a Communist?" I replied: "Because I like red, because I'm a Communist, because I wear what colour I like, and because G. doesn't give me overalls and

I don't want to spend money on his account. Why haven't I the right to wear what colour I like?"

To which Passerini (1987b) comments, "The girl's reply summarises rather better than we could the multiplicity of meanings that a red outfit could assume in the daily struggle and balance of forces in the factory" (p. 106).

READING FOR SYMBOLIC ORDER

Passerini argues that reading for the symbolic order of her interviews illuminates an otherwise invisible subjective experience of the fascist period. Her aim is a broader interpretation of subjectivity as a historical rather than a natural phenomenon. She demonstrates the conventionalized nature of narratives by comparing written and oral self-representations of workers. When picking up pen to write about their lives, working-class authors typically adopt the literary conventions of the classic novel. They focus their narratives on a process of education and growth, a movement that dramatizes the hero's increasing competence in handling life's challenges. Passerini's narrators, on the other hand, showed no growth but tended toward stereotypical, timeless, "fixed" identities that closely corresponded to age, gender, and skill levels. Women, for example, particularly those born before 1900, often presented themselves as "born rebels." Men, however, described themselves as capable workers with "instinctive" or "natural" know-how, a convention that preserved traditional patriarchal and artisanal virtues when such roles no longer had any direct relationship to actual working conditions.

Such stereotypes are neither self-deceptions nor reductive but ultimately valid representations of reality. Passerini (1987b) observes that many (although not all)

women who characterized themselves as "born rebels" exhibited socially and politically conservative attitudes in their testimonies. The "rebel" self-appellation, she concludes, was part of a complex reaction to the radical changes industrialization brought to women's social roles:

The stereotypical notion of "having the devil in her" justifies and explains certain innovative choices made in moments of crisis—the decision to marry without her father's permission, the wish to work in the factory even after the birth of her son, the call for a different division of labor in the house. (P. 28)

The "rebel woman" image, deriving from Italian folklore traditions about women's supposed propensity for sweeping away conventions, is what Passerini calls a "survival." Urban working-class women reworked the tradition and changed its content to fit the emotionally ambiguous and unsettling circumstances of their lives. The power of the image derived precisely from its not being "true." The symbol helped women narrate to each other their confusions over female identity in a changing society. Modern Italy remained oppressive of women but nonetheless demanded that they abandon stable relationships promising, even if not always delivering, reciprocal responsibilities within family relationships. A self-proclaimed character trait mitigated compulsory social transformations through an assumption of responsibility that, because it was inborn rather than acquired, evaded questions of choice and decision. The symbol allowed for the transmission of an awareness of oppression and a sense of otherness from the social order within which working-class women lived. It helped them develop an openness to change, which they nonetheless often resented, as they forged new lifeways for themselves. Self-representation necessarily involves an individual's acquiescence to the role his or her character

plays in supporting group interpretations of historical events and processes (Passerini 1987b:27-28).

Stereotypical self-representations typically lend themselves more readily to humorous accounts than to tragic accounts of the past. Retelling anecdotes about individuals' lives is a form of entertainment in which the community can identify and interpret factors shaping life patterns. There is room for both tears and laughter, but humor is more likely to succeed in providing a satisfactory resolution to the tensions crystallized in an anecdote. In a collective storytelling situation, response shapes the way an individual comes to tell an oft-repeated story, causing him or her to drop those elements that elicit indifference or antagonism and sharpen those that promote good company.

Passerini recorded several brutal accounts of fascist terror, but her subjects spoke of life under fascism much more frequently with humor, laughter, and even joie-viality. The absurd posturing and venality of the regime loomed larger in their collective memory than its viciousness. Were the interviews evidence of a more benign image of fascism than that presented by other sources? Hardly. Behind the laughter, Passerini uncovered a complex of social and psychological forces that etched a darker picture.

Passerini notes that the humor in her interviews conducted in the 1970s, as well as that found in police documents from the 1930s, most frequently took the form of self-ridicule. One could interpret this recurrent feature as a marker of shame and guilt, as even an uneasy admission of complicity when daily life required some form of cooperation with the rulers of the nation. Passerini (1987b:125) observes, however, that although any form of antifascist statement was dangerous, police authorities were more likely to be lenient if a violator of public order appeared to be a drunk, playing the fool and making statements in jest. Police records show that verbal

antifascism evaded judicial proceedings if it took the form of regression to childhood language and humor.

In analyzing working-class humor, Passerini did not look for hidden political meanings. She understood humor as at once a symptom of the regimentation of life under fascism and a sign of resistance to it. In the fascist period, popular culture was a substitute for politics. A sense of self distinct from that of the oppressor could be expressed through jokes and laughter instead of through political action. When the world situation changed and the Allied invasion precipitated the collapse of Mussolini's government, laughter could suddenly turn into actual resistance, fueling an armed political warfare that previously would have been futile. The hidden side of humor suddenly became visible. Laughter and self-ridicule had all along been weapons of struggle, preserving identity against a hated regime intent on eradicating the rights of individuals to have personal opinions, to reflect on their lives, or to make judgments of any kind about the state of the nation. Humor helped express working-class self-identity, as well as a sense of pride in having endured and survived to have the last laugh.

Passerini's observations on Italian women's resistance of fascist demographic policy illustrate her use of oral sources to reveal the intersection of historical processes and personal experience in the generation of new possibilities for self-understanding. The natalist policies of the fascist regime subjected women to constant propaganda praising large families as a sign of femininity. Mothers were offered significant material inducements to bear additional children. Passerini's (1987b:155) interviews reveal that this propaganda had some continuing subjective effect: Even antifascist women praised themselves as being "fertile" and dismissed their enemies as "barren."⁴ Nonetheless, birthrates continued to decline, and the number of illegal abortions, the most widespread form of birth

control, continued to rise among the working classes. One-third of the women interviewed acknowledged having had abortions in those years, and Passerini assumed that other women interviewed for the project must also have had abortions but did not want to discuss this aspect of their past.

How had these women learned about birth control, given that they lived in a culture in which the practice was universally condemned? Passerini could not find evidence of underground traditions passed from mother to daughter, nor did she find evidence of working-class women's having access to or knowledge of middle-class birth control methods. Knowledge about abortion apparently spread clandestinely through social networks contained within the community and the age group most concerned about pregnancy. The choice to have an abortion was difficult and involved a radical break with community traditions. All dominant ideological institutions—the Fascist and Communist Parties and the Catholic Church—equally condemned abortion. A woman arrested for ending a pregnancy faced heavy legal penalties, with little likelihood of sympathy or support from anyone. Even 40 years later, the subject remained painful for the women who elected to share this part of their experience, although they defended their choice as an effort to make their lives better than those of their mothers or grandmothers. Passerini (1987b) concludes that, to some degree, their understanding of past behavior was influenced by feminist ideas of the 1970s retrospectively projected onto their actions in the 1930s. Still, she argues, "the fact that the meaning of actions is perceived with the wisdom of hindsight, when they had not been so clear and conscious for our subjects in the past, does not diminish the importance of their intuition in the present" (p. 181).

This aspect of Passerini's analysis suggests a model for understanding the subjective ground of ideological change. The women had recognized a need so strong that they ignored both universal ideological

condemnation and heavy legal penalties. This new behavior, conflicting with preexisting community values, made the women particularly receptive to new ideas, new values, and new ideologies that might justify what self-interest had said was necessity. A tentative process of ideological shift had begun documented by a retrospective effort to justify past transgressions that subsequently could be more broadly recognized as heroic.

LINKING PERSONAL AND HISTORICAL TIME

The conceptual tools Passerini chose are particularly suitable for reading contradictions in interview texts. Silences, self-censorship, lies and exaggerations, an overabundance of insignificant episodes told in minutest detail, the reworking of the past in terms that serve present-day interests—these offer rich sources for historical insight because such narrative blemishes indicate areas of conflict: The individual and the group could not arrive at a satisfying way of narrating painful or contentious events. Symbolic turns within a text link personal and historical time. All oral history interviews, Passerini (1987a) has written, involve

decision-making about the relationship between the self and history, be it individual history or general. . . . The problem is [to determine] what forms the idea of historical time takes at different levels of abstraction and in various philosophical or daily conceptions; and in what ways the idea of historical time is connected with historical narration and self-representation. (P. 412)

Two different but subjectively undifferentiated conceptions of time alternate in interviews. These modes of temporal experience are markedly more complex than the common observation that interviews involve a retrospective reworking of past ex-

perience into terms meaningful for the present. Interviews include a linear conception of change, and interviewees feel obligated to explain differences between the present and the past. Spiraling around efforts to understand change by narrating its causes and effects, however, is a condition of atemporality, in which a "fixed" identity locates the speaker in an eternal present. Passerini (1987a:420) argues that this combination reflects a desire to see change in the surrounding world but not in oneself, because recognition of personal temporality involves acceptance of death. The idea of personal time is inseparable from an idea of a tragic fate. A fixed identity is a narrative strategy, an imaginative leap that allows a speaker to talk about historical change and still repress confrontation with mortality.

Symbols fuse judgment of historical events with retreats into the imaginary. Analysis of the "symbolic order of everyday life" found in interviews allows historians to separate these two aspects of consciousness. Symbolization is the process that mediates the ongoing, continuous dislocation of the self between the real and the imaginary. Symbols through such mediation constitute subjective experience as both encounter and evasion of history. Reflection on individual historical experience takes on the forms of literary expression: Through metaphor and other verbal juxtapositions, interviews create their experience as symbolic expressions. In a particularly eloquent account, a woman told Passerini how the fascists administered castor oil to political opponents to humiliate them in front of their neighbors. She linked a number of distinct anecdotes about fascist terror by leaping from feces to menstrual blood to the blood of victims of politically motivated beatings. The connections between the episodes emerged in the narrator's metonymic stringing together of images linked by the transformation of bodily discharges. Feces, menstrual blood, and blood from beatings became symbols for each other, and the ensemble illuminated for Passerini a past

emotion that continued to live through a linguistic, aesthetic device. Tracing the shifts among these three symbols, she argues that shame, vulnerability, and rage still defined her interviewee's subjective experience of the fascist years. Metaphorical leaps are seldom arbitrary, even when clumsy, misguided, or fabulous. Narrative figures refer the listener (and subsequently the analyst) to an aspect of the speaker's mental representations that most clearly express her understanding of historical reality. Displaced meaning allows speakers to redescribe—in other words, reinterpret—experiences in ways that are more emotionally satisfying to them than usages that are more literal would allow.⁵

By focusing on oral narratives as cultural objects, Passerini shows that what one might dismiss as malapropism can be a key to reading oral texts. However, if metaphoric figures used by interviewees are never arbitrary, critical readings can easily be. Passerini locates the solution to this problem in the simple but fundamental observation that the structures of oral narratives arise to communicate ideas and feelings within a group. The narrative traditions of that group necessarily limit interpretations of figurative representations to what members of that group would likely find intelligible. Individuals push the boundary of sense at the risk of becoming incomprehensible. The guarantee that narrative structure must contribute to sense combines with the performative opportunities in every speech situation to generate a field of regularities and innovations vital to understanding the play of ideas within popular memory. Every interview contains within it a guide to the plotlines and symbolic structures of the interviewee's most important communities, as well as evidence of the social tensions narratives express and often displace. Passerini applied ethnographic and folkloric study of Italian working-class and peasant cultures along with psychological theory to decode the historically specific meaning of symbol systems used to narrate the experience of fascism.

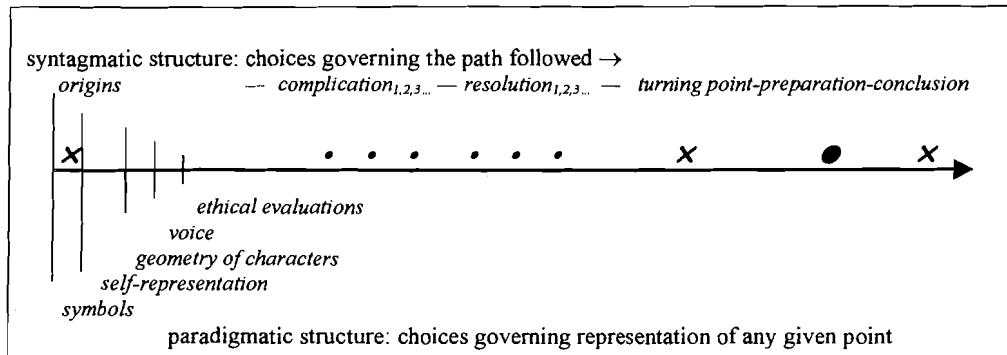


Figure 34.1. The Two Axes of Narratives

Underlying her method was a semiotic approach to language acts such as storytelling. Many scholars working with life history and oral history sources have found that before they can interpret the symbolic orders converting historical events into personal experience, they first need to analyze the narrative structures interviewees use to convey that experience.

◆ *Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic Analysis: The Organization of Plot and Symbol*

Contemporary thought on narrative is structured by two contradictory ideas: Language is a set of rules that impose categories of knowledge upon speakers, but all performative acts are unique expressions that push against boundaries established by genre, content, or form of expression. Researchers undertaking analysis of the linguistic aspects of interviews begin by identifying regular verbal and narrative patterns, knowing that performance will never be precisely regular. This distinction parallels the relation of speech to language in the semiotic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, who held that languages are best understood not as they are actually spoken but as ideal forms comprising regular value

distinctions combined in predictable sets. These recurrent codings render historical forces into narrative symbols and meaningful explanatory narratives (Culler 1986; Gadet 1989; Harris 1988; Holland 1992).

Narratives have two axes. In Figure 34.1, syntagmatic structure appears as a horizontal arrow that represents the emplotted, temporal dimension of narration: how a story begins and what problem is posed, what complications mark change in the development of the problem, what the turning point is that makes the conclusion inevitable, how the story concludes, with what kind of resolution. Paradigmatic analysis focuses on recurrent images that can appear at any point in the story. It describes and explains symbolic vocabulary and the ways in which associational registers express both judgments and affective responses.

Both syntagmatic analysis and paradigmatic analysis look for coded regularities. Because these understandings expressed through regularities in the interview arise in communicative acts, repetition of storytelling motifs across interviews with different informants provides evidence of a shared construction of the past. Whether marked by individual variations or presented in a stereotyped form, narrative and symbolic structures tend to reappear in different interviews conducted in the same community. Recurrent images found in more than one interview reveal a storytell-

Table 34.1 ACHIEVING A CRAFT IDENTITY: THE NARRATIVE OF AN ARTIST-FURNITURE MAKER

Narrative Episode	Identity Narrative: Interview Excerpts
1. Origins	"My beginnings were in—uh I did a little bit of woodworking when I was a kid, mostly with wooden boats."
2. Complication ₁	"I'm one of those people really vague about what I wanted to do. I—I entered—I got accepted to college as a chemical engineer, because I was interested in plastics at the time."
3. Resolution ₁	"I decided I wanted to do something else. . . . I started in an undergraduate program as an architect."
4. Complication ₂	"And ah after school I had a job for a while with a firm. ah The firm . . . collapsed. Folded. And uh I met an architect, and he and I decided to design some geodesic domes, and do that kind of thing."
5. Resolution ₂	"And I met a third-generation craftsman in Indiana, who uh allowed me to share his shop space with—And ah that's when I really started to do woodworking. . . . But he just knew so much technically, and I learned an awful lot."
6. Complication ₃	"I felt like I was wasting all my—my ah schooling as a landscape architect. So [we] moved [and] I started working as a landscape architect. And I did that for five and a half years."
7. Turning point	"And ah it just wasn't what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. . . . So I did a search, and uh decided to go to graduate school in furniture. . . . I made the—the decision to ah, go into furniture. Just in that I had an intuitive sense about woodworking, which I didn't about landscape architecture."
8. Preparation	"So three years altogether, totally investing myself in—in ah the furniture world as a craftsman. Got a—degree in crafts, .hh.ah treating furniture as an art form."
9. Conclusion	"I started teaching . . . I collected more equipment and set up the shop here. . . . Started doing some shows and commission work, and that all went pretty well."

SOURCE: Adapted from Mishler (1992:29-31).

events that serve as plotting points are symbols in that they merge description with ethical evaluation. The evaluation appears to be the result of examining consequences, but it flows from the principles that narrators assume can and do provide explanation of the concluding point.

This distinctly conservative aspect of narration reconciles narrators (and their communities) to the patterns of change they have experienced. At times, however, the conclusion can be unbearable. Utopian aspiration refuses reconciliation and prompts a reconstruction of memory so

that possibilities for change are accentuated. In his essays "The Death of Luigi Trastulli: Memory and the Event" and "Uchronic Dreams: Working-Class Memory and Possible Worlds," Alessandro Portelli (1991:1-26, 99-116) analyzes patterns of narrative reconfiguration he found in interviews with working-class residents of Terni, Italy. Their reconstructions of the past were factually wrong. Their accounts merged or scrambled events and at times referred to events that never occurred. In effect, their collective stories had created an alternative chronology that allowed them

to maintain their own historical experience.

Portelli argues that chronological inaccuracy in the narrative helped the community maintain a sense of continuing to have a future and retaining the possibility of political resurgence during a time of retreat. Notwithstanding modernization of economic structures, the growth of educational opportunities, and a growing differentiation occurring as a result of individuals' differing personal responses to a changing society, the community maintained its political cohesion. Portelli's analysis suggests that the community's ability to maintain identity rested on a utopian, historically inaccurate, but culturally effective myth of the past. The narratives kept alive an alternative future that preserved for several decades the possibility of independent, worker-based action, even if, for the most part, members of the community were actively participating in the reconstruction of Italian society around international markets.

Disjunction between discursive and pragmatic behavior may be quite widespread and could provide insight into discrepancies in the political, economic, social, and cultural actions of social groups. The disjunction between subjective and objective factors in social relationships is an area for which oral history documents provide ideal sources of evidence. Paul Ricoeur's (1983:52-87) model of three-fold mimesis may help researchers to see how individual textual configurations ($mimesis_2$) found in oral history interviews intersect with collective processes of prefiguration ($mimesis_1$) and refiguration ($mimesis_3$). *Prefiguration* refers to the metaphorical transpositions that are normally available and allowed in a community, which for these purposes we can define as a group built around regularly shared communicative acts. *Refiguration* refers to the process of reconstruction of texts into experiences of meaning. In simplified terms, prefigured time (ideology) becomes refigured time (experience) through the

mediation of configured time (narrative accounts).

Prefiguration sets limits as to what will be a refigurable text—that is, one that potential audiences will accept as meaningful. Nonetheless, prefigurative conventions do not predetermine the shape of any configured text. Texts are propositions that members of a community put forward to each other. Texts must convince others that the narration accounts for what a group accepts as fact. Texts prove their aptness as explanations by providing satisfying understandings of the present and by identifying key events that others will accept as suitable evidence for the conclusion proffered (Ricoeur 1973).

As individual performances of collective prefigurations circulate with varying degrees of success, ideology becomes a fluid part of individual lives and social relations. Accepted narratives create a temporal world within which people have "experiences" that they can continue to share; that is, they have a sense of actions that remain meaningful and related logically to conclusions understood as "necessary" or, less strongly, "probable." Action may not necessarily be dependent upon narrative explanations available to a group, but stories that people exchange and accept as satisfying help establish a sense of proper, effective action, which can then be configured into new narratives. The truth of narratives rests on their ability to instigate and sustain new action. One of the values of examining how oral history interviews emplot explanatory frameworks is the degree to which they can point researchers to preferred actions as well as to likely blockages, clues that will assist with the identification and reading of other sources.

PARADIGMATIC ANALYSIS

Paradigmatic analysis complements the study of emplotment by examining recurrent symbols and other expressive motifs that are the basic constructive units of narrative flow. Oral accounts in particular tend

to synthesize complex series of events into readily comprehensible and expressible images. Symbols take their place within stories as instantiations of narrative logic (Allen 1982; Ashplant 1998; McMahan 1989:100-105; Tonkin 1992:126-30). For example, in my work on interviews recorded with painters in California (Cândida Smith 1989, 1995), I found that the special quality of light and climate in the state was a recurrent symbolic motif. Interviewees used the image to articulate a special condition that shaped their work and set them apart from painters in other parts of the world. The motif appeared to the interviewees as an indubitable natural fact that explained the particularities of painting in the region. In fact, the symbol as deployed in narratives had little to do with nature but appeared typically when interviewees wanted to encapsulate their sometimes pleasant, sometimes difficult relationship to society into a ready metaphor. In one interview recorded over several sessions, the narrator described California light as clarifying and liberatory to underscore the freedom he felt when he began painting and exhibiting. Several sessions later, he described California light as blinding and stultifying as he discussed a point when his career had reached a dead end. In either case, light was not a physical phenomenon but a symbolic displacement of professional self-representation. The value that the symbol expressed depended in both cases upon its location within a narrative plotline and the conclusion it had to reinforce (Cândida Smith 1989:3-4).

Symbols often appear in patterned relationships. Women painters in post-World War II California, for example, often found as they struggled to establish their careers that critics couched favorable reviews in highly sexualized terms. Joan Brown was "everybody's darling," according to one writer, who proceeded to describe her as a talented, energetic "receptacle of attitudes" for the "germinating" ideas of her (male) teachers. In the several oral history interviews conducted with Brown over a

30-year period, she alternated two distinctive voices as she recounted her life story. One voice used humorous hyperbole to accentuate the surrealism of commerce and business and those who live within that world. This inflection drew a veil across painful elements of her life by rendering them into sharp, quick, brittle images designed to shock and get a laugh. The other voice used more expansive, philosophical language to express the wonder and excitement that a once young woman felt embarking on her career. Painting was explicitly a symbol for a journey of initiation that would ultimately result in wisdom and inner peace.

Brown never recursively marked the transition between these two voices. Her vocabulary and sentence structures changed unself-consciously as she went back and forth between the two modes of her career. She was, however, quite aware of a double self-representation that enacted her response to the sexualization of herself and her art. She used archly stereotypical sexual imagery to portray herself in interaction with the absurd world of career building. She presented herself as a compulsive liar who used dress and appearance to make fools of people she encountered. This mendacious, opportunistic character appeared in her accounts as a person who drank too much, participated in parties to excess, and let herself be carried to unspecified extremes by others. Opposed to a gendered, sexualized conception of self, another voice called within the interviews, invoking the deeper reality of an initiate who survived spiritually through recurrent journeys into the alternative worlds that painting realized for her. This self-consciously degendered self-representation gave her strength to stand her ground and make difficult practical career decisions that alienated critics, curators, and gallery owners (Cândida Smith 1995:172-89).

The recurrence of paradigmatic motifs across interviews and their structural logic suggests that they are not simply individual performative expressions. They help artic-

ulate the logic of a communication by stressing the justice of a conclusion. Self-representation is a privileged symbolic feature of oral narrations because it articulates the moral position that the speaker has taken on the turning point and its consequences. Eva M. McMahan (1989), building on the theoretical work of Livia Polanyi (1985), argues that the framing of a speaker's evaluative conclusions is particularly strong in oral narratives as they establish the relationship between speaker and listeners. McMahan (1989) states that

the teller must constantly address the implicit evaluative response of the listener: "So what?" The teller must show that the story is both topical and meaningful—that it makes a point. Generally, the interviewee as storyteller is expected to "(a) tell a topically coherent story; (b) tell a narratable story—one worth building a prolonged telling around; (c) introduce the story so that the connection with previous talk is clear; (d) tell a story that begins at the beginning, that is, one in which time moves ahead reasonably smoothly except for flashbacks that seem to serve a justifiable purpose in the telling; and, (e) evaluate states and events so that it is possible to recover the core of the story and thereby infer the point being made through telling." (Pp. 80-82; McMahan quotes Polanyi 1985:200)

In oral accounts, bracketing sections are frequently introduced so that the narrator can comment explicitly on the ethical meaning of the story, just in case listeners do not quite intuit how to feel the symbols. The narrator may elicit responses from listeners, often by asking questions. By the end of the story, as the conclusion becomes inevitable, McMahan argues, ethical evaluation begins to merge with self-representation. How listeners respond to the story determines how they respond to the storyteller, and through the account an ethical

relationship has been proposed, if not established (pp. 89-92, 93-96).

Just as emplotment can lead to a reimagination and reordering of events to strengthen the inevitability of the conclusion, paradigmatic elements may be reworked to strengthen the moral evaluation and consequently the subject position that the storyteller takes in relation to his or her listeners. Mariano Vallejo, in his testimonial collected in 1874 for Hubert Bancroft's multivolume history of California, discussed at length a meeting he claimed took place in 1846, on the eve of the American invasion of Mexico. Subsequent historians have largely dismissed Vallejo's account as legendary and in the process missed the vital political content his possible fabulation conveys. As war loomed, Californio leaders convened to discuss their options. Nominally, they were citizens of Mexico, but since a local revolution in 1836, California had been for all practical purposes autonomous of the central government. Vallejo's story condensed a series of debates that occurred within Californio society over many years into the arguments of one evening. As Rosaura Sánchez (1995) has analyzed the anecdote, the participants in the debate represented four positions. Spokesmen for a liberal, federalist, republican future opposed those who were promonarchist. Liberals were evenly divided between those who favored immediate independence and those, like Vallejo, who sought annexation to the United States. The monarchists were divided between those who wanted British annexation and those who sought French intervention. The characters presented in the anecdote articulate a geometry of political positions. Whether or not the meeting actually occurred, the characters were paradigmatic inventions that allowed the speaker to articulate his evaluation of the meeting and its ultimate consequences.

Throughout his account, Vallejo editorialized on the strengths and weaknesses of each position. He linked the arguments to several practical issues for Californio soci-

ety, such as trade and property regimes, while he ignored other issues entirely, such as slavery and implications for relations with the indigenous peoples. Vallejo's anecdote, however symbolic, articulated in crystalline form the competing ideological positions of his people in 1846 while explaining the political strategies that he and others followed. He defended his support for annexation to the United States by articulating his understanding of the American Revolution of 1776 and its, to his mind, still-universal promises of freedom, equality, and due process of law. He structured his account largely to convince his listeners, primarily the Anglo-American readers who would encounter him either directly in the transcript of his interview or indirectly through Bancroft's history, of their hypocrisy. His overall testimonial builds around his protest of the theft of the Californios' property and their political marginalization. American expansion had in fact betrayed the hopes that Vallejo and others had felt 30 years earlier. He wanted to convince his listeners that the outcome might have been very different had the Californios adopted policies opposed to annexation by the United States. Vallejo's account, motivated by moral fervor and foregrounding political and ideological choices of his people, still provides an important corrective to accounts that present westward expansion as a story with only American actors (Sánchez 1995:245-48).

♦ *Recuperating Experience Back into History*

In the context of narrative analysis, the "data" of interviews are first and foremost the ways in which a person has reconstructed the past to negotiate an ever-fluid process of identity construction. The subjective position in narration differs from psychological consciousness in its exterior manifestation and the element of self-

reflective purpose. Vallejo's interview unfolds as a conscious effort to speak through his interviewers to a broad public. Although this is not uncommon, particularly in interviews with elite figures, many interviews remain within the local, intimate historical contexts that stories shared between friends help establish. In a world of close acquaintances, anecdotes convey possibly useful impressions about what individuals might expect in future encounters. The cues are couched in explanations that, however trivial in form, remove arbitrariness from the relationship. Fred will flame you at the least provocation because "he's always like that." Characterization in this case is more of a predication than an explanation, but it serves to warn those who must or might be exposed to Fred of what to expect (Cándida Smith 1995:xxi-xxvi; Clark, Hyde, and McMahan 1980; Frank 1979; Halbwachs 1993:38; Thompson 1988:150-65).

In reading emplotment and paradigm codes, scholars often must assign meanings and values to these images that they may not have had in their original context in order to make them speak to a broader historical context. Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame (1982:192-93), for example, analyzed interviews with migrants from the countryside into Paris and found recurrent patterns in the choices of pronouns used by the interviewees. Men typically used first-person singular forms to speak of themselves as actors making decisions and changing their lives and those of their families. Women, on the other hand, tended to avoid first-person singular forms and to speak more usually either with first-person plural forms or with the impersonal third-person pronoun *on* (one). This observation allowed Bertaux-Wiame to develop a rich psychological argument about gendered conceptions of power and historical action prevalent among the French working class at a particular historical conjuncture. She readily acknowledges that her categories would seem irrelevant and foreign to the narrators whose accounts stimulated her

insight. Many historians might likewise question the validity of her interpretation. Gendered selection of pronouns became meaningful because Bertaux-Wiame turned to feminist theory for assistance in reading "data" that would otherwise be ignored. Interpersonal relations symbolized through the selection of pronouns would likely not register as relevant to the study of larger transpersonal social forces without a theoretical perspective that reread intimate interactions as dialectically constituted with political and economic structures.

The distinction between psychological consciousness and narrative self is foundational to the examination of regularities, whether syntagmatic or paradigmatic, within interviews. The narrative self takes shape in the unfolding stories within which it is deployed as one of several codes. Changes in self-representation do not provide evidence in and of themselves about how people "felt." Such studies trace instead how understandings of the self have grown from and altered in relation to other social and cultural phenomena also represented within a narrative.

Symbolic contradictions within narrative texts indicate areas of conflict about how to represent and understand the past. The storyteller and his or her group could not arrive at a satisfying way of narrating painful or contentious events, so they deflected issues into a variety of evasive symbolic strategies. Isolation of contradictory, confused, and evasive elements within a narrative has served historical analysis by highlighting areas of concern that communities have not been able to resolve narratively. Analysis presents a field of symbolic measures that in and of themselves are subject to multiple interpretations, but these areas of contention themselves reveal places for further historical contextualization and exploration. Careful analysis of the subject positions contained within these symbols in particular can elucidate a pattern of self-imagining that includes perceptions of the dangers that "others" pose (Passerini 1987a).

Conflicts between identity and subjectivity may be a recurrent paradigmatic feature in interviews. The challenge of reconciling differences between the subject position assigned a person due to his or her social classification with a more complex, varied sense of relationships may reveal itself at the paradigmatic level through such measures as Joan Brown's double self-representation. The challenge may also appear in performative tensions that undercut a narrator's ability to articulate either a clear ethical evaluation or a clear self-representation.

Feminist scholars in particular have worked with contradictions in self-representation to identify the translation of gendered power structures into historically situated experience of gender relations. Women's accounts of their lives negotiate, as Joan Brown's does with great elegance, the discrepancy between the self-image they have developed in the course of their everyday activities and the images of themselves that they receive from men. Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack (1991) argue that women's oral history interviews usually have two channels working simultaneously across the episodes narrated. On the one hand, many women may tell their stories using dominant, masculinist emplotment and paradigmatic codes. They enunciate through the selection of complications, resolutions, turning point, and conclusion, as well as through the symbols used, concepts and values that affirm male supremacy, and the appropriateness of women's reduced social position. Within the performance, however, there may be a muted story that expresses painful disappointments and resentments as a set of ironies that suggest the purely fictional character of dominant values. Anderson and Jack advise that interviewers and analysts should focus on difficult choices that women have had to make in their lives, much as Passerini did when probing for information on birth control and abortion. They also advise paying careful attention to expressions of pain and subjects that ad-

dress the margins of acceptable behavior, particularly feelings and behaviors that the interviewees themselves identify as "unwomanly." Stereotypes about women invoked in the interview provide the analyst with an opportunity to see efforts to reconcile derogatory images with an interviewee's positive self-images. In these areas, narrative structures will be less likely to effect a comfortable ethical evaluation that reconciles the interviewee and her listeners to the inevitability of the conclusion. Anecdotes and images that women use to address their weakness in a situation often lead to a layering of codes conveying the storyteller's intellectual and emotional conflict. In these situations, logic collapses and the storyteller abruptly tacks on a conclusion to a story that was headed in another direction. A pat ending realigns her account with dominant values in her community but does so in a way that signals an experience of tensions (see also Borland 1991; Passerini 1987b:138-49).

Catherine Kohler Riessman (1992), in her work on women's accounts of abusive marriages, has observed critical differences in how women relate stories of victimization and stories of resistance. At the beginning of the 1980s, stories about marital rape were difficult to narrate, in part because the term itself did not yet have currency. Neither laws nor social custom recognized a wife's right to refuse sexual relations with her husband. As a political movement developed to demand legal change, new narrative structures emerged that helped women transform brutal facts in their lives into communicable experience. In seeking security and the right to divorce, abused women learned to speak to each other, to counselors, and to lawmakers. A shared language allowed for crisp, articulate stories in which the pain endured was coded typically in inflections of speech patterns, such as the introduction of unusually long pauses. Stories of resistance typically became less articulate when self-defense was angry or violent. Not even the

women involved were sure that their efforts to protect themselves from further abuse were ethical. Riessman (1992) observes that the language structures surrounding abusive marriages provide "for women's depressed emotions but not for their rage" (p. 246). Consequently, narration of anger is more episodic and confused, as if the storyteller herself had to struggle to understand her emotions and actions, which are ostensibly out of character for a "good" woman. A political movement had succeeded by establishing one emplotment code, which then blocked positive reception of alternative narratives arriving at conclusions less consonant with the nobility of victimhood.

Emplotment structures as well as symbolic motifs established in one discourse are then available for use in other situations. Work on narrative plotlines, and the subject positions they entail, allows for analysis of individual narrating style. William R. Earnest (1992) has examined the relation of workplace narratives to typical patterns for the interviewee's life story. In an interview with an employee in an automobile factory, Earnest noticed a syntagmatic pattern that recurred across several sessions. A grievance about work conditions in the factory welled up with considerable bitterness, but then the issues in dispute found resolution through a pattern of "self-effacement, criticism of other workers, sympathy for management rationales, and then final absolution of management" of any responsibility for the problem (pp. 257-58). When the questioning turned to family background and personal life, Earnest heard the same syntagmatic pattern applied to the interviewee's relationship with his father. Whenever anger at paternal neglect flared up, the interviewee's story line displaced his rage into criticism of others in the family. Family stories paralleled workplace stories by concluding with the interviewee's acceptance of his father's rationales and affirmation of father-son identity. The interviewee was unconscious of

this storytelling pattern. When told of it, he was surprised and doubtful, but he accepted the validity of the conclusion when shown the evidence. Confronting his experience as a narrative effect jolted him into reexamining his memories and his organization of his recollections into discrete episodes directing him to preordained conclusions. The interviewee was thrown out of experience into a historical reconsideration of how he had come to form his social relationships.

His self-reexamination began with his examination of the points in his narratives where he felt the most tension. The movement toward reevaluating the codes he used to create meaning arose, according to George Rosenwald's (1992) analysis of this case, from a conflict between identity and subjectivity that the interview process brought to the surface. Rosenwald contends that the culture-specific narrative rules ensuring intelligibility also govern identity. In opposition to the relatively stable and stabilizing patterns of self that arise as one talks in ways that are comprehensible to others, Rosenwald poses the force of subjectivity, which he defines as the "restlessness of desire" (p. 265). Recursive recognition of the rules of narration can allow normally repressed imagination of other ways of being to enter into the storytelling process.

The introduction of such self-reflection into oral history interviews is not common—at least not as a conscious aim of the interviewer and the narrator. Portelli (1997), however, in his recent work on genre in oral history, suggests that the encounter of historian and interviewee, each with such different strategies for understanding the past, must inevitably generate cognitive tension. One way interviewers have coped with this has been by effacing themselves and allowing narrators to tell their stories with a minimum of response or guidance. That strategy imposes highly artificial requirements upon dialogic exchanges. No matter how silent interviewers

strive to be, they are not invisible, and the interview situation, although drawing upon narrative repertoires that interviewees have developed, has little in common with everyday conversation.

"What is spoken in a typical oral history interview has usually never been told *in that form* before," Portelli (1997:4) argues. Even if interviewees rely upon twice-told tales to answer questions posed to them, they have usually never previously strung their stories together in a single, extended account. Narrators are also aware, like Mariano Vallejo, that they speak through their interviewers to a larger audience. Portelli notes that this leap into an imagined public realm often involves a marked change in diction. Interviewees begin to speak in a formally correct style. Even more important, Portelli adds, "the novelty of the situation and the effort at diction accentuate a feature of all oral discourse—that of being a 'text' in the making, which includes its own drafts, preparatory materials, and discarded materials" (p. 5). The task that the narrator faces is new and not reducible to the rules of everyday conversation, even if words and anecdotes spring largely or exclusively from that source.

What distinguishes oral history from folklore, Portelli (1997) claims, is the move away from "storytelling," from the sharing of familiar accounts with workmates, friends, and family that help bind them together into communities. Narrators discover a genre of discourse that Portelli calls "history-telling" (p. 6). Flowing out of researchers' theoretical and analytic assumptions, interview questions challenge narrators to transform their personal anecdotes. The process provokes narrators to reflect consciously upon the larger historical and social meanings of what has happened to them as individuals.

The relationship at the heart of oral history, as Portelli describes it, is a groping toward mutual understanding that is equally taxing for both parties to the interview. Interviewers must work to understand the

connections that narrators are providing as they consider additional lines of questioning that will build upon rather than cut short the dialogue. Historians' questions ask narrators to apply their experiences to frameworks that they may never have thought with before, but that they need to intuit if they are to respond with helpful and relevant information. An attempt to reconstruct memory so that it can speak to history proceeds within this dialectic, which if it breaks down leads to an interview lacking in either texture or information. Successful oral history interviews take on a special verbal quality that Portelli calls "thick dialogue," and the recorded conversation ceases to be a rehearsal of comfortable and conventional formulas and becomes a deeper probing of what happened and why.

Oral history has been part of a broader deontological trend in the social sciences. Collaboration between historian and narrator has helped generate greater understanding that personal experience has historical impact and is not simply an aftereffect of social process. The possibility of communication, and not simply translation, across quite different modes of representing the past rests in an understanding of the symbolic structures that narrators use to posit themselves as subjects who know the objects of their worlds—past, present, and future—in specific, practical, and community-based ways. A focus on the practical underpinnings of meaning systems reintegrates ethics, politics, and knowledge.

Memory and history confront each other across the tape recorder. Separately, both struggle with syntagmatic and paradigmatic codes that structure comprehension of what the present situation means. From their collaboration occasionally emerges a richer, more nuanced understanding of the past, the power of which lies in its having transcended the particular languages that engulf both participants in the interview. (On the alienation of both academic and community understandings of the past through the oral history process,

see Friedlander 1975:xxiii-xxvii.) The first step in analyzing oral history interviews is to recognize that they are not raw sources of information. Oral sources are themselves already analytic documents structured with complex codes and achieved meanings. An analyst can make visible neither the limitations nor the critical capacities of those meanings without delving into the text of the interview and beginning a process of dialogue with its narrator.

■ Notes

1. Jan Vansina's *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* (1965) is the classic text on oral tradition. On the relationship between oral tradition and oral history, see Elizabeth Tonkin (1992) and Isabel Hofmeyr (1992). On the selectivity of sources and the relation of oral traditions to documentary archives, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995).

2. A large literature has developed on the social construction of memory. The classic sociological texts were written by Maurice Halbwachs prior to World War II. Lewis Coser has edited a selection of Halbwachs's work in a volume titled *On Collective Memory* (1993). See also the work of Alan Confino (1997), Susan Crane (1997), Noa Gedi and Yigal Elam (1996), Patrick H. Hutton (1993, 1997), Andreas Huyssens (1995), Iwona Irwin-Zarecki (1994), Jacques Le Goff (1992), Allan Megill (1989), Pierre Nora (1989), Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins (1998), Michael Roth (1995), Michael Schudson (1995), David Thelen (1989), Frances Yates (1966), and James Young (1993).

3. For recent discussions of rules of evidence and verifiability in historical investigation after the narrative turn, see Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob (1994), Susan Stafford Friedman (1995), Lynn Hunt (1996), David Lowenthal (1989), Allan Megill (1998), and Peter Novick (1988). For classic discussions of the historical method, see Raymond Aron (1961), Lee Benson and Cushing Strout (1965), Marc Bloch (1953), Fernand Braudel (1980), R. G. Collingwood (1946), William Dray (1957), Louis Mink (1965, 1970), and Paul Veyne (1984).

4. Fascist demographic propaganda drew upon preexisting ideas and cultural expressions, which may explain to a degree the hold such ideas had on women, even those who did not act in conformity with older ideals of femininity.
5. For the classic account of displacement through narrative figures, see Aristotle's *Poetics* (1982:secs. 1451b5-6, 1458a18-23, 1457b6). See also Roland Barthes (1982), Seymour Chatman (1975), Leon Golden (1962), and Paul Ricoeur (1977).

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5. Lynn Abrams, "Turning practice into theory," and "The peculiarities of oral history," *Oral History Theory* (Routledge: 2010): 1-32.

Oral History Theory

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Contents

First published 2010
by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2010 Lynn Abrams

Typeset in Times New Roman by
Taylor and Francis Books Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Catalog-in-Publication Data
Abrams, Lynn.

Oral history theory/Lynn Abrams.

p. cm.

“Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada”—T.p. verso.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Oral history—Philosophy. I. Title.

D16.14.A25 2010

901—dc22

ISBN10: 0-415-42754-1 (hbk)

ISBN10: 0-415-42755-X (pbk)

ISBN10: 0-203-84903-5 (ebk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-42754-8 (hbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-42755-5 (pbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-203-84903-3 (ebk)

Acknowledgements

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1 Introduction

Turning practice into theory

Introduction

Oral history is a practice, a method of research. It is the act of recording the speech of people with something interesting to say and then analysing their memories of the past. But like any historical practice its theoretical aspects need to be considered.

As a research practice, oral history is engulfed by issues which make it controversial, exiting and endlessly promising. These are well spelt out by the oral historian Alessandro Portelli who starts one of his studies by noting that he is trying to:

convey the sense of fluidity, of unfinishedness, of an inexhaustible work in progress, which is inherent to the fascination and frustration of oral history – floating as it does in time between the present and an ever-changing past, oscillating in the dialogue between the narrator and the interviewer, and melting and coalescing in the no-man's land from orality to writing and back.¹

Portelli points to the poetic in oral history, to its permeability, its ability to cross disciplinary boundaries, and also to its ephemeral nature. He sums up what makes this method of finding out about the past so alluring and challenging for the historian.

This book proceeds on the assumption that in oral history research, practice and theory – doing and interpreting – are entwined. Conducting an interview is a practical means of obtaining information about the past. But in the process of eliciting and analysing the material, one is confronted by the oral history interview as an event of communication which demands that we find ways of comprehending not just *what* is said, but also *how* it is said, *why* it is said and *what* it means. Oral history practice then demands that one thinks about theory; indeed it is the practice, the doing of oral history, that leads to theoretical innovation. In this book we approach the oral history interview as a means of accessing not just information but also signification, interpretation and meaning.

This chapter will introduce the book in a number of ways. It will clarify some of the key terminology in the field, place oral history methodology within the wider field of personal-testimony research used by historians, sketch out the history of oral history as it relates to the turn to theory and outline some of the practical considerations encountered by all oral historians.

What is oral history?

Oral history is a catch-all term applied to two things. It refers to the process of conducting and recording interviews with people in order to elicit information from them about the past. But an oral history is also the product of that interview, the narrative account of past events. It is then both a research methodology (a means of conducting an investigation) and the result of the research process; in other words, it is both the act of recording and the record that is produced. Many other terms may also be used interchangeably with oral history, such as personal-testimony research and life-story research, and these will be used in this book. But historians seem to be most comfortable with ‘oral history’ as an umbrella term that incorporates both the practice and the output.

Such has been the success of oral history that it is now a tried and tested research practice, embedded not only in historical research but also in a wide range of disciplines including ethnology, anthropology, sociology, health-care studies and psychology. Oral history has also been employed outside the academic world as an evidential tool in the legal environment (in war-crimes trials for instance), by medical practitioners and those working in the caring professions. It is also a popular research tool deployed in community and educational projects, practised by young and old, volunteers and paid researchers, and is to be found in use in most countries of the world. Oral history has become a crossover methodology, an octopus with tentacles reaching into a wide range of disciplinary, practice-led and community enterprises. It is used by academics, by governments and during regime change – as in the officially sanctioned Truth and Reconciliation Commission after the collapse of apartheid in South Africa. But it is also used in social work, community enterprises and volunteer-led local-heritage projects. It is thus widespread and highly adaptable, being practical, political or historical in aim.

This success has had a number of consequences. The meaning of the term ‘oral history’ has been diluted so that almost any interview conducted with an individual may be labelled ‘oral history’, and historians can no longer lay claim to oral history methodology as distinctive to their profession. It is important here though to make the distinction between oral history and other forms of data collection using the interview process. Qualitative research which may collect data via an interview can be a close cousin of oral history but may not have the distinctive character of specifically engaging with the past. Likewise, participant observation methods, where the researcher joins people in a social activity and which may incorporate interviews as an

element of the research practice, are not always focused on the act of remembering the past.

But oral history’s very success across the humanities and social sciences as well as outside academia has had the hugely beneficial effect of bringing together practitioners and theorists from a variety of perspectives. They each bring their own expertise to bear. The result is a vibrant and constantly evolving research practice that draws upon innovative findings from across the disciplinary spectrum. For this reason, this book cites examples from many of these contexts outside the history discipline. Historians who conduct and use oral history have learned to be promiscuous in their use of theoretical perspectives and borrow analytical techniques from literature and linguistics, psychology and anthropology, folklore studies and the performance arts to name a few. As Portelli so aptly says, oral history is permeable and borderless, a ‘composite genre’ which requires that we think flexibly, across and between disciplinary boundaries, in order to make the most of this rich and complex source.²

Yet there is a need for the historian to think in a distinctive way about oral history. This book is designed primarily for historians and also for researchers with their feet in other disciplines and non-academic contexts who use oral history sources; for those who may already have experience of conducting interviews but who require an introduction to the interpretive approaches to analysis. This book does not provide a ‘how to’ guide to the practical issues concerned with carrying out oral history projects or interviews; it assumes readers will refer to the many excellent print and web-based resources designed for this purpose, some of which are listed in the guide to further reading at the end of the book. However, at the heart of this book is the belief that practice and analysis cannot be separated; that the process of interviewing cannot be disaggregated from the outcome (the oral history narrative and the interpretation of that narrative).

Some clarity is needed at this point in respect of the terminology to be used in this book. ‘Oral history’ refers to both the practice of conducting interviews and all the subsequent stages of transcription and interpretation. The ‘interviewer’ will also, for the sake of variety, be referred to as the ‘researcher’; likewise, the ‘interviewee’ may also be referred to as the respondent or narrator. The ‘interview’ refers to the process of engaging a living witness in an in-depth conversation about the past. The ‘recording’ refers to the aural or aural-visual product deriving from the interview whether it be on tape or in digital format. The ‘transcript’ is the written form of the recorded interview. Definitions of the various theoretical terms are to be found in the relevant chapters and in the Glossary.

Fact-finding and theory-bagging

Oral history has changed enormously in a few decades. The international, multidisciplinary, multi-vocal, confident and mature oral history movement of

the twenty-first century is a distant relative of the post-Second World War oral history field which struggled to find legitimacy within hide-bound disciplinary traditions.³ In the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s in the USA, the UK and Scandinavia in particular, oral history occupied a particular and circumscribed place within scholarly research. In America two early initiatives represented the two faces of oral history in that country. In the late 1930s, the New Deal Federal Writer's Project (FWP; a project designed to give work to unemployed artists and writers during the Depression years) began to collect the life stories of ordinary Americans. The result was a comprehensive documenting, without the aid of tape-recorders, of the everyday circumstances of thousands of Americans. It has been described as 'one of the most massive oral history projects ever undertaken'; more than 6,000 writers were employed at its peak and more than 10,000 men and women from all walks of life were interviewed.⁴ By contrast, the post-war Columbia University oral history project was initiated in 1948 by historian Allan Nevins with the aim of documenting with the aid of tape-recorders the memoirs of those who 'contributed significantly to society or who were close affiliates of world leaders', what might be called the 'great men' approach.⁵

Britain and the Nordic countries followed a different trajectory. The rediscovery of oral history in the 1950s and 1960s, following decades during which the oral source was shunned in favour of the written record, was informed in part by the European tradition of ethnology and folklore collection which had always privileged the spoken voice as a repository of tradition, and then by the emergence of social history and historical sociology which employed oral history as a means of rescuing the voices of the labouring people.⁶ By the 1980s, oral history had become the methodology of choice (and necessity) amongst scholars of the twentieth century seeking to uncover the experiences of a number of groups who had traditionally been disregarded by conventional histories: women, gays and lesbians, minority ethnic groups and the physically and learning disabled to name the most prominent.

These were important developments on both sides of the Atlantic, essentially marking the beginning of the oral history discipline we recognise today. But the early practitioners often worked on the margins of their respective academic disciplines or outside them altogether. Early oral historians were frequently famous figures. In the USA, the writer and broadcaster Studs Terkel took oral history to the masses via his radio programmes (*The Studs Terkel Show* ran for forty-five years from 1952 on WFMT in Chicago and interviewed countless celebrities) and books on subjects ranging from the Depression, the Second World War, working life and race relations which featured conversations with ordinary Americans.⁷ In Britain, one of the most influential oral history publications in those early years was Ronald Blythe's *Akenfield*, a portrait of East Anglian village life based on conversations with rural folk published in 1969. Blythe was a writer, not a historian, and he later admitted he was not at all familiar with the practice of what became known as oral history.⁸ Similarly, George Ewart Evans's studies of English rural life,

notably *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay* (1956), were based on what he called 'spoken history'; but Evans was a writer first and foremost, never a professional historian, and only later was he regarded as a founding father of British oral history.⁹

Moreover, in many countries, oral history has emerged from, and found a foothold in, disciplines and departments other than history. Indeed, the historical profession kept oral history at arm's length for some time, not quite trusting it as a legitimate historical source. At the same time, historians were wary of its practitioners, many of whom were located outside the academy or whose political stance – often sympathetic to the left and working within social, labour history and later feminist history – made them uncomfortable bedfellows with the discipline's gatekeepers. The combination of the political stance of oral history's adherents and the uses to which oral history was put consigned it to a place on the edge of professional practice. In order to establish some kind of academic legitimacy at that time, oral history could be summed up in Ron Grele's definition as 'the interviewing of eye-witness participants in the events of the past for the purpose of historical reconstruction'.¹⁰ Oral history as 'recovery history', the practice of interviewing people to provide evidence about past events which could not be retrieved from conventional historical sources, usually written ones, or to uncover the hidden histories of individuals or groups which had gone unremarked upon in mainstream accounts, was the dominant trend within oral history practice in the 1970s and 1980s. Though this definition of oral history would now be regarded as somewhat limiting, the reconstructive agenda still remains a prime motivation (and a legitimate one at that) for many oral history research projects today.

Despite its narrow role, even the 'recovery history' mode of oral history was mistrusted by many historians and social scientists because it rested upon memory, and memory they regarded as unreliable. In an era when historical research was dominated by the document, oral history did not, in the main, produce data which could be verified and counted. It was not an objective, social-scientific methodology which could be rigorously tested. Thus cornered, pioneering oral historians went to great efforts to justify their practice to the critics. Verification of evidence obtained from oral interviews was one way of doing this, cross-checking with documentary sources in order to separate truth from fiction as well as setting the oral evidence in the wider context and checking for internal consistency in order that oral material could stand up to scrutiny. Oral historians working predominantly within a social-science framework were also concerned about the representative nature of their data, recommending the use of scientific sampling methods and making strenuous attempts to obtain a representative sample of interviewees. Respondents were given numbers to denote scientific tags, and an aura of pseudo-science pervaded much of what oral historians did.¹¹ Interestingly, Blythe's *Akenfield* fell victim on both counts, criticised by non-historians for not containing sufficient 'facts' for readers to feel comfortable with what they

were being told and even more harshly critiqued by historians from the social-science tradition for its ‘artistry’. The social historian Howard Newby, himself an expert on English rural life remarked: ‘If all oral historians were allowed such artistic licence, what then for oral history? More enjoyable, more pleasurable to read, perhaps, but certainly not history.’¹² And Paul Thompson, generally acknowledged as the father of British oral history, doubted the authenticity and reliability of the oral evidence Blythe cited, describing it as ‘less careful scholarship’, largely it seems because the author approached his material in a literary and creative fashion rather than adhering to the rules of oral history practice as they were being laid down at that time.¹³ Unless the sheen of social science was added to oral history practice, including the careful and accurate transcription of interviews and faithful representation of the spoken voice, then the method was depicted as literary and creative rather than as historical and reliable.

The infighting and criticisms of oral history’s validity and reliability, and concerns about the representativeness of interview subjects, are still to be heard today. But rather than trying to meet the critics on the same ground (by testing and validating and recruiting huge samples of respondents), oral history researchers since the 1980s have exuded much more confidence in what they do. They feel sure of the distinctive elements of their practice, acknowledging that oral history is a subjective methodology, celebrating its orality, recognising that memory stories are contingent and often fluid, and in short arguing that oral sources must be judged differently from conventional documentary materials, but that this in no way detracts from their veracity and utility.¹⁴ In the process, oral historians have become both intuitive and imaginative interpreters of their materials.

If one was to identify a point when oral historians began to leave behind their defensiveness and started to redefine oral history as an analytical practice as opposed to a method of recovery it was the 1979 publication of Italian historian Luisa Passerini’s critical article, ‘Work, Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism’.¹⁵ In this seminal piece Passerini acknowledged that oral history had been successful on two counts: in countering the critics’ charges about the validity of oral sources, and in expanding the boundaries of historical research by focusing on hitherto-ignored areas of historical experience. But she warned against the tendency to what she termed a ‘facile democratisation’ whereby oral history could be seen as giving a voice to the oppressed, and cautioned against replacing an ‘open mind with demagogic’.¹⁶ Such developments, she argued, risked turning oral history into ‘an alternative ghetto’.¹⁷ Passerini urged the oral history community to go much further than the mining of oral sources for their factual information, notwithstanding the contribution this has made to the process of historical reconstruction. What was important was to understand the real import of oral narratives. ‘Above all’, she wrote, ‘we should not ignore that the raw material of oral history consists not just of factual statements, but is pre-eminently an expression and representation of culture, and therefore includes

not only literal narrations but also the dimensions of memory, ideology and subconscious desires.¹⁸

This heralded the move of oral history from social science to cultural history. Passerini’s clarion call for a new kind of oral history derived from her own life-story interviews with two generations of Italian workers born before 1910 and between 1910 and 1925. The historiographical context was a debate about the stance of the Italian working class towards Fascism. Her interviews threw up some surprising findings, notably that when asked questions about the Fascist era interviewees responded with what she calls ‘irrelevant or inconsistent answers’.¹⁹ The irrelevant responses were characterised by silence on the topic of Fascism, particularly in the period of Fascist-led peacetime. The inconsistent responses narrated lives which appeared discrepant with the known historical events; stories were told of everyday lives apparently disconnected from the structures of the Fascist state. In order to explain these surprising results, Passerini made the point that oral sources derive from subjectivity – they are not static recollections of the past but are memories reworked in the context of the respondent’s own experience and politics. If one accepts this point then the oral historian is obliged to think hard about how and why those memory stories are produced – about the cultural environments of memory (when things happened) and of remembering (as they are recalled).²⁰

Very quickly this new turn in oral history towards reflecting on how memory stories are constructed came to dominate academic practice and debate. Historians at the forefront of this second wave adhered to a revised definition of what we were all doing. In the words of Schrager: ‘Talk about events is much more than data for the derivation of history: it is also a cultural production in its own right, a mode of communicating, a surfacing of meaningfulness that binds past and present together.’²¹ In other words, whilst oral history produces useful evidential material in the form of description and factual information, the oral history narrative itself has considerable significance in that it is a way by which people articulate subjective experiences about the past through the prism of the present. Ron Grele puts it like this: interviews tell us ‘not just what happened but what people thought happened and how they have internalised and interpreted what happened’.²² The personal testimony produced in the interview mediates between personal memory and the social world. It was at this point in the 1980s that historians realised that they needed to draw on interpretive frameworks largely drawn from other disciplines in order to understand what is going on in an oral history interview. The history discipline was singularly ill equipped with theory to appreciate this developing discipline of oral history interviewing that saw researchers go off into the field to create their own sources via a conversation with a live subject. To get to grips with all the different elements that surfaced in an oral history encounter, oral historians came to other people’s theories. These included subjectivity, memory, use of language, structures of narrative and modes of communication as well as issues concerning power and ethics. These are the things we shall be exploring in later chapters.

Since the 1960s, oral history has been transformed from a practice largely undertaken as a means of gathering material about the past to a sophisticated theoretical discipline in its own right. Exemplars from both ends of the spectrum illustrate the distance travelled. British women's historian Elizabeth Roberts' *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890–1940*, published in 1984, is a fine example of 'recovery history'. It is an examination of women's lives in northern England based on interviews with more than 100 respondents, using the rich qualitative material as primary evidence to illustrate and interpret the lives of ordinary women and supporting the argument that women themselves did not perceive their poverty and lack of opportunity to be the result of gender oppression.²³ Roberts was a skilled and path-breaking oral historian who turned to this method as a means of investigating the lives of working-class women who rarely featured in standard accounts and whose everyday lives had left few traces in the documentary record, but she pays no attention to issues concerning the ways in which her respondents constructed their narratives apart from noting in the sequel, *Women and Families*, that all sources contain bias.²⁴ Roberts' work is a prime example of recovery oral history used to full advantage.

In contrast, Daniel James's *Doña María's Story: Life History, Memory and Political Identity*, published in 2000, is a study of a working-class community in modern Argentina, pivoting around the testimony of one woman and comprising a series of interpretive essays, all of which engage with key theoretical problematics that provide insight into individual agency, gendered experience and labour politics in that country. James manages to convey new empirical information about the meatpacking community at the centre of the study, unionism and Peronism in Latin America, with a sophisticated analysis of oral history as a distinctive methodology. For James:

life stories are cultural constructs that draw on a public discourse structured by class and gender conventions. They also make use of a wide spectrum of possible roles, self-representations, and available narratives. As such, we have to learn to read these stories and the symbols and logic embedded in them if we are to attend to their deeper meaning and do justice to the complexity found in the lives and historical experiences of those who recount them.²⁵

James's work is a masterclass in the use of oral history to uncover new evidence, but it also exemplifies the ways in which sensitive analysis of personal testimony can lead to a deeper and richer understanding of how the past is remembered, reworked and reconstructed by people in the present.

But Roberts and James are part of the same oral history discipline, and although their modes of analysis might not have much in common, they share a commitment to the value of oral testimony and to the practical techniques of oral history. Oral history today is a 'broad church' encompassing a huge diversity of practitioners, from academics to community activists, from health

workers to volunteers in the developing world. It is an international movement, active on all continents, communicating across borders from advanced post-industrial nations to some of the poorest developing countries and back again. What all oral historians share is a commitment to best practice in conducting interviews, transcribing narratives and engaging with respondents. No doubt they also share that excitement of embarking on a series of interviews for a new project, a real enjoyment from communicating with people about the past, and for many their engagement is also motivated by a commitment to social or political change. While some of the more arcane or philosophical interpretive trends might not engage attention across the entire spectrum of practitioners, there is a sense that both fact-finders and theory-baggers may be happily accommodated within the oral history community.

What are we interpreting?

Oral history exists in four forms: the original oral interview, the recorded version of the interview, the written transcript and the interpretation of the interview material. These are distinct from one another with the recording, transcript and interpretation mediated and edited versions of the real-time interview. Thus, the historian hears and reads different versions of the narrative using each to create another – the interpretation – in a chain of versions. At each link of the chain a number of practical issues arise which have implications for the interpretation to be undertaken.

There are, of course, some important preparatory decisions to be made by the researcher prior to conducting interviews which will invariably have an impact on the kinds of material gathered and in turn will influence the interpretive approaches to be adopted. We are not considering all these elements here. There are some excellent guides to project design which include advice on recruitment of interviewees, the format of the interview and equipment issues, some of which are listed in the guide to further reading at the end of the book.

The interview

Oddly, it is the interview itself that often receives the least attention in oral history theory. Oakley memorably said that: 'Interviewing is rather like marriage: everybody knows what it is, an awful lot of people do it, and yet behind each closed front door there is a world of secrets.'²⁶ While oral historians are often at pains to detail the number of interviews conducted, the nature of those interviews (whether formal or informal, with a questionnaire or not and so on) much of what actually takes place in the interview goes unreported. A lot happens between the parties before the interview occurs when there are hidden interactions which are not transferred adequately or at all to the transcript, yet few historians write candidly about interview experiences. The interview is the communicative relationship at the heart of our practice,

fundamentally different from most encounters a historian will have with a historical source. One can hardly think of anything more different to the conventional experience of sitting in an archive consulting primary-source documents than collaborating in creating one's source with a living person. We all know that hitting it off on a personal level with an interviewee can make all the difference and that, conversely, poor interpersonal empathy can kill an interview dead. And we know from the application of interview technique in a range of contexts around the world that the interview dynamics that we think we understand in the developed West may not apply in other cultural contexts.²⁷ So the interview itself is not just a means to an end; it is a communicative event. And, as such, it needs to be given theoretical reflection.

In recent years, the interview relationship has been pushed back into the limelight as oral historians have accepted that oral history is a collaborative endeavour, the result of a relationship between interviewer and interviewee. There are two people involved in an interview, which means two worlds, or subjectivities, are colliding. The collision may take many different characters – deep rapport, polite regard, stand-offish defensiveness or deep incomprehension and alienation. This conceptual shift has moved attention to the subjectivities at play in the interview setting (simply put, the identities adopted by the parties) – taking into consideration class, gender, age, ethnicity and other variables which may affect the relationship – and a consideration of how these impact upon the story told by the respondent.²⁸ Portelli has described the interview as a ‘deep exchange’ that occurs on a number of levels.²⁹ It is not usually a question-and-answer session but give and take, collaborative and often cooperative, involving information-sharing and autobiographical reminiscence, facts and feelings. Given the degree of complexity contained within the interview setting we are surely committed to reflecting on the process that produces our oral history sources.

Daniel James is one of the few historians who has written candidly about his own sometimes difficult experiences as an interviewer in the context of an Argentine labouring community. He notes how his confidence in his skill as an oral historian was challenged by a respondent who was not prepared to engage solely on the historian's terms. James admits that he was ‘out of his depth’, that he was impatient and intolerant of the man's beliefs, that the physical conditions of the interview scenario – a freezing day in a cold, gloomy house – were not conducive to the kind of interview James had imagined, and throughout the encounter he had ‘a sense of intruding on an intimate drama’ between the man and his wife.³⁰ James concludes: ‘I felt like a voyeur and found the sensation deeply disturbing. He, of course, noticed my reserve, and the interview wound down.’³¹ In hindsight, James rationalised the encounter. He decided that in part it was an uncomfortable experience because he could not empathise with the man's Argentinian politics – ‘a brand of religiously intense right-wing Peronism’; but perhaps more significant was his recognition that an academic interview agenda was not appropriate.³² The

‘propensity for aggressive intervention’ in James's search for ‘historical information’ scuppered the relationship.³³

Of course, we are probably more likely to think about the interview dynamics when a respondent fails to conform to what we are expecting than when the encounter potters along nicely. But both scenarios throw up pertinent issues. The interview in which the parties get along well, share stories, partake in refreshments and part on good terms tends to attract little comment but at the very least we should observe that the respondents in these events are conforming to what is expected, they have some knowledge of the role they are required to play and in some cases they will do their very best to provide the researcher with what it is they think they want. A ‘successful’ interview – one that perhaps produces a nice coherent and fluent narrative containing a balance between information and reflection – is likely to be the product of shared values between the parties, a good rapport and the willingness of the interviewer to permit the respondent to shape the narrative, avoiding unnecessary interjections. An ‘unsuccessful’ interview – one that fails to produce a coherent narrative, in which the respondent offers short or factual answers to questions without elaboration or reflection – may have its roots in a poor interview relationship, lack of empathy or rapport, and an absence of understanding or comprehension on both sides. Of course, these are rather value-laden definitions of success and its opposite, but many would agree that the interview relationship (alongside good preparation) is the key to eliciting a narrative response. In fact, every interview lends itself to analysis, and all of the interpretive approaches described in this book at some level have the interview relationship as their base line.

The recording and the transcript

Whilst oral historians are now attuned to the issues implicit in the interview relationship and have written sensitively about the complexities of the interview dynamic, most in-depth analytical work is conducted using the recorded version of the interview and the written transcript. Transcription from tape or digital file to written document is time-consuming and laborious but pays dividends to the researcher. A good recording – one that reproduces the sound clearly with an absence of background noise – facilitates ease of transcription. Given that, for practical reasons, most researchers are likely to conduct their interpretive analysis using oral history transcripts (though often in association with the recording), the accuracy and authenticity of the transcript, the degree of closeness to the original recording, is of some importance. In oral history's early days, powerful arguments were made in favour of maintaining the integrity of the spoken word in the process of translating speech into text. Raphael Samuel in an essay entitled ‘The Perils of the Transcript’ made an impassioned plea for precise transcription, for the ‘role of the collector of the spoken word ... is that of archivist, as well as historian’.³⁴ Ignoring the rhythms and imperfections of the spoken word, tidying

up, decluttering, removing verbal tics, rendering dialect silent and the imposition of the researcher's interpretation of a respondent's words, was akin in his view to vandalism.

These concerns were reflections of a particular moment in oral history practice, starting in the early 1970s when the retention of authenticity and the attempt to render the spoken word as faithfully as one could, was regarded as an essential skill of the oral historian and influenced a generation of practitioners. The motivation underpinning this was a laudable commitment to hearing the voices of the dispossessed, of not silencing those whose voices had been silenced in the past, a commitment to democracy in the interview and research process, and the obligation to be a good researcher. And practitioners today are usually taught to aim to reproduce the narrator's speech as closely as possible because 'faithful reproduction takes us one step closer to actual data, any deviation becomes an error'.³⁵

An accurate and complete transcript does permit you to see the interview in its entirety: its shape, its rhythm, its fluency or conversely its disjointed nature. Moreover, a transcript which allows the reader to 'hear' the narrator, one which manages to reflect the narrator's rhythms of speech, dialect and linguistic idiosyncrasies, can be priceless though this is difficult to achieve. My own experience of transcribing interviews with people who have strong accents and who use dialect words suggests that a non-native speaker is unlikely to be able to accurately and consistently translate speech into text. My interview with Agnes Leask from the Shetland islands in the far north of Scotland is a case in point. Although she spoke in a strong Shetland accent my transcript reads as standard-pronunciation English with the exception of a few dialect words. Here is a short extract from that transcript; Agnes is talking about her father:

by that time he already had two crofts, he looked after the old man on the adjoining croft and he'd left it to him, and of course in those days, same as the present day, you had to have an income outwith your croft. The croft was your home and your way of life, your own food for your table, if you were lucky a few beasts to sell in the autumn to pay the rent and that sort of thing.³⁶

But a transcription by a native Shetlander of an earlier interview with the same woman is able to capture to a much greater extent the sound and rhythm of her speech. On being asked to describe her grandparents' croft (a small landholding), Agnes replied:

Hit wis a crof' probably aboot maybe twal' or fourteen acres, hit wis a braa good crof', da Twatt crofts wis braa good quality, but dey wirna excessively big. But it wis a crof' at wis big enoch ta hae like milkin kye fur da hoose an rair young beasts fur sale an dat sorta thing, plus der ain corn fur mael an suchlike as dat. But of course a wife wi a lok o

young bairns couldna wark it tad a same extent as if dey'd baith been warkin.³⁷

A transcript of this woman's speech that had been smoothed out and standardised might even translate the dialect words like kye and bairns into their standard English equivalent – cows and children. Chapter 7 offers some examples of transcription methods that aim to translate not just the words said but the paralinguistic elements of the interview, the gestures, the tone and volume of voice and so on. Most practitioners will also say that the experience of transcribing one's own interviews is invaluable; it brings the interview back to life, and it identifies aspects of the interview that went unnoticed at the time because you were concentrating so intensely, checking the recorder or taking notes.

But it is more realistic to accept that there can only be a semblance of similarity – a verisimilitude – between the narrative as told and the narrative as written down; something happens in the process of speech being translated to text. 'The oral interview is a multilayered communicative event', comments David Dunaway, 'which a transcript only palely reflects'.³⁸ The interview is a unique, active event, reflective of a specific culture and of a particular time and space. By contrast, the transcript is static and in comparison with the interview, flat. As a result, Dunaway concludes, 'when we transcribe, we as much re-create as translate'.³⁹ We write down the words said as accurately as possible, even including the hesitations, repetitions and vocal mannerisms, but the words are surface utterances embedded in a thick culture which it is virtually impossible to represent or recreate on the page. Without rejecting the need for accurate transcription, especially if one wants to undertake an analysis of linguistic and paralinguistic elements, one should not equate obsessive accuracy with the ability of the transcript to convey the *meaning* of the speaker. After all, most historians heavily edit their oral history material for publication, and the embedding of sound recordings in published books and articles still seems some way off, so that readers are still reliant on the transcribed words.

So, we rely on the written text, along with our commentary, to convey the speaker's intent. Returning to the example of *Akenfield*, there is a sense in which Blythe's tidied-up yet elegant prose manages to convey meaning at least as well as a faithfully reproduced transcription with all its ragged edges. As an example, here we have a memorable and to my mind evocative extract from the reminiscences of farm-worker Leonard Thompson, a man described by Blythe as 'a little brown bull of a man with hard blue eyes and limbs so stretched by the toil that they seem incapable of relaxing into retirement'.⁴⁰ Thompson was speaking about the conflict between farmers and their labourers in the years before the First World War:

These employers were famous for their meanness. They took all they could from the men and boys who worked their land. They bought their

life's strength for as little as they could. They wore us out without a thought because, with the big families, there was a continuous supply of labour. Fourteen young men left the village in 1909–11 to join the army. There wasn't a recruiting drive, they just escaped. And some people just changed their sky, as they say, and I was one of them.⁴¹

Oral historians still differ on this form of recounting interviewees' stories. But would the transcription of Thompson's words faithfully rendered in Suffolk dialect, containing all the normal verbal tics, convey his meaning any better?

There is a balance to be struck in the process of transferring the spoken word to the written document. Conforming to one of the guides to transcription that are widely available and aiming for accuracy and integrity obviates any grievous errors. However, it is rare that any one transcript will please all possible users (remembering that many archived transcripts will be referred to by users without the recording). The requirements of the linguist or the folklorist may well be different from those of the historian. The historian must try to be true to the respondent but most would aim for a transcript that reproduced the words said and the way in which they were said without an added layer of linguistic notation.

The final stage

Whatever kind of historians we are, we all go through the process of selection and interpretation that pulls the interview apart for analysis and edited quotation. Christine Borland explains:

Oral personal narratives occur naturally within a conversational context, in which various people take turns to talk, and thus are rooted most immediately in a web of expressive social activity. *We* [the oral historians] identify chunks of artful talk within this flow of conversation, give them physical existence (most often through writing), and embed them in a new context of expressive or at least communicative activity (usually the scholarly article aimed towards an audience of professional peers). Thus we construct a second level narrative based upon, but at the same time, reshaping the first.⁴²

So, by the time we reach the interpretive stage we are already some way distant from the original interview. Most researchers and community historians who conduct oral history are not content to let their interviews remain uninterpreted and unedited, whether for the purposes of reconstructive history or for analytical interpretive work. The majority of historians still select choice extracts from their interviews, removing the words from their context. Some editing is inevitable for public consumption. For example, Daniel James, whose work with an Argentinian meatpacking community was mentioned

before, extensively reproduces the testimony of the subject of his book, Doña María, but the narrative is translated and, as he admits, also shortened, condensed and reconfigured.⁴³

We can identify three models of oral history usage at this final interpretative stage. The first is what I will term the reminiscence and community model. This encompasses the tradition of undertaking oral history interviews for the sole purpose of recovering voices and placing them on the historical record. Such projects may regard the collection of material as the ultimate aim but usually produce transcripts and maybe publish extracts or full records of interviews. With this model of practice the theoretical input is likely to be minimal and the emphasis is upon uncovering information and recording voices before the knowledge they hold is lost.⁴⁴ The second model is the evidential. This encompasses the application of oral history for evidence gathering, the use of oral testimony as data, providing information to support an argument and illustrative material for publication. In this model the oral history text is likely to appear dismembered from its context, as short, pithy extracts, chosen for their typicality or their ability to say something in a memorable way. Roberts' work on women referred to above falls into this category as does Thompson, Wailey and Lummis's collective study of British fishing communities, and my own early oral history research largely falls into this category.⁴⁵ The third model is theoretical and may be sub-divided into two approaches. The purely theoretical approach uses the oral history material as a source on which to apply a particular analytical model. Relatively few historians have conducted this kind of analysis but oral history interview material has often been deployed in this way by scholars in other disciplines. As an expert on oral literature and performance, Ruth Finnegan has analysed the personal testimonies of English residents of a new town drawing on insights from narrative analysis and cultural and linguistic anthropology.⁴⁶ The stories told by the interviewees contain much material of use to the urban historian, but Finnegan's approach is to treat the narratives as storied accounts which contain narrative conventions and which draw on wider cultural discourses. An intermediary and much more widespread approach amongst historians is that which combines theoretical or interpretive insight with the evidential. There are many excellent examples of this, notably Penny Summerfield's research on women's narratives of the Second World War, Alistair Thomson's work with Australian veterans of the First World War and Daniel James' aforementioned study of the Argentinian labouring classes.⁴⁷ All these approaches to the use of oral history jostle side by side, coexisting within a field which happily accommodates this diverse bunch of people who do their history by talking to people.

We can see already that there is a diversity of approach and output from oral history research. The elements of interview, recording, transcript and interpretation each have significant variations. For the academic oral historian there is a need to lay out and reflect upon the theoretical dimensions of how the work is done.

Why do we need theory?

It is the *practice* rather than the content that marks out oral history as distinctive within historical research. The oral historian creates the resource of the interview and transcript; that it is actively elicited by the researcher is virtually unique in the profession. Elsewhere, historians rely on pre-existing historical sources; oral historians make their sources. Moreover, oral historians make this source in contact – usually a one-to-one meeting – with the memory-giver. The recognition that the oral history interview is unlike any other historical source – that it is dialogic or relational, discursive and creative – demands that we employ theories from other disciplines in order to interpret its significance to the narrator and within culture. Key to this approach is the acknowledgement that the interview is ‘a conversational narrative’ or a ‘communicative event’ that has taken place in real time between real people.⁴⁸ Oral history sources are also narrative sources, so historians must use theories devised for the interpretation of literary and folklore texts, and those derived from linguistics and psychology in order to gain insight into the meaning as opposed to the content of the interview.

An oral history interview then is an entry point from the present into the culture of the past. In order to gain access to that culture we must take notice of and interpret not just the words said but also the language employed, the ways of telling and the structures of explanation. In addition to attending to the language used, we must be aware of the social structure of the interview – that is the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee. And, embracing all of this is the cultural context within which each participant in the interview and the encounter itself is situated. All of these considerations impact upon how memory is recalled and converted into language. The oral history interview is therefore a complex historical document that contains many layers of meaning and is itself embedded within wider social forces. Theoretical insights can help us decode this document, to enable us to link the individual narrative to the general experience, the personal experience to the public, the past to the present. As historians we are interested in the personal anecdote, the individual version of past events, but ultimately we are aware that all personal narratives are embedded within something much bigger – what we might call culture, or wider social forces or the public-political world or the discursive field.⁴⁹

The following chapters aim to outline for the oral historian some of the most useful interpretive models and theoretical frameworks that can be applied to make sense of oral history narratives. While some of these are familiar to social and cultural historians, others are drawn more directly from other disciplinary fields such as anthropology, psychology, sociology, linguistics and performance studies, but have specific applicability to oral narrative and memory documents. Historians utilising and analysing oral history sources need to be flexible and curious, willing to step outside history’s disciplinary boundaries to make the most of their sources which are for sure the

most complex and challenging in the primary-source treasure chest. Historians are not generally theorists but are happy to draw on theoretical insights if they prove useful in decoding documents. Oral historians have been more theoretically promiscuous than most in the historical profession – terms such as ‘intersubjectivity’, ‘narrative’, ‘discourse’ and ‘self’ are now commonplace in oral history publications – but these are often applied with little sense of being informed by specific theoretical positions. Concepts and frameworks drawn from cognate areas such as storytelling and oral tradition, folklore research, literary theory and the study of memory are also commonly utilised. In addition, as a reflection of the maturity of oral history as a discipline, oral historians have developed their own interpretive frameworks grounded in practice: concepts such as the cultural circuit, composure theory and shared authority. No chapter is discrete; each is interconnected, illustrating how oral history theory and practice are necessarily promiscuous in their use of approaches and the propensity to interdisciplinarity and experimentation.

Chapter 2 offers a discussion of oral history’s distinctive features which give rise to our need for interpretive models drawn from outside history’s natural toolbox. Chapter 3 begins with the person – the interviewee – at the centre of our practice, focusing on constructions of the self, identity and consciousness. In Chapter 4 we move on to the interview itself to examine ideas about how the intersubjective relations present in the interview impact upon the outcomes. Chapter 5 focuses upon memory – how it works, how it is accessed, processed and produced in an oral history narrative and how we might interpret memory stories. Chapter 6 looks at the narrative structures used in the creative production of memory stories, whilst Chapter 7 examines the memory story as a performance. In Chapter 8 the book closes with a discussion of the power relationships inherent in the production and publication of memory narratives. Chapters 3–7 broadly adopt the same format: (a) a description of the theory, (b) a discussion of how oral historians have applied the theoretical approach, and (c) some suggestions for how to translate theory into practice. This book offers the researcher a smorgasbord of approaches, not all of which will be relevant to every oral history project. All I am suggesting is that historians who work with oral history consider the utility of some of these theoretical models in order to gain insight into the complex process of creating an oral history and in the process advance the field of study.

2 The peculiarities of oral history

Introduction: oral history as a distinctive field

Oral history is much more than just another means of uncovering facts about the past. It is a creative, interactive methodology that forces us to get to grips with many layers of meaning and interpretation contained within people's memories. It is the combination of oral history as an interactive process (the doing), and the engagement of the historian with the meanings that people ascribe to the past (the interpretation), that marks it out as a peculiar historical practice. Oral history is not like written sources. As the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo says, it is mistaken to treat spoken testimonies like written documents, because 'as soon as we do we inevitably begin to conceive of oral tradition as "undistorted narrative transmitted through a conduit"'.¹ Oral history is unlike any other historical document or primary source consulted by a historian, and therefore it requires analytical techniques that are peculiarly suited to interpreting its many layers.

In 1979, Alessandro Portelli set out the case for oral history as a distinctive genre or category of historical practice.² In an influential article and subsequently in a collection of analytical pieces which applied his methodological insights, Portelli challenged oral history's critics and, more importantly, provided oral historians with a theoretical and methodological foundation for their work. To quote Portelli, oral history is the 'genre of discourse which orality and writing have developed jointly in order to speak to each other about the past'.³ In this definition then, it is what the historian does, the dialogue with the narrator, the active shaping of the discourse between them and then the translation and presentation of that material, that constitutes oral history as a genre, that is a distinct category or type of practice and source. It is the practice of oral history – the doing of it – rather than the content derived from it that marks out this method of historical research as different.

Oral history involves communicating with living, breathing human beings. No other history method does this. This may seem so obvious that it is not worth saying, but we should always remember that at the heart of our practice are real people: the researcher who is asking the questions and the

respondent doing his or her best to answer them. And it is this that is the key to oral history's uniqueness. All the features that distinguish oral history stem from this one element. It is precisely the very complexities that arise from using people as our sources that give rise to some specific issues of analysis and interpretation. So what is peculiar? First, a human respondent cannot be analysed in the same way as a written document, a material artefact or a visual image. While we may ask similar questions about subject position (who produced the source?), the circumstances around its production (why was it produced?) and the intended audience (who was it intended for?), thereafter the historian who chooses to utilise oral history sources finds herself on different terrain to her counterpart reliant on written or printed documents, be they government records, charters, photographs or artefacts. And this is essentially because oral history is a *dialogic* process; it is a conversation in real time between the interviewer and the narrator, and then between the narrator and what we might call external discourses or culture. As a result of these conversations – both the one that is verbalised and the one that is conducted in the narrator's consciousness (essentially the process by which the narrator silently engages with the researcher's questions and decides how to answer) the historian encounters a series of elements which require attention if one is to conduct a meaningful interpretation of the interview.

Portelli identifies six elements that make oral history sources 'intrinsically different' from other historical sources. These are: orality, narrative, subjectivity, credibility, objectivity and authorship.⁴ To this list many theorists might add performativity, mutability and collaboration. In what follows I will loosely follow Portelli's schema.

Orality

Oral history deals with the spoken word. Thus it has the character of orality. It can so often be forgotten or put to the back of one's mind owing to the dominance of the transcription and the ease of working with it rather than the recording. Scholars of oral tradition – storytelling, folktales and such like – have always paid close attention to orality, the shape and rhythm of the speech act, because these are taken to be capable of revealing important attributes of the story, the contents, the practice of telling and the culture which produces it. Oral historians have often failed to take the orality of the recorded speech seriously, perhaps because traditionally we regarded the oral history interview as a means of only accessing information rather than thinking about the importance of the speech of one who 'was there' in the past or who is passing on the oral tradition of his or her forebears.

Of course, some non-oral sources used by historians, such as the accounts of court cases and legal depositions, actually originated as speeches by witnesses and defendants in trials – material given as evidence that was written down by a court clerk. Normally, however, these were not transcribed as fully verbatim and faithful reproductions of the speech act; the resulting

documents provide what might be described as a mediated and often stylised or formulaic version of what was actually said so that much of the orality of the original is lost. As an example, here is some witness evidence from a case of infanticide heard in a Scottish court in 1854. The words are those of a female witness from the rural labouring classes of Shetland, a part of Scotland which had a very distinctive accent and dialect. The surviving document states:

I went up to her bedroom to see her, she was in bed and apparently very weak. I asked what was the matter with her and she told me she had overwrought herself and caught cold and was very unwell. From what she said of her state as well as from her appearance I had little doubt in my own mind that the report of her having been delivered was correct ... having had a family myself I was satisfied both from what she told me of her state and from her appearance that she had been delivered but whether prematurely or not I had no mean of knowing.⁵

From this extract we can see that the distinctive voice of the witness has likely been emasculated – translated from dialect into standard English, rendered in a legalese (legal language) that has lost much of its link to the speaker's original words, and has lost intonations and style. When there is an attempt by the court clerk to transcribe reported speech more faithfully, as in the next example, the reader does get a better sense of the orality of the original encounter. Here we have a witness in a Dundee court in 1891 reporting on her encounter with her servant who was suspected of being pregnant:

I said 'Dear me Lizzie what is the matter with you? – you must be in the family way.' She replied at the same time brushing her hands down the front of her person, 'There is nothing the matter with me.' I said 'do not try to deny it, it will not conceal any longer – you look like a woman near her time' and pressed her to tell me her time as I was concerned because of her being in a bedroom alone. She became silent and would not tell me anything then began to say 'what about it' (meaning the sleeping alone), 'Oh let's alone, I am vexed enough, dinna bother's and dinna rage?'⁶

Here we get a better idea of the character of the narrator's speech. Orality comprises the rhythms and cadences, repetitions and intonations, the use of particular speech forms such as anecdote or reported speech, the use of dialect, as well as the volume, tone and speed. Without attention to these features Portelli warns that we risk flattening 'the emotional content of the speech down to the supposed equanimity and objectivity of the written document'.⁷ We should not ignore the orality of an oral history source so that it becomes like any other, like one of those legal documents which have been smoothed out. This is why a careful transcription is needed even though this can only provide a good imitation of the original interview.

Narrative

Implicit in the orality of the interview is its narrative nature. This second distinguishing feature refers to the ways in which people make and use stories to interpret the world; in other words narrative is a form which is used to 'translate knowing into telling'.⁸ Almost all oral histories, or at least those testimonies elicited in informal, semi- or unstructured interviews as opposed to a formal question-and-answer format will demonstrate narrative features. The story told will be arranged and dramatised in a narrative form with a variety of elements such as reported speech, diversions, commentary, reflection and so on. It may follow certain codes of structure distinctive to the culture from which it and the storyteller come. For example, here is the testimony of Apphia, an Inuit from the north of Canada speaking (originally in the Inuktitut language) in the 1990s:

I am Apphia Awa. Now I will start. I will start with a description of my ancestors, my family. How is it? Just a minute. I have to think of where to start ... who to start with ... Just a minute now ...

Now my ancestor family, it goes like this. The Arvaarluk family was my adoptive family. Arvaaluk and his wife, Ilapaalik, they were my adoptive parents ... Arvaaluk had a mother named Aqaaq and a father named Attaarjuat ... Now for my actual relatives: Kublu was my real father, and my real mother was Suula. I don't know all of Kublu's ancestors, but I do know who his parents were ... As for Suula, my real mother, her father was Nutarariaq and her mother was Kaukjak ...⁹

Even from the transcribed and translated interview, we can detect here quite readily, the distinctive structure and manner of recounting family history amongst an older generation of Inuit. It shows the orality and narrative qualities distinct to the Inuit people contrasting with a normative Western model which would conventionally begin with a date and place of birth. Certainly written sources may constitute or contain narrative forms in some ways similar to this, so the element of narrative is not completely unique to oral history. Historians are familiar with the narrative styles adopted by those who record events, from medieval chroniclers to twentieth-century journalists. But written records have in most societies been the product of learned people, the educated elites, usually men and often members of the legal or church professions. As such they have a blandness that has erased distinctive ways of speaking by non-elite groups. The oral history narrative, then, has a sharper connection to ways of speaking and remembering within societies. The important point here is that as historians using oral history we must be alert to the essential narrative nature of oral sources and recognising them as such we need to employ the tools of the narrative theorists to unpack our sources. We will look further at narrative in Chapter 6.

Performance

Orality and narrativity take us to a third quality – the recognition that each oral history is a performance and the understanding that the meaning or interpretation of the source lies not merely in the content of what is said but also in the way it is said. As a means of verbal communication, oral history is in part a ‘physical’ thing; we form facial expressions as we speak, gesticulate, move our head and arms, we modulate our voice, we present ourselves in a way appropriate to the performance required. All narrators adopt a performance style, some consciously, others not. A performance style will often consist of a combination of narrative form and a particular speech form; hence a clergyperson’s pulpit sermon would be a recognisable performance style, as would a politician’s speech, or a comedian’s stage act, or a storyteller surrounded by a group of children. In the same way, the oral history narrator will adopt a style appropriate to the interview situation. During the interview many will moderate an accent or refrain from speaking in dialect. We might also observe how our respondent dresses and acts as she or he speaks. It follows that the performance element of the interview should be evaluated alongside the content – often the two are inseparable for most interviewees are aware that they are expected to perform and will rise to the occasion. From this, the oral historian can often make telling observations – about the moral code of a ‘host’ or ‘hostess’ in the culture concerned, for example, which may demand a clean home and plentiful tea and biscuits for the interviewer.

Subjectivity

Students of history are taught that all sources are subjective, meaning that they are produced from a particular standpoint and identifying that standpoint aids one’s interpretation of the sources. Subjectivity then, at least in this sense, is not unique to oral history, but subjectivity – defined as the quality of defining or interpreting something through the medium of one’s mind – is what oral history is. The oral historian is not just looking for ‘facts’ for her or his work but is looking to detect the emotional responses, the political views and the very subjectivity of human existence. We go looking for the personal experience, sometimes as an antidote to generalised accounts of events or to versions of the past produced by those with power. Subjectivity – accessing it, even celebrating it – is the bread and butter of oral history. We ask not merely ‘what happened?’ but we ask next ‘and how did you feel about it?’ We encourage our interviewees to tell us about the past *from their own point of view* and to reflect on ‘what do you think about it now?’ The result is often that oral history provides a conduit to the meaning of an event to individuals, peoples or entire nations. To cite an oft-quoted phrase of Portelli, ‘oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did’.¹⁰ It is that

process of active self-reflection on the part of the narrator that distinguishes the oral history interview, and thus the source produced, from virtually all other sources consulted by historians.

Memory

If oral sources are subjective then it follows that they are also memory documents. Indeed, many other historical documents are also produced from memory to a greater or lesser extent: minutes of government meetings, legal records, journalistic reportage, published memoirs and diaries. Before the advent of sound recording, people made notes either during or after an event. However, these documents are consulted in their written form and too often the historian is apt to forget that memory and its frailties underpin them. In this way, every documentary source will contain a fallibility as to accuracy and bias. For oral historians this should never be a problem, but an opportunity. Memory, with all its imperfections, mutability and transience is at the heart of our practice and analysis. We want to know why people remember or forget things, the warping and mistakes they make, and ask ‘why?’ It is this use to which oral historians put memory that sets this type of historical research apart.

From this has long arisen the complaint of critics that oral history exposes the fallibility of memory, the ability of memory to change over time, to be ‘infected’ with outside influences. But for oral historians it is the very process of how this ‘infection’ has occurred that is interesting. The way a respondent ‘borrows’ ideas, motifs, sayings and whole ‘memories’ about the past from their family, community or wider culture reveals much about the collective memory of neighbourhoods, groups and nations. This has generated an entire subfield of oral history studies – that which focuses on collective memory. No other part of the history profession takes this interest in how communities – from the family up to the nation – remember themselves, digging up their past to elaborate the evolution of their identity.

Although we do still rely on our respondents to mine their memories for facts about past events and experiences, particularly in instances where the information is unavailable elsewhere, where oral history really departs from other memory sources – the memoir or autobiography for example – is in the recognition that memory is an active process. The oral history interview is an event whereby, through the relationship between the interviewer and the respondent, a memory narrative is actively created in the moment, in response to a whole series of external references that are brought to bear in the interview: the interviewer’s questions, the respondent’s familiarity with media representations of the past, personal prompts and cues such as photographs and family memorabilia. We go on in Chapter 5 to look more closely at the working of memory and how it excites the oral historian.

Mutability

Finally, the distinctiveness of oral history lies in its *mutability*, its resistance to being pinned down. Before it has been transcribed, the oral history interview is inconstant, it has a capacity to undergo change. No interview with the same person will ever be repeated the same. Words will change, stories will change, and performance and narrative structure will change, especially if the interviewer is replaced by another. For instance, there is widespread acceptance that the sex and age of the interviewer has a major impact on the testimony from a respondent. This is part of a much wider process known as intersubjectivity – the interaction between the two subjects present at the interview. Moreover, an oral history interview with one individual, especially if it is relatively unstructured and not focused on a single event, may have no natural end point. Likewise, a project to investigate an identifiable event or experience may have no natural boundaries in terms of numbers of people interviewed. This is why Portelli describes oral history as having the ‘unfinished nature of a work in progress’.¹¹ The mutability is only stopped when the recorded speech is turned into words on a page and at that point the oral history source comes closer than at any time to being like any other conventional primary source. For this reason, the oral historian must beware the power of the transcript to transform the source from its natural mutability into unnatural fixity.

Collaboration

The understated element so far in this discussion has been the place of the historian. In what other research context does the historian have such an active role in the creation of the source? It is the historian after all who initiates the oral history encounter, who identifies respondents, who sets the agenda. It is the historian who asks the questions and shapes the interview. And it is the historian who controls the final product, generally transcribing the oral text and then deploying the material as evidence in a product aimed at public consumption. Oral history is the only sphere of historical research where the researcher, with the cooperation of the interviewees, creates his or her own sources. This is a privileged position to occupy, and one is honour-bound to acknowledge one’s presence in the source as well as one’s power over its creation and how it is used. This leads to many oral historians writing about themselves in their writing-up of an oral history project.

This means that oral history is a joint enterprise, a collaborative effort between respondents and researchers. Once a historian has dabbled in oral history he or she is drawn into the story; neutrality, much less objectivity, is hard to sustain. Hence Portelli’s question, ‘who speaks?’ There can be no pretence that our subjects speak for themselves because they evidently do not, or at least not as pure, unadulterated voices, yet oral history is one of the few ways by which those who have traditionally been silenced in History may be

heard. But the historian’s presence as ‘ventriloquist’ or ‘stage director’ should not be forgotten.¹² The oral history source then is multi-vocal, it contains many voices and more than one point of view. It begins with the orality of the narrator, and that is always our central focus, but it goes through several transformations before it becomes public.

All of these distinctive elements of oral history are summed up by Portelli in a classic description. Oral history, he writes, is:

a ‘text’ in the making, which includes its own drafts, preparatory materials and discarded attempts. There will be gradual approaches in search of a theme, not unlike musical glissando; conversational repairs and after-the-fact corrections, for the sake of either accuracy or of pragmatic effectiveness; incremental repetitions for the sake of completeness or accuracy, or of dramatic effect. This personal effort at composition in performance is supported by the use of socialised linguistic matter (clichés, formulas, folklore, frozen anecdotes, commonplaces) and by the example of genres derived from writing (the novel, autobiography, history books) or mass media.¹³

Oral history then, is a mutable genre, meaning it starts out as one thing but may become something else. The form mutates but at the same time several versions of the original coexist – the recording, the transcription and the interpretation – and each informs the others. Within each of these forms different elements are highlighted. In the aural version it is the verbal performance of the narrator that takes centre stage. In the written or transcribed version we tend to focus on the content. In the public version we focus on interpretation. In effect, what starts out as a personal exchange, a private conversation, becomes a public statement or a text which is open to various interpretations and even may be transformed into another genre altogether such as a scholarly article or a film or theatre performance.¹⁴

Types of personal testimony

Oral history is not only distinct from other historical sources but also from other forms of personal testimony. Oral tradition, storytelling as well as autobiography, diaries, memoirs and other forms of life review all have much in common with oral history. But it is important to identify oral history’s distinctiveness from these.

Oral tradition

Of course oral history has many points of connection with oral tradition, that is messages or stories transmitted orally from one generation to another. However, as anthropologist and historian of Africa Jan Vansina makes clear, oral history is methodologically distinct from oral tradition in many ways. To

start with, oral tradition is defined as 'oral messages based on previous oral messages, at least a generation old'.¹⁵ Oral tradition then is not contemporary; it has a historical genealogy and may be used as a historical source, particularly in non-literate cultures, but often it is hard to say when the story originated because of its instability over time owing to the chain of transmission.¹⁶ Oral history, on the other hand, is the 'remembering of events and experiences within the lifetime of the narrator' which can normally be situated within a recognisable timescale.¹⁷ We assume that the events and experiences recalled in an oral history interview have been experienced by the narrator unless explicitly stated otherwise.

There is clearly overlap between oral tradition and oral history. Some oral histories consist in part of the relating of stories passed down orally which tell of events not experienced by the narrator. And oral tradition, as Vansina acknowledges, may constitute historical evidence, especially if the tale told is based on verifiable observation.¹⁸ In fact, there has been much debate about the status of oral tradition as historical evidence, particularly in native communities where written documents are partial or absent. Although this understanding of oral history has progressed since Vansina was writing, his key points are still valid. Oral tradition possesses a dynamic nature; it is continually passed on and in that process is transmuted. Each rendering of the oral performance will be influenced by the circumstances in which the telling occurs. Oral history is a narrative about an experienced past told at any one time. The narrative told by an individual may alter in repeated tellings but it is generally not passed on in oral form over generations (though elements within it might be, such as family stories, versions of notable events and so on). What unites oral tradition with oral history is their orality, their performative nature, their subjectivity and their character as interpretive accounts, versions of the past. Broadly speaking, although oral tradition is regarded as a process and oral history a method, they are both cultural ways of transmitting knowledge, meaning and experience.¹⁹

Autobiography

The task of distinguishing oral history from autobiography is a little more clear-cut. Most oral history is autobiographical in the sense that a person is recounting his or her version of events from the point of view of the reflective self. And many, if not most, oral history narratives will contain much that is autobiographical, details of a life deemed relevant to the story being told. Narrators generally tell their stories in the first person (using the personal pronoun 'I') or from the personal point of view. Likewise, the autobiography is the positioning of a life within a broader conception of the past, a linking of the private with the public, the personal with the political. But the critical aspect that distinguishes an oral history interview – even one that takes a life-story approach – from autobiography is the involvement of the interviewer. 'Although an oral autobiographical narrative may look on the surface very

much like any other autobiographical *text*, it constitutes a very different autobiographical *act*', writes Portelli, 'because the basis of authority is different.'²⁰ The intervention of the interviewer shifts that authority away from the narrator creating in Michael Frisch's words a 'shared authority'.²¹ So, the story to be told may exist independently of the interviewer but the way it is expressed is influenced by the interviewer's intervention. Though there may be influence from editors or publishers, in a conventional written autobiography the initiative stays with the autobiographer from the first decision to narrate a life to what to include and exclude, how to shape the story and so on. Unlike storytelling or even middle-class autobiography, where the speaker/writer takes the floor with a legitimacy derived from social status or tradition, the narrator in an oral history interview gains the legitimacy to speak from the interviewer. Thus the process and the product is different. Oral history can produce a reimagining of the past that is being shared in a joint moment between narrator and interviewer. Power often shifts throughout the process of the interview and post-interview activities: the interviewee might assert power at certain points – in the post-interview checking and approval of the transcript for instance – but is never solely responsible for the outcome.

Oral history is also distinguishable from autobiography on account of its inclusivity and its political instrumentality.²² Many autobiographies are of the rich and famous, published because of the subject's celebrity and following. By contrast, oral history has a well-deserved reputation for giving a voice to the voiceless, for empowering the weak. For Joanna Bornat it is oral history's ability to record the stories of those who are rarely heard and its agenda of social and political change that marks out this practice from autobiography, which tends to be the mouthpiece of those with power, fame or privilege. Oral history, Bornat argues, diminishes inequalities of power and can be empowering beyond the frame of the research project whereas autobiography is bounded by a text – that is the text is the end point, offering no further opportunities for change.

Conventions in oral history

Oral history then, has its own form, its own shared conventions by which it is recognised as a distinctive practice. But it also contains or produces a variety of what might be called subgenres – recognisable forms of speech, of narrative formation, and of performance – that is, ways of translating knowing about the past into an expressive narrative. Most of this book is concerned with the theoretical approaches employed to understand and interpret these subgenres so that we can gain a deeper or richer insight into the narrator's meaning.

Most interviews adopt a variety of forms reflecting the changing nature of the conversation. A formal question-and-answer format might mutate into a more informal dialogue or conversational mode as the participants become more comfortable with one another. Respondents might, at points, assume the

role of a narrator or a monologue; they might use anecdotes, description, repetition, reported speech, commentary and so on. We know that some of these modes of speech are cultural, that is, in some cultures narrators will more readily adopt a particular communicative form. Storytelling, for instance, has been observed as a common communicative device in societies where orality is privileged over the written text; thus some oral history interviews can lead to long, almost uninterrupted narrations that sound like, and in the transcript look like, old-fashioned folk tales. For another example, some modes of speech appear to be gendered. Women are more likely than men to cite reported speech.²³ Here is eighty-three-year-old Lily Levitt from the east of England describing an argument with her employer on the occasion of her leaving her service as a live-in maid:

I remember when I left to go to London she didn't like me leaving and she was quite angry because I was leaving. She said 'You're very anaemic,' which I was at the time, 'you'll have lots of stairs to climb. You'll be ill. You're better by half to stop here with me.' I said 'No, I want to go. I'm going.' 'Oh, well', she said, 'I liked your brother Sydney and I liked your father, but I never did like you.' And I said 'And I don't like you.'²⁴

This is a classic woman's style of speaking, much less common amongst men, though the differences may have been lessening in the past fifty years. These are just two ways in which the oral history interview can reveal various cultural conventions.

In addition to linguistic and narrative genres identifiable within the oral history interview we may also be able to distinguish certain thematic genres or motifs that are used to shape the meaning of a story. Portelli identifies the war narrative as a common means by which men make sense of their personal life as it relates to History, or at least public history. He found that women, on the other hand, more commonly used the caring motif to talk about their lives and particularly the way they engaged in the public sphere at a time when women were relatively disempowered in society.²⁵ These may not be universal rules but may be culturally specific. The war narrative is less likely to appear so commonly in stories related by men of the generation too young to remember the last all-embracing war, the Second World War. And perhaps the caring narrative would have less salience today for women who have a more active role in the public sphere. However, just as those who have analysed traditional folk tales have identified a series of universal motifs (recurring themes or elements that make the tales work for the listener or reader – such as the motif of the wicked witch, the speaking animal or the magic number three), it may be possible to do similar work for oral history narratives in particular cultural and historical contexts: the weak overcoming the strong, the disempowered fighting back against authority, the bad man turned good, the monster who turns into a prince, the happy ending.

Research imperatives

Finally we need to reflect on the fact that historians also work within identifiable genres and employ particular methods at all stages of the research and writing process. Historians are trained to work according to certain professional criteria, we possess a set of skills, sometimes described as the 'historian's craft' (which includes ways of assembling and sampling data, reading sources, validating sources against one another, avoiding subjective judgements and so on), and it is hard to jettison these in the pursuit of a story.²⁶ The historian starts out with an agenda and conducts interviews in order to obtain information that will contribute to answering a set of research questions.²⁷ Few historians would feel comfortable with the kind of methodology exemplified by Henry Glassie's classic text, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone*, a work of folklore, ethnology and history in a rural Northern Irish community in which the author admits: 'I knew nothing about the community and I had no hypothesis'.²⁸ He describes his method as a process of interaction and collaboration. Glassie writes that by asking questions 'I would be able to find the community's wise speakers, and while scanning broadly to test their generalisations, I would let them guide me. They know'.²⁹ Yet the work of the oral historian is often more akin to Glassie's approach than that of her colleagues reliant on documentary sources.

In conducting oral histories one is always aware of a project's open-ended nature in that few interviews stick to the script the researcher has set and new avenues for research are constantly being introduced by the respondent. But historians find it hard to break out from their disciplinary straitjacket. We may assert that meaning is more important than facts, but what oral historian has not asked the question, 'and when precisely was that?' or 'what year did that happen?' Daniel James notes that he frequently interrupted his respondent Doña María to confirm or pin down dates and other 'facts', an honest admission by a historian conscious of what he calls professional ideology.³⁰ And in adopting this frame for an interview (even unconsciously) we may push a respondent into a form of narration that fits our own agenda or, conversely, in Ron Grele's words, force 'memory to its limits, destroying its very narrative capacity'.³¹ In fact, it has been suggested that it is almost impossible for the historian to really represent the point of view of the narrator, the insider's perspective, because their interests are so often in opposition: the historian often inserts the oral history evidence into a pre-existing historical framework whereas the narrator has provided a version of the past as it was experienced in all its complexity, usually containing much that appears tangential to the topic under discussion.³² So, in doing oral history, the historian sometimes has to restrain the impulse to be a historian at all times; she or he has to push at the disciplinary envelope, employ methods of practice and analysis which might feel strange or antithetical to conventional ways of doing historical research, to move away from the approach that sees oral history merely as a means of answering our pre-prepared research questions.

The public documents we produce, from the transcriptions of oral interviews to our scholarly articles and books and even the publications of community and voluntary organisations, all conform to a set of generic practices and forms into which we bend and shape and sometimes force our oral sources. Since the forms in which academic historians disseminate research are generally written and published in printed or online format, the orality of our sources is lost; online recordings are generally edited and truncated; and even the most precise transcription, which endeavours to reflect the narrator's rhythms and patterns of speech, dialect and intonation, is no substitute for the original oral version. Constraints on the length and form of the scholarly text usually prevents the reproduction of a complete interview transcript. Most commonly the oral history source is embedded into a text as selected extracts, either used as illustrative material or what is described as 'textual verifications of an historical interpretation'.³³

Increasingly, and excitingly, there are exceptions to this rather unsatisfactory representation of our oral sources. Portelli's moving study of the massacre by Nazis of 335 prisoners in Rome during the Second World War privileges the narrators and their stories over the historian's interpretation. Unusually for a history text, Portelli lists the names of the narrators at the start of the book (rather than hidden at the back amongst the appendices), and each chapter begins with a lengthy story from one of the narrators so that it is the oral history that leads the reader rather than the historian.³⁴ The extracts are not used merely as window dressing or as particularly good or pithy articulations of a point made by the historian; rather, the oral history narratives convey the different meanings of the massacre and its aftermath from the point of view of those who offered their testimony. Those working outside the rather restrictive conventions of the academy have more successfully privileged the words of their respondents. Works such as Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*, a personal account by a South African journalist of the work of that country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission that presided in the years after racial apartheid, places the harrowing words of the witnesses centre stage.³⁵ Many community oral history projects have taken advantage of the digital revolution, including recordings of oral history extracts on hardware packaged with publications or have decided to showcase their work on the Web where length and form restrictions are less applicable.³⁶

The oral history genre remains varied in terms of ways of publishing the material. The practice of reproducing respondent's stories at length and with little additional interpretive material, as in Blythe's *Akenfield*, or Mary Chamberlain's *Fenwomen*, has been continued in works such as John Bodnar's *Workers' World*, a study of a Pennsylvania industrial community, or Eric Marcus' *Making History*, a collection of oral narratives from the American gay and lesbian community. An alternative approach is to focus on the life of one individual as James does in *Doña María's Story* and likewise Sally Cole, a historical anthropologist, whose *Women of the Praia*, a study of the lives of Portuguese women in the past and the present is foregrounded by the oral

testimony of one woman, Alvina. Her story, that of a Portuguese fisherwoman in the first six decades of the twentieth century, is presented by Cole as a monologue, uninterrupted by the questions and interventions of the interviewer and unadulterated by the slips, verbal tics and speech imperfections one would normally hear (or see) in such a testimony. This short extract from Alvina's testimony demonstrates Cole's approach:

I always wanted to work on the sea, and when I was fourteen and old enough I persuaded my father to take me into Vilo do Conde to the Capitania for my license (*cédula*). For the test I had to swim across the Rio Ave, but I didn't know how to swim, so my father gave the man from the Capitania a coin and I got my license. After that I fished with my father and my brother, and when the weather was too bad for fishing I worked with my mother and sisters for the lavradores in the fields (*no campo*). And that was my life day in and day out until my marriage.³⁷

Cole writes that life stories are 'pieced together' from several interviews conducted over time and in the course of writing the stories she repeatedly checked with her respondents that she had conveyed their narratives accurately. Nonetheless, the author's intention was to 'provide women the opportunity to present themselves and their lives as they would want them presented'.³⁸

Taking things a step further, anthropologists Julie Cruikshank and Nancy Wachowich have engaged in collaborative work with their narrators, acknowledging the fact that life stories, once told, are not the possession of the researcher.³⁹ Finally, Luisa Passerini creates an altogether new genre in her *Autobiography of a Generation*, interweaving oral history, interpretation, autobiography and psychoanalysis in her study of the generation of 1968 in Italy.⁴⁰ Few authors, however (and Passerini is an exception), are happy with placing themselves as interviewers in the published text. Interview questions are rarely reproduced, the to and fro of a conversation is infrequently alluded to. We write about the interview relationship but are loath to be honest about our own role (asking leading questions, sticking to our interview agenda and so on).

Oral history practice has begun to break down some of the genre boundaries surrounding scholarly writing, encouraging historians to engage more with a wider readership and to push at the envelope of traditional academic outputs by foregrounding the voices of those who inform the research. And oral history has tested the limits of conventional historical writing by privileging personal experience, allowing for subjectivity, celebrating memory's inconsistencies and forcing the historian to be reflexive about research practice.

Conclusions

After more than fifty years of methodological and interpretive experimentation, oral history has begun to assume the character of a discipline, in part

because of its commitment to sound interview practice and also because it has developed some distinctive practices and conventions in the realm of interpretation. But it is a discipline with undisciplined tendencies, continually drawing upon other disciplinary approaches, and in flux as it defines acceptable practices and modes of theorising. It is at the same time profoundly interdisciplinary, a promiscuous practice that, jackdaw-like, picks up the shiny, attractive theories which have originated elsewhere and applies them to its own field of study. Oral history is a peculiar practice in many ways: in terms of its distinctiveness as a methodology, its marrying of practice in the field with interpretive analysis, and in terms of the ways in which it is used and presented to the wider public.

3 Self

Introduction

The oral historian knows that when a respondent tells a story about an event or an experience he or she is directly or indirectly telling us something about him or herself. In an interview that tackles the whole life course or life history of the individual, the respondent is given the opportunity to tell a story that reveals their present sense of self. This is a view of their self as the culmination of a life. The life-story interview invites the narrator to dig deep, to reflect on the inner self, to reconcile any conflicts and then to reconstruct the self as a coherent whole in the form of a single narrative. In an interaction with the interviewer, the interview becomes a process in which the respondent actively fashions an identity. And even in an interview where the declared aim is merely to gather information it is rare for the respondent not to reveal something of themselves.

The revelation of the self, understood as the autonomous and self-contained individual who possesses a rich and complex inner life or consciousness, has become one of the key aims of oral historians. The use of personal or subjective documents – from autobiography and memoirs to oral history – across the social-science and humanities disciplines was traditionally a means of accessing empirical information and as a window into culture. But in the past thirty years or so the use of life narratives of all kinds in research and in popular culture has constituted a methodological and interpretive turn. This is constituted by a celebration of the subjective and an understanding that life stories are complex and revealing narrative performances which can offer an insight into both identity formation and the relationship between that and larger historical forces. Indeed, it has been said that people in the western developed world inhabit a confessional culture in which the public divulgence of aspects of the self hitherto regarded as private are normalised via public consumption of celebrity interviews, personal accounts of triumph and tragedy in the popular press and intense media focus on the personal lives of anyone in the public eye. At the popular level, the success of American President Barack Obama's two-volume autobiography is evidence of this turn to the personal in popular culture, the notion that an understanding of what

6. Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack, "Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses," *Women's Words: the Feminist Practice of Oral History*, eds. Gluck and Patai, Routledge (Routledge: 1991): 11-25.

Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses

Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack

Oral history interviews provide an invaluable means of generating new insights about women's experiences of themselves in their worlds. The spontaneous exchange within an interview offers possibilities of freedom and flexibility for researchers and narrators alike. For the narrator, the interview provides the opportunity to tell her own story in her own terms. For researchers, taped interviews preserve a living interchange for present and future use; we can rummage through interviews as we do through an old attic—probing, comparing, checking insights, finding new treasures the third time through, then arranging and carefully documenting our results.

Oral interviews are particularly valuable for uncovering women's perspectives. Anthropologists have observed how the expression of women's unique experience as women is often muted, particularly in any situation where women's interests and experiences are at variance with those of men.¹ A woman's discussion of her life may combine two separate, often conflicting, perspectives: one framed in concepts and values that reflect men's dominant position in the culture, and one informed by the more immediate realities of a woman's personal experience. Where experience does not "fit" dominant meanings, alternative concepts may not readily be available. Hence, inadvertently, women often mute their own thoughts and feelings when they try to describe their lives in the familiar and publicly acceptable terms of prevailing concepts and conventions. To hear women's perspectives accurately, we have to learn to listen in stereo, receiving both the dominant and muted channels clearly and tuning into them carefully to understand the relationship between them.

How do we hear the weaker signal of thoughts and feelings that differ from conventional expectations? Carolyn Heilbrun urges biographers to search for the choices, the pain, the stories that lie beyond the "constraints of acceptable discussion."² An interview that fails to expose the distortions and conspires to mask the facts and feelings that did not fit will overemphasize expected aspects of the female role. More important, it will miss an opportunity to document the experience that lies outside the boundaries of acceptability.

To facilitate access to the muted channel of women's subjectivity, we must inquire whose story the interview is asked to tell, who interprets the story, and with what theoretical frameworks. Is the narrator asked what meanings she makes of her experiences? Is the researcher's attitude one of receptivity to

learn rather than to prove preexisting ideas that are brought into the interview? In order to learn to listen, we need to attend more to the narrator than to our own agendas.

Interview Techniques: Shedding Agendas—

Kathryn Anderson

My awareness of how both personal and collective agendas can short-circuit the listening process developed while scanning oral histories for the Washington Women's Heritage Project. This statewide collaborative effort received major support from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Washington Commission for the Humanities to develop educational workshops and to produce a traveling exhibit documenting women's lives in interviews and historical photographs. The first stage of the project involved training dozens of interviewers in a series of oral history workshops held throughout the state. A typical workshop provided information on equipment, processing tapes, interviewing techniques, and a crash course in the new women's history scholarship. Prospective interviewers left with a manual, which included Sherna Gluck's "Topical Guide for Oral History Interviews with Women."³

To select excerpts for the exhibit, we reviewed dozens of interviews produced by project staff and workshop participants along with hundreds of interviews housed in archives and historical societies. We found them filled with passages describing the range and significance of activities and events portrayed in the photographs. To our dismay and disappointment, however, most of them lacked detailed discussions of the web of feelings, attitudes, and values that give meaning to activities and events. Interviewers had either ignored these more subjective dimensions of women's lives or had accepted comments at face value when a pause, a word, or an expression might have invited the narrator to continue. Some of us found discrepancies between our memories of interviews and the transcripts because the meaning we remembered hearing had been expressed through intense vocal quality and body language, not through words alone.

We were especially confused that our interviews did not corroborate the satisfactions and concerns other historians were discovering in women's diaries and letters, or the importance of relationships social scientists were uncovering in women's interviews. To understand why, I scrutinized the interviews with rural women that I had done for the project, paying special attention to interview strategies and techniques. My expectations that the interviews would give rural women a forum to describe their experiences in their own terms and to reflect on their experiences as women in the specific context of Washington state were thwarted to some extent by three factors: the project's agenda to document women's lives for the exhibit; an incomplete conversion

from traditional to feminist historical paradigms; and the conventions of social discourse.

While the project's general goal was to accumulate a series of life histories my special task was to discover women's roles in northwest Washington farming communities. Project deadlines and the need to cover a representative range of experiences combined to limit interviews to no more than three hours. In retrospect, I can see how I listened with at least part of my attention focused on producing potential material for the exhibit—the concrete description of experiences that would accompany pictures of women's activities. As I rummaged through the interviews long after the exhibit has been placed in storage I am painfully aware of lost opportunities for women to reflect on the activities and events they described and to explain their terms more fully in their own words.

In spite of my interest at the time in learning how women saw themselves as women in specific historical contexts, the task of creating public historic documents as well as the needs of the project combined to subvert my personal interests and led to fairly traditional strategies. As a result, my interviews tended to focus on activities and facts, on what happened and how it happened. They revealed important information about the variety of roles women filled on Washington farms, and how they disguised the extent and importance of their contributions by insisting that they were just "helping out" or "doing what needed to be done." Left out, however, was the more subjective realm of feelings about what made these activities fun or drudgery, which ones were accompanied by feelings of pride or failure. The resulting story of what they did tells us something about the limitations under which they operated but less about the choices they might have made. My interests were not incompatible with the project's goals but my methods often failed to give women the opportunity to discuss the complex web of feelings and contradictions behind their familiar stories.

My background included both women's history and interpersonal communication, but no specific training in counseling. My fear of forcing or manipulating individuals into discussing topics they did not want to talk about sometimes prevented me from giving women the space and the permission to explore some of the deeper, more conflicted parts of their stories. I feared, for good reasons, that I lacked the training to respond appropriately to some of the issues that might be raised or uncovered. Thus, my interview strategies were bound to some extent by the conventions of social discourse. The unwritten rules of conversation about appropriate questions and topics—especially the one that says "don't pry!"—kept me from encouraging women to make explicit the range of emotions surrounding the events and experiences they related. These rules are particularly restrictive in the rural style I had absorbed as a child on an Iowa farm. In a context where weather, blight, pests, and disease were so crucial to productivity and survival, conversation often tended toward the fatalistic and pragmatic; we certainly did not dwell on feelings

about things beyond our control. As I interviewed rural women, the sights, sounds, and smells of a farm kitchen elicited my habits of a rural style of conversation and constrained my interview strategies.

Another interviewer experienced tensions between project goals and rules of conversation in a different context for different reasons. As she interviewed Indian women from various Washington tribes, she felt torn between a need to gather specific information and an awareness of appropriate relationships between young and old: the rules she had learned as an Indian child prohibited questioning elders, initiating topics, or disagreeing in any form, even by implying that a comment might be incomplete. When, as in these instances, interviewer and narrator share similar backgrounds that include norms for conversation and interaction, interview strategies must be particularly explicit to avoid interference.

Although I approached the interviews with a genuine interest in farm women's perceptions of themselves, their roles, and their relationships in the rural community, I now see how often the agenda to document farm activities and my habit of taking the comments of the farm women at face value determined my questions and responses. Both interfered with my sensitivity to the emotionally laden language they used to describe their lives. My first interview with Elizabeth illustrates a lost opportunity to explore her discussion of the physical and mental strains of multiple roles.⁴ We had been talking about her relationships with her mother and half-sister when she offered the following:

I practically had a nervous breakdown when I discovered my sister had cancer, you know; it was kind of like knocking the pins [out from under me]—and I had, after the second boy was born, I just had ill health for quite a few years. I evidently had a low-grade blood infection or something. Because I was very thin, and, of course, I kept working hard. And every fall, why, I'd generally spend a month or so being sick—from overdoing, probably.

Instead of encouraging further reflection on the importance of her relationship with her sister or on the difficulties of that period in her life, my next question followed my imperative for detailing her role on the farm: "What kind of farming did you do right after you were married?"

Elizabeth was a full partner with her husband in their dairy farm and continued to play an active role as the farm switched to the production of small grains. Her interview has the potential of giving us valuable information about the costs incurred by women who combined child-rearing and housework with the physical labor and business decisions of the farm. It also suggests something of the importance of relationships with family and close friends in coping with both roles. The interview's potential is severely limited, however, by my failure to encourage her to expand upon her spontaneous reflections and by my eagerness to document the details of her farming activity. Not until later did I realize that I do not know what she meant by "nervous breakdown" or

"overdoing." The fact that other farm women used the same or similar terms to describe parts of their lives alerted me to the need for further clarification. I now wish I had asked her to tell me in her own words of the importance of the relationship with her sister and why its possible loss was such a threat.

Later in the same interview I was more sensitive to Elizabeth's feelings about the difficulty of combining roles, only to deflect the focus from her experience once again. She was telling me how hard it was to be a full partner in the field and still have sole responsibility for the house:

This is what was so hard, you know. You'd both be out working together, and he'd come in and sit down, and I would have to hustle a meal together, you know. And that's typical.

How did you manage?

Well, sometimes you didn't get to bed till midnight or after, and you were up at five. Sometimes when I think back to the early days, though, we'd take a day off, we'd get the chores done, and we'd go take off and go visiting.

Was that typical? Neighbors going to visit each other after the chores were done?

While Elizabeth was telling me how she managed, I was already thinking about patterns in the neighborhood. My first question had been a good one, but, by asking about what other people did, my next one told her that I had heard enough about her experience. The two questions in succession have a double message: "Tell me about your experience, but don't tell me too much." Part of the problem may have been that even while I was interviewing women I was aware of the need to make sense of what they told me. In this case, the scholar's search for generalizations undermined the interviewer's need to attend to an individual's experience. Ideally, the processes of analysis should be suspended or at least subordinated to the processes of listening.

If we want to know how women feel about their lives, then we have to allow them to talk about their feelings as well as their activities. If we see rich potential in the language people use to describe their daily activities, then we have to take advantage of the opportunity to let them tell us what that language means. "Nervous breakdown" is not the only phrase that I heard without asking for clarification. Verna was answering a question about the relationship between her mother and her grandmother when she said:

It was quite close since my mother was the only daughter that was living. My grandmother did have another daughter, that one died. I didn't know it until we got to working on the family tree. My mother was older than her brother. They were quite close. They worked together quite well when it would come to preparing meals and things. They visited back and forth a lot.

Her answer gave several general examples of how the closeness was manifested, but what did Verna mean when she described a relationship as "close" twice in a short answer? What did her perception of this relationship mean to her? My next question asked, instead, for further examples: "Did they [your grandparents] come to western Washington because your parents were here?"

Even efforts to seek clarification were not always framed in ways that encouraged the interviewee to reflect upon the meaning of her experience. Elizabeth was answering a question about household rules when she was a child and commented: "My mother was real partial to my brother because, of course, you know that old country way; the boy was the important one." My question "How did her partiality to the brother show?" elicited some specific examples, but none of a series of subsequent questions gave her an opportunity to reflect upon how this perception affected her understanding of herself and her place in the family.

A final example from Verna's interview illustrates the best and the worst of what we are trying to do. Her statement is a powerful reflection upon her role as a mother; the subsequent question, however, ignores all the emotional content of her remarks:

Yes. There was times that I just wished I could get away from it all. And there were times when I would have liked to have taken the kids and left them someplace for a week—the whole bunch at one time—so that I wouldn't have to worry about them. I don't know whether anybody else had that feeling or not, but there were times when I just felt like I needed to get away from everybody, even my husband, for a little while. Those were times when I would maybe take a walk back in the woods and look at the flowers and maybe go down there and find an old cow that was real gentle and walk up to her and pat her a while—kind of get away from it. I just had to, it seems like sometimes . . .

Were you active in clubs?

As the above portion of her remarks indicates, Verna was more than willing to talk spontaneously about the costs of her choice to combine the roles of wife, mother, and diligent farm woman. Perhaps she had exhausted the topic. If not, my question, even though it acknowledged the need for support at such times, certainly did not invite her to expand upon the feelings that both she and I knew might contradict some notion of what women ought to do and feel. She was comfortable enough to begin to consider the realities beyond the acceptable facade of the female role, but my question diverted the focus from her unique, individual reflections to the relative safety of women's clubs and activities, a more acceptable outlet for such feelings. In this case, my ability to listen, not Verna's memory, suffered from the constraints of internalized cultural boundaries. Until we can figure out how to release the brakes

that these boundaries place on both hearing and memory, our oral histories are likely to confirm the prevailing ideology of women's lives and rob women of their honest voices.

What I learned by listening carefully to my interviews is that women's oral history requires much more than a new set of questions to explore women's unique experiences and unique perspectives; we need to refine our methods for probing more deeply by listening to the levels on which the narrator responds to the original questions. To do so we need to listen critically to our interviews, to our responses as well as to our questions. We need to hear what women implied, suggested, and started to say but didn't. We need to interpret their pauses and, when it happens, their unwillingness or inability to respond. We need to consider carefully whether our interviews create a context in which women feel comfortable exploring the subjective feelings that give meaning to actions, things, and events, whether they allow women to explore "unwomanly" feelings and behaviors, and whether they encourage women to explain what they mean in their own terms.

When women talk about relationships, our responses can create an opportunity to talk about how much relationships enriched or diminished life experiences. When women talk about activities or events, they might find it easy to take blame for failures, but more sensitive responses may also make it possible to talk about feelings of competence or pride, even for women who do not consider such qualities very womanly. When women talk about what they have done, they may also want to explore their perceptions of the options they thought they had and how they feel about their responses. We can probe the costs that sometimes accompany choices, the means for accommodating and compensating for such costs, and how they are evaluated in retrospect. We can make it easier for women to talk about the values that may be implicit in their choices or feelings. When women reveal feelings or experiences that suggest conflict, we can explore what the conflict means and what form it takes. We can be prepared to expect and permit discussions of anger. If our questions are general enough, women will be able to reflect upon their experience and choose for themselves which experiences and feelings are central to their sense of their past.

The language women use to explore the above topics will be all the richer when they have ample opportunity to explain and clarify what they mean. When they use words and phrases like "nervous breakdown," "support," "close," "visiting," and "working together," they should have an opportunity to explain what they mean in their own terms. With letters and diaries we can only infer what individuals mean by the language they use; with oral interviews we can ask them. As they discuss examples, the particularities of their experiences often begin to emerge from behind the veil of familiar and ambiguous terms.

As a result of my discussions with Dana, a trained therapist, I have developed a new appreciation for oral history's potential for exploring questions

of self-concept and -consciousness, for documenting questions of value and meaning in individuals' reflections upon their past. Important distinctions remain between oral history and therapeutic interviews, but as we shed our specific agendas the women we interview will become freer to tell their own stories as fully, completely, and honestly as they desire.

Interview Analyses: Listening for Meaning—

Dana Jack

I have been using oral interviews in research on depression among women and on moral reasoning among practicing attorneys.⁵ In broad terms, both studies examine the interactions among social institutions, social roles, and women's consciousness. The women I interviewed are grappling with ideas about relationships, self-worth, career, and personal integrity in the context of society-wide changes in women's roles. As I listened to a woman's self-commentary, to her reflection upon her own thoughts and actions, I learned about her adaptation to her particular relationships and historical circumstances, especially her adaptation to the ideals of "good lawyer," "good wife," "good woman," to which she tried to conform.

I listened with an awareness that a person's self-reflection is not just a private, subjective act. The categories and concepts we use for reflecting upon and evaluating ourselves come from a cultural context, one that has historically demeaned and controlled women's activities. Thus, an exploration of the language and the meanings women use to articulate their own experience leads to an awareness of the conflicting social forces and institutions affecting women's consciousness. It also reveals how women act either to restructure or preserve their psychological orientations, their relationships, and their social contexts. This was true for two very different studies and populations—depressed women and practicing lawyers.

The first, and the hardest, step of interviewing was to learn to listen in a new way, to hold in abeyance the theories that told me what to hear and how to interpret what these women had to say. Depressed women, for example, told stories of the failure of relationships, an inability to connect with the person(s) with whom they wanted to experience intimacy. These were the expected stories, predicted by existing models, and the temptation was to interpret the stories according to accepted concepts and norms for "maturity" and "health." Because psychological theories have relied on men's lives and men's formulations for these norms, they explain women's psychological difference as deviant or "other."⁶ The interview is a critical tool for developing new frameworks and theories based on women's lives and women's formulations. But we are at an awkward stage: old theories are set aside or under suspicion and new ones are still emerging. We must therefore be especially attentive to the influences that shape what we hear and how we interpret. How do we listen to an interview when we have rejected the old frameworks

for interpretation and are in the process of developing new ones? How can an interview pull us beyond existing frameworks so that we stretch and expand them?

First, we must remember that the researcher is an active participant in qualitative research. My initial training was as a therapist, and the practice of listening to others while also attending to my own response to them has helped in conducting interviews. Theodore Reik calls this quiet involvement of the self "listening with the third ear."⁷ As a researcher, I have learned that critical areas demanding attention are frequently those where I think I already know what the woman is saying. This means I am already appropriating what she says to an existing schema, and therefore I am no longer really listening to *her*. Rather, I am listening to how what she says fits into what I think I already know. So I try to be very careful to ask each woman what she means by a certain word, or to make sure that I attend to what is missing, what literary critics call the "presence of the absence" in women's texts—the "hollows, centers, caverns within the work-places where activity that one might expect is missing . . . or deceptively coded."⁸

And what is it that is absent? Because women have internalized the categories by which to interpret their experience and activities, categories that "represent a deposit of the desires and disappointments of men,"⁹ what is often missing is the woman's own interpretation of her experience, or her own perspective on her life and activity. Interviews allow us to hear, if we will, the particular meanings of a language that both women and men use but that each translates differently. Looking closely at the language and the particular meanings of important words women use to describe their experience allows us to understand how women are adapting to the culture within which they live. When their behavior is observed from the outside, depressed women are called passive, dependent, masochistic, compliant, and victimized by their own learned helplessness. Yet, when I listened to the women's self-reflection, what became clear was that behind the so-called passive behavior of depressed women was the tremendous cognitive activity required to inhibit both outer actions and inner feelings in order to live up to the ideal of the "good" woman, particularly the good wife. Statements such as "I have to walk on eggshells in dealing with my husband," and "I have learned 'don't rock the boat'" show awareness of both their actions and their intended effects: not to cause discord.¹⁰

How do we listen to interviews without immediately leaping to interpretations suggested by prevailing theories? The first step is to immerse ourselves in the interview, to try to understand the person's story from her vantage point. I found that three ways of listening helped me understand the narrator's point of view. The first was to listen to the person's *moral language*. In the depression study, I heard things like: "I feel like I'm a failure," "I don't measure up," "I'm a liar, a cheat, and I'm no good." In the lawyer study, when lawyers were describing fulfilling the obligations of role, we heard statements such as:

"It's like being forced into a sex relationship you didn't anticipate. It's a screw job. It feels horrible to do something that you wouldn't do normally." Or "I have to contradict myself depending on what role I'm taking . . . it's sort of professional prostitution." Or finally, "Sometimes you feel almost like a pimp or something. . . . [I]t felt sleazy to cut the truth that finely."

Although very different in tone, these moral self-evaluative statements allow us to examine the relationship between self-concept and cultural norms, between what we value and what others value, between how we are told to act and how we feel about ourselves when we do or do not act that way. In a person's self-judgment, we can see which moral standards are accepted and used to judge the self, which values the person strives to attain. In the depression study, this was the key to learning about gender differences in the prevalence and dynamics of depression. Negative self-judgment affecting the fall in self-esteem is considered to be one of the key symptoms of depression. Research by Carol Gilligan and her colleagues indicates that women and men often use differing moral frameworks to guide their perception and resolution of moral problems.¹¹ Listening to the moral language of depressed women illuminated both the standards used to judge the self and the source of their despair. The women considered the failure of their relationships to be a *moral* failure; their sense of hopelessness and helplessness stemmed from despair about the inability to be an authentic, developing self within an intimate marriage while also living up to the moral imperatives of the "good woman."

Attending to the moral standards used to judge the self allows the researcher to honor the individuality of each woman through observing what values she is striving to attain. An oral interview, when structured by the narrator instead of the researcher, allows each woman to express her uniqueness in its full class, racial, and ethnic richness. Each person is free to describe her idiosyncratic interaction between self-image and cultural norms. Each person can tell us how she comes to value or devalue herself. During the interview, the researcher's role is to preserve and foster this freedom, and to restrict the imposition of personal expectations. When the woman, and not existing theory, is considered the expert on her own psychological experience, one can begin to hear the muted channel of women's experience come through.

In analyzing the depression study, for example, I heard how women use the language of the culture to deny what, on another level, they value and desire. A key word for depressed women is "dependency." Psychologists consider depressed women to be excessively dependent upon their relationships for a sense of self and self-esteem. But when I looked at how depressed women understand dependence, and how their negative evaluation of themselves as dependent affects their self-perception and their actions, the concept was cast in a new light.

In a first interview with a thirty-three-year-old depressed woman, the issue of dependence was central and problematic: "You know, I'm basically a very

dependent person to start with. And then you get me married and tied down to a home and start not working. . . ."

Asked what she meant by dependent, she responded:

I like closeness. I like companionship. I like somebody, an intimate closeness, even with a best friend. And I've never had that with my husband. . . . Sometimes I get frustrated with myself that I have to have that, you know.

I look at other people that seem so self-sufficient and so independent. I don't know—I just have always needed a closeness. And maybe I identified that as dependency.

. . . [S]ince I've been married I realize it's kind of a negative thing to be that way. I've tried to bury that need for closeness. And so I guess that has also contributed to a lot of my frustrations.

Saying that she "had been feeling that my need for intimacy and my need for that kind of a deep level of friendship or relationships with people was sort of bad," this woman began "to believe there was something the matter with me." In her attempt to bury her needs for closeness, she revealed the activity required to be passive, to try to live up to self-alienating images of "today's woman."

This interview contains an implicit challenge to prevalent understandings of dependence. Looking closely, we are able to see how this woman has judged her feelings against a dominant standard that says to need closeness makes one dependent, when one should be able to be self-sufficient and autonomous. Further, she reflects upon her own experience, her capabilities, and her needs not from the basis of who she is and what she needs but in terms of how her husband and others see her. Her capacity for closeness and intimacy goes unacknowledged as strength. Rather than a failure of the husband's response, the problem is identified as her "neediness." If a researcher went into this interview with the traditional notion of dependence in mind, s/he would find the hypothesis that depressed women are too dependent confirmed. But if one listens to the woman's own feelings about dependence, her confusion about what she knows she needs and what the culture says she *should* need, one begins to see part of the self-alienation and separation from feelings that is a key aspect of depression.

The second way of listening that allowed me to hear the voice of the subject instead of my own preconceptions was to attend to the subject's *meta-statements*. These are places in the interview where people spontaneously stop, look back, and comment about their own thoughts or something just said.

For example, in the lawyer study, a woman is answering the question, "What does morality mean to you?":

. . . [I]t seems to me anything that raises to mind hurting other people or

taking things away from other people or some sort of monetary gain for oneself. . . . And I suppose just how we interact with each other, if there's a contentiousness or bad feelings or bad blood between some people, that raises some moral issues because I guess I see us all as having a bit of a moral obligation to be nice to each other and to get along. So—do I sound much like a litigator?

Meta-statements alert us to the individual's awareness of a discrepancy within the self—or between what is expected and what is being said. They inform the interviewer about what categories the individual is using to monitor her thoughts, and allow observation of how the person socializes feelings or thoughts according to certain norms.¹² Women lawyers made many more meta-statements than men, indicating they were "watching" their own thinking. Because women have come into a legal system designed by men, for men, and because they still face discrimination, it is easy for them to develop an "onlooker" attitude of critical observation toward themselves.¹³ This woman looks at herself being looked at in law and notices the difference. Second, these remarks show how powerfully a stereotypic image of the successful, adversarial lawyer divides them from their personal experience and makes some women, early in their careers, question their ability within law. Finally, such comments reveal the lack of public validation of frameworks that women use to understand and value their own feelings and experiences.¹⁴

The third way of listening was to attend to the *logic of the narrative*, noticing the internal consistency or contradictions in the person's statements about recurring themes and the way these themes relate to each other. I listened to how the person strings together major statements about experience so I could understand the assumptions and beliefs that inform the logic and guide the woman's interpretation of her experience.

A woman I call Anna, age fifty-four, hospitalized twice for major depression, provides an example of a contradiction within the logic of her narrative, a contradiction that points to conflicting beliefs. Anna says:

I was telling my daughter-in-law, "I guess I was just born to serve others." But we shouldn't be born to serve other people, we should look after ourselves.

Anna constructs the most important issues in her life—how to balance the needs of her self with the needs of others—as an either/or choice that presents her with loss on either side. The choice is either loss of self or loss of other. Such dichotomous thinking leaves Anna with feelings of hopelessness about how to resolve the conflicts in her relationships, and restricts her perception of choice.

On the surface, Anna's statement simply pits the traditional female role against the new "me first" ethic of self-development. But, looking more deeply, one sees that she describes two visions of relationship: either isolation or

subordination. Through Anna's construction of her possibilities in relationship, one gains a glimpse of how specific historical ideas about women's roles and women's worth affect her own depression. Anna's vision of her self in relationship as either subordinated or isolated is profoundly influenced by a social context of inequality and competition. When unresolved personal issues intersect with conflicting social ideals that limit women's lives, that intersection increases the difficulty of forming a positive and realistic vision of self toward which one can strive.

Rather than conclude, as do cognitive theories of depression, that cognitive errors "cause" depression, observing this dichotomous thinking led me to see how the female social role is structured in thought and works to constrict women's perceptions of their relationships and their choices. Such logic of the narrative allowed me to see how a woman deals with conflicting cultural ideals, and how easy it is to feel depression as a personal failure rather than to recognize its social and historical aspects.

Conclusion

The process of sharing and critiquing our interviews has helped us sharpen our listening skills and improve our interviewing methods so that narrators feel more free to explore complex and conflicting experiences in their lives. Because of our divergent disciplinary interests, we have changed in different ways. The historian has become more alert to the subjective dimensions of events and activities; the psychologist has gained greater awareness of how the sociohistorical context can be read between the lines of a woman's "private" inner conflict. Both are more determined to discover how individual women define and evaluate their experience in their own terms.

Realizing the possibilities of the oral history interview demands a shift in methodology from information gathering, where the focus is on the right questions, to interaction, where the focus is on process, on the dynamic unfolding of the subject's viewpoint. It is the interactive nature of the interview that allows us to ask for clarification, to notice what questions the subject formulates about her own life, to go behind conventional, expected answers to the woman's personal construction of her own experience. This shift of focus from data gathering to interactive process affects what the researcher regards as valuable information. Those aspects of live interviews unavailable in a written text—the pauses, the laughter—all invite us to explore their meaning for the narrator. The exploration does not have to be intrusive; it can be as simple as "What did that [event] mean for you?"

This shift in focus, from information (data) gathering to interactive process, requires new skills on the researcher's part. In our view, it stimulates the development of a specific kind of readiness, the dimensions of which have been sketched in this paper. As Anderson has suggested, its most general aspects include an awareness that (1) actions, things, and events are accompa-

nied by subjective emotional experience that gives them meaning; (2) some of the feelings uncovered may exceed the boundaries of acceptable or expected female behavior; and (3) individuals can and must explain what they mean in their own terms. Jack described three ways of listening during the interview that sharpen the researcher's awareness of the feelings and thoughts that lie behind the woman's outwardly conventional story: (1) listening to the narrator's moral language; (2) attending to the meta-statements; and (3) observing the logic of the narrative. Incorporating these insights has helped us learn how to remain suspended and attentive on a fine line between accomplishing our research goals and letting the subject be in charge of the material in the interview.

While by no means conclusive or inclusive, the following points suggest further ways to sharpen our attentiveness to the interactive process of the interview:

A. Listening to the narrator

1. If the narrator is to have the chance to tell her own story, the interviewer's first question needs to be very open-ended. It needs to convey the message that in this situation, the narrator's interpretation of her experience guides the interview. For example, in the depression study, Jack started with, "Can you tell me, in your own mind what led up to your experience of depression?"
2. If she doesn't answer the interviewer's question, what and whose questions does the woman answer?
3. What are her feelings about the facts or events she is describing?
4. How does she understand what happened to her? What meaning does she make of events? Does she think about it in more than one way? How does she evaluate what she is describing?
5. What is being left out, what are the absences?

B. Listening to ourselves

1. Try not to cut the narrator off to steer her to what our concerns are.
2. Trust our own hunches, feelings, responses that arise through listening to others.
3. Notice our own areas of confusion, or of too great a certainty about what the woman is saying—these are areas to probe further.
4. Notice our personal discomfort; it can become a personal alarm bell alerting us to a discrepancy between what is being said and what the woman is feeling.

Oral history interviews are unique in that the interaction of researcher and subject creates the possibility of going beyond the conventional stories of women's lives, their pain and their satisfactions, to reveal experience in a less culturally edited form. But despite the value of this focus on the oral history

interview in its dynamic, interactive form, we must offer one word of caution. The researcher must always remain attentive to the moral dimension of interviewing and aware that she is there to follow the narrator's lead, to honor her integrity and privacy, not to intrude into areas that the narrator has chosen to hold back.¹⁵ This is another part of the specific kind of readiness the researcher brings to the interview: a readiness to be sensitive to the narrator's privacy while, at the same time, offering her the freedom to express her own thoughts and experiences, and listening for how that expression goes beyond prevailing concepts.

Notes

Public discussion of this collaborative work began at the National Women's Studies Association Conference held in Seattle, Washington, in June 1985 and continued with coauthors Susan Armitage and Judith Wittner in the *Oral History Review* 15 (Spring 1987): pp. 103–27.

1. See Shirley Ardener, ed., *Perceiving Women* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975), pp. xi–xxiii. In that volume, see also Edwin Ardener, "Belief and the Problem of Women," pp. 1–27, and Hillary Callan, "The Premise of Dedication: Notes Towards an Ethnography of Diplomats' Wives," pp. 87–104.
2. Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1988), pp. 30–31.
3. "Women's Oral History Resource Section," *Frontiers* 2 (Summer 1977): pp. 110–18.
4. Kathryn Anderson and others, interviews for the Washington Women's Heritage Project, Center for Pacific Northwest Studies, Western Washington University, Bellingham, Washington. In the following account, two interviews from the collection are cited: interview with Elizabeth Bailey, 1 July 1980; interview with Verna Friend, 31 July 1980.
5. Dana C. Jack, "Clinical Depression in Women: Cognitive Schemas of Self, Care and Relationships in a Longitudinal Study" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 1984); and Dana C. Jack, "Silencing the Self: The Power of Social Imperatives in Female Depression," in *Women and Depression: A Lifespan Perspective*, ed. R. Formanek and A. Gurian (New York: Springer Publishing Co., 1987). The lawyer study is in Rand Jack and Dana C. Jack, *Moral Vision and Professional Decisions: The Changing Values of Women and Men Lawyers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
6. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).
7. Theodore Reik, *Listening with the Third Ear* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1948).
8. Carolyn Heilbrun and Catharine Stimpson, "Theories of Feminist Criticism: A Dialogue," in *Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Josephine Donovan (Lexington, KY.: The University Press of Kentucky, 1975), pp. 61–73.
9. Karen Horney, *Feminine Psychology*, ed. Harold Kelman (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1967), p. 56.
10. Jack, "Clinical Depression in Women," p. 177.
11. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*. See also C. Gilligan, J. Taylor, and J. Ward, eds., *Mapping the Moral Domain* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).
12. See Arlie Russell Hochschild, "Emotion Work, Feeling Rule, and Social Structure," *American Journal of Sociology* 85 (November 1979): pp. 551–75.
13. The onlooker phenomenon is described by Marcia Westkott, *The Feminist Legacy of Karen Horney* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986).
14. Jean Baker Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), writes: "When . . . we can think only in terms given by the dominant culture, and when that culture not only does not attend to our own experiences but specifically denies and

devalues them, we are left with no way of conceptualizing our lives. Under these circumstances, a woman is often left with a global, undefined sense that she must be wrong" (p. 57).

15. The American Psychological Association (APA) has adopted ethical standards for the treatment of research subjects that provide some guidelines for thinking through issues of researcher intrusiveness. A copy of the APA Ethical Principles may be obtained from the APA Ethics Office, 1200 17th Street NW, Washington, DC 20036.

7. Hugo Slim and Paul Thompson, with Olivia Bennett and Nigel Cross, "Ways of Listening," *The Oral History Reader* (Routledge: 1998): 114-125.

10 Ways of listening

Hugo Slim and Paul Thompson, with Olivia Bennett and Nigel Cross

Hugo Slim was Senior Overseas Research Officer for Save the Children Fund, and is now Director, Centre for Development and Emergency Planning (CENDEP) at Oxford Brookes University. Paul Thompson is Research Professor at the University of Essex. Olivia Bennett is Director, Oral Testimony Programme, Panos Institute, London. Nigel Cross was Research Director of the Sahel Oral History Project, and is now Executive Director of the Panos Institute, London. Extracted with permission from Hugo Slim and Paul Thompson, with Olivia Bennett and Nigel Cross (eds), *Listening for Change: Oral History and Development*, London, Panos, 1993, pp. 61–94. This book was published as part of the Panos Institute's Oral Testimony Programme, which explores and illustrates the potential of oral testimony in the development process; and gathers, publishes and amplifies the views and experiences of individuals and communities in the South on specific development themes.

[. . .] While the interview is now a common form of enquiry and communication in the West – where a job interview is a prerequisite for most employment, the media feature endless interviews, both informative and entertaining, and few people escape having to take part in polls and questionnaires – this is by no means a universal experience. As British anthropologist Charles Briggs has observed, in some societies the interview is not an established type of speech event, and there can often be an incompatibility between standard interview techniques and indigenous systems of communication.¹ This incompatibility can create problems for people who, as interviewees, are forced to express themselves in an unfamiliar speech format. In particular, the interview form has a tendency to put unnatural pressure on people to find ready answers, to be concise and to summarise a variety of complex experiences and intricate knowledge.² It may also mean that researchers and interviewers unwittingly violate local communication norms relating to turn-taking, the order of topics for discussion or various rituals attached to storytelling. In some societies, individual interviews are considered dangerously intimate encounters. In others, the recounting of group history can be a sacred ritual and certain people must be consulted before others. Sometimes a number of clearly prescribed topics should be used to start proceedings, while other topics may be taboo, or should not be introduced until a particular level of intimacy and trust has been achieved.

In many societies, community or clan history is the vested interest of particular people or a designated caste, such as the *griots* of West Africa.

They will often adapt their account to a particular audience, tailoring it to focus on the ancestors of their listeners. Alongside the right to tell, there is often a reward: payment in cash or kind for the teller. Storytelling may also have a seasonal dimension. In Ladakh, for example, winter is the time for telling stories. It is considered an inappropriate activity during the busy summer months when the agricultural workload is at its peak, as a local saying makes clear: 'As long as the earth is green, no tale should be told.'³ It would be an ill-prepared and disappointed oral testimony project that set out to collect traditional stories in Ladakh during the summer!

There may also be special rituals of rendition which require certain elders to act as witnesses and checks on the history or stories being recounted. The proper setting for the recounting of a community history may be a feast with a minimum number present. Such conditions affect the collection of oral history and can sometimes even make it impossible, as Lomo Zachary, a Sudanese researcher, found when he tried to gather information about the origins and relations of various Ugandan clans living as refugees in South Sudan:

I approached several clan historians but all were asking me for a 'Calabash' – meaning some liquor . . . After requesting some liquor most told me that they were unable to narrate me any stories because there were no esteemed witnesses or observers. Usually when such clan histories are told to clansmen or a group of interested young clansmen there is someone also well versed in the clan history who makes corrections when necessary. Sometimes they have long debates on a controversial item in the history. For example, the storyteller might skip or include a false family line of a particular clansman. Here the observer or witness has to interpose immediately with concrete proofs . . . So all gave me a similar response: 'My son, I am indeed grateful for your wise request for knowing where we originated from, how we have come to be separated and how we handle our affairs. I could have given you an elaborate history of our people but as you know, we are all scattered at this time. We have lost all our animals. There are no more tribal palavers where our people could be gathered . . . It could be during such sittings that our wise children could now put down all our cultures and traditions. Please accept my sincere apologies.'⁴

It is critically important to be aware of these different conceptual and cultural dimensions to interviewing and to historical information. A vital part of any preparation for an oral testimony project should involve learning about the norms of what Briggs describes as people's 'communicative repertoire': its particular forms, its special events, its speech categories and its taboos.⁵ The most fundamental rule is to be sensitive to customary modes of speech and communication and allow people to speak on their own terms.

METHODS OF COLLECTION

There are a number of different kinds of interview. The most wide-ranging form is the individual life story. This allows a person to narrate the story of his or her whole life in all its dimensions: personal, spiritual, social and economic. Another kind is the single-issue interview which seeks to gain testimony about a particular aspect or period of a person's life. The object might be to hear about someone's working life, perhaps with an emphasis on indigenous knowledge, or to listen to their experiences during an event or episode such as a famine or a time of conflict or displacement. In addition to individual interviews, oral testimony can also be collected in focus group discussions, community interviews or by diary interviewing. When choosing the method(s) to be employed, it is important to bear in mind the objectives of the project and the kind of testimony required.

Life story interviews

These are normally private, one-to-one encounters between interviewer and narrator. Sessions should be held at a time convenient to the interviewee and in a suitable location, preferably somewhere which offers seclusion, comfort and familiarity. There is often no better place than the narrator's home.

In some societies, a one-to-one interview may not be acceptable, particularly for women, and one or more observers will need to be present. This can serve the additional function of testing and cross-checking information as observers interrupt to challenge or correct the interviewee. However, it can also mean that information is distorted. In some situations observers can act as censors and indeed may be there specifically to intimidate: husbands observing wives; parents observing children; or officials observing a community living in fear or repression.⁶ While it is important to conform to the communicative repertoire of the people being interviewed, it pays to be aware that there may be more dubious aspects to observation and extra participation. Gender can also be an inhibiting factor and as a general rule interviewer and narrator should be the same sex.⁷ [...]

An average life story interview may need two or three sessions and can take anything from one to eight hours. Breaking up the interview into separate sessions gives people time to remember and explore the past and makes recollection more of a process than an occasion. It takes the pressure off a single session, when the narrator might feel obliged to cram everything in. Things triggered in one session can be reflected upon by the narrator in peace and then brought to the next. The interviewer can similarly benefit from the pause between sessions.

It is important to remember that a life story interview can often have a profound effect on the interviewee, who may never have told anyone their memories before and certainly is unlikely to have recalled their whole life in the course of a few hours. For most people, recounting their life story is a

positive, if emotional, experience from which they can gain much satisfaction and a renewed sense of perspective, but the listener should always ensure that the narrator is comfortable at the end of the interview and is surrounded by the support they need, whether from family or friends.

Family-tree interviewing

In the course of a life story interview, the narrator will describe many members of his or her family from contemporary or previous generations. These people will obviously be mentioned largely in terms of their impact on the narrator. However, it is possible to focus on these other family members in more depth by asking the narrator to supply second-hand accounts of their relatives' lives. This technique is perhaps best described as family-tree interviewing. [...]

It obviously takes up much more time, but it does give an interesting ripple effect to any study. It is perhaps most useful when one is looking for trends, rather than the specific detail of direct personal experience. An alternative, which is still more time-consuming but also a more direct measure of change, is to interview two generations from the same family.

Single-issue testimony

Single-issue interviews may be carried out on a one-to-one or group basis, and focus on a specific aspect of the narrator's life. As such they can be shorter than a life story, but more detailed. Single-issue interviews can yield valuable insights for many development and relief activities. They are the main method of learning about a particular event, such as drought, or for an investigation into a particular area of knowledge or experience. For example, they might involve interviewing farmers about land use and water conservation methods, or a traditional healer about botany and plant use. They require the interviewer to have more detailed background or technical knowledge of the subject matter than is necessary for a more wide-ranging life story.

Diary interviewing

Diary interviewing is a method which is increasingly being used by social scientists. It involves selecting a sample of people who contribute regular diary entries as part of a continuing and long-term study of social trends. Such a study might ask people to report on specific issues or it might seek more general life story material. The participants make a commitment to keep a written or oral, tape-recorded diary. Entries might be made on a daily, weekly, monthly or annual basis, and are then sent in and analysed centrally, over time.

Alternatively, diary interviewing can involve a less rigorous procedure

whereby the participant is interviewed at key moments over a period of time. In a study of indigenous agricultural practices, for example, these might include particular times during the cropping calendar such as land preparation, sowing, weeding, harvesting and threshing. In a more general life story study, such moments might include religious festivals, rites of passage or different stages of educational or working life. The objective of diary interviewing is therefore to collect a running progress of a person's experience over time and not just retrospectively.

Group interviews

Oral testimony can also be collected through group work. Indeed, in many societies, group interviews may be more in keeping with the customary ways of communicating. If the concept of a one-to-one interview seems unusual or unnatural, the format of group discussions or public meetings may be more familiar and oral testimony collection can be adapted accordingly.

Groups can bring out the best and the worst in people. Sometimes, by taking the focus off individuals, they make them less inhibited, but the opposite can occur just as easily. A group may subtly pressurise people towards a socially acceptable testimony or a mythical representation of the past or of a current issue which everyone feels is 'safe' to share and which may be in some sense idealised. Communal histories gathered in this way can involve a powerful process of myth construction or fabulation which misrepresents the real complexity of the community. At worst, this can develop into a persistent false consciousness which can only tolerate the good things, and remembers 'how united we all were', or which exaggerates the totality of suffering and recalls 'how bad everything was'.⁸ The voices of the less confident, the poorer and the powerless, are less likely to be heard, and so the variety of experience and the clashes and conflicts within a community may well remain hidden.

But groups can also be especially productive, as members 'spark' off one another. Memories are triggered, facts can be verified or checked, views can be challenged and the burning issues of the past can be discussed and argued about again in the light of the present. Group work can also increase rapport between project workers/interviewers and the community, encouraging people to come forward for one-to-one sessions if appropriate. Two kinds of group work are appropriate to oral testimony collection: small focus group discussions and larger community interviews.

Focus group discussions developed as an important part of market research, but are now used widely on an inter-disciplinary basis as a means of assessing attitudes and opinions. In this context, they are a particularly useful forum for discussing both the past and the major issues of the day. Focus groups are particularly appropriate for collecting testimony from people who may be very reserved on a one-to-one basis, but draw confidence from being in a familiar group. Children are a good example of this.

The idea is to bring a group together – preferably between five and twelve

people – to discuss a particular issue or a number of issues. They should be a homogeneous group made up of participants of the same sex and largely equal in social status, knowledge and experience so that confidence is generally high and no-one feels threatened. The discussion should last for one to two hours, with the participants sitting comfortably and facing each other in a circle. Several consecutive sessions can be held if necessary.

Social scientist Krishna Kumar notes that the main emphasis on a focus group is the interaction between the participants themselves, and not that between participants and interviewer.⁹ Focus groups are therefore guided by a 'moderator' rather than an interviewer, whose role is to steer the discussion and ask some probing questions by adopting a posture of 'sophisticated naïvete'. This encourages the group to talk in depth with confidence, but also to be ready to spell things out for the outsider. The moderator's role also involves countering the two main constraints on a focus group: dominance of the proceedings by so-called 'monopolisers'; and a sense of group pressure which can build up from a majority viewpoint and which then discourages a minority of participants from expressing their views.

Community interviews involve larger groups and may resemble public meetings more than group discussions. Their emphasis is different, too. The main interaction of a community interview is between the interviewer and the community. The ideal size is around thirty people, but no more, and two interviewers will be needed for such an event. Their role is a directly questioning one, but they must still take responsibility for balancing participation in the meeting with guiding the interview. Having two interviewers can be confusing and their respective roles should be well defined in advance of the interview, to ensure that they do not speak at the same time or interrupt each other's train of enquiry.

The advantage of a community interview is the opportunity it provides for gathering a wide cross-section of people together at one time. This is particularly useful at the outset of a project, for example, when background information is being collected or future interviewees are being sought and selected. It is also useful midway or at the end of the process of collecting interviews, when certain details or views need to be tested or checked. It can provide the occasion for a number of 'straw polls' and hand counts in order to learn how many people share experiences or hold similar views. Finally, both group and community meetings are especially useful for the 'return' of oral testimony. They can act as a review mechanism and can encourage decision-making based on the testimonies collected. [. . .]

PROPS AND MNEMONICS

Questions are not the only way to inspire a narrator and jog the memory. Physical objects, such as old tools, photographs and traditional costumes or artefacts, can provide the focus for a more detailed testimony or group discussion. A farmer will often be more eloquent when holding an implement

and describing its function. A refugee may find much more to say when looking at a picture of home. However, any prop should be carefully chosen, otherwise they will tend to distract the narrator and divert the interview instead of giving it depth.

One prop which is central to the communicative repertoire of Native Americans is the talking-stick.¹⁰ This is a ritual stick which lies in the centre of any group of people who are there to talk or listen, whether it be at a political meeting or a storytelling session. In order to speak a person must go into the centre of the circle and pick up the stick. The speaker must then hold it while they talk and replace it when they stop. The stick places certain responsibilities upon speaker and listeners alike. It requires the latter to listen actively and patiently, but also tends to curb excessive talkativeness on the part of garrulous speakers and gives courage to the shy. Similar indigenous speech rituals should be employed wherever they exist.

Revisiting a place and conducting an interview *in situ* or during a 'walk-about' can also free the mind and allow someone to recall the past more easily. Such walkabouts might include: visiting a sparsely wooded watershed which used to be a forest, in order to discuss environmental history and change; returning to a mine or factory which used to be a place of work, to discuss child labour; or examining an abandoned and broken pump, to discuss irrigation techniques and land use.¹¹

Role play can also be useful as a mnemonic or memory aid, particularly in groups, but also in one-to-one interviews (if you had been the elder what would you have done?). Role play not only releases memory through the re-enacting of situations or events (a certain dance, a typical working day, a particularly important meeting), but also allows people to be less inhibited as they narrate events under the cover of a different persona. Hearing old stories is another good way to jog the memory, and a song or tune from the past can be particularly evocative, taking the mind right back to the time the interviewer is investigating.

VISUAL TECHNIQUES

While props and mnemonics help to jog people's memories, some visual techniques may assist them to express the past more clearly. Many oral testimony projects rely on straightforward interviewing alone, but additional visual methods can be helpful when testimony is being gathered among groups unfamiliar with the interview form. Creating a diagram or making a model can take the place of a potentially awkward personal interaction between interviewer and narrator; or may complement, assist or encourage people's verbal performance. Such material can then be displayed alongside the testimony in any report, exhibition or book resulting from a project.

Robert Chambers has described a range of techniques which can be used by rural people and development workers to give expression to various

aspects of the past or recent past. These include time lines and biographies (including ethno-biographies); historical maps and models; historical transects; and trend diagrams and estimates.¹² Older people in the community usually play a key role in providing and shaping the relevant historical information in these techniques.

A *time line* is a list of key events, changes and 'landmarks' in the past, written up in chronological order on a large sheet of paper. It is often a useful way of putting an individual's or a community's history into perspective by identifying the broad framework of events which shaped their past. It can therefore be a good way into a life story interview or focus group discussion and may also provide the basis for the interview map. Figure 1 shows a time line produced by a village in Tamil Nadu, India, stretching from 1932 to 1990.¹³

A visual *biography* is a similar kind of chart which traces the 'life' of a particular phenomenon, whether it be a famine, a certain crop or diet, or the

1932	- TANK UNDERTAKEN BY GOVT
1935-1946	- ESTABLISHMENT OF VERANDA SCHOOL BY GOVT
1947	- INDEPENDENCE
1948	- 16 WERE DIED DUE TO CHOLERA, FAMINE
1954	- ROAD, RHATCHED SCHOOL
1956-1964	- CYCLONE, FLOODS
1966	- NEW SCHOOL BUILDING
1968	- AGAIN CHOLERA, 4 WERE DIED
1970	- ELECTRICITY FACILITY, BRIDGE 100 FAMILIES MIGRATED BECAUSE OF SEVERE DROUGHT
1977	- ESTABLISHMENT OF NOON-MEAL CENTER
1978	- COMMUNITY WELL, 2 BORE WELL FOR DRINKING PURPOSE
1983	- TIN P
1984	- ELECTION BOYCOTT. ONE MORE BORE WELL. DRINKING WATER OVERHEAD TANK. STREET TAPS BY GOVT
1984-1985	- NON FORMAL EDUCATION BY GOVT
1987	- SPEECH
1989	- GROUP HOUSES FOR 20 HARIJANS
1990	- HEAVY CROP DAMAGE BECAUSE OF FLOOD

Figure 1 Time line: Tamil Nadu, India, 1932-1990

development of a kind of technology. These biographies are particularly useful for single-issue histories and can form the framework for the interview.

Maps can be drawn on paper or on the ground with sticks, chalks, pens or paints. Those worked on the ground can be photographed or transcribed on to paper before they are destroyed. Maps of the past are particularly useful in illustrating ecological histories and showing previous land-use patterns, plant and animal coverage. Figure 2 shows the landscape change over the past twenty-five years in Abela Sipa Peasant Association in Ethiopia.¹⁴

Three-dimensional historical models using local materials have aided discussion on erosion and other environmental and agricultural concerns. In another example described by Chambers, villagers from Seganahalli in Karnataka, India, made two models on the ground. One showed their watershed as they remembered it fifty years earlier with trees growing on the rocky hills, and the other as they saw it now, with no trees and serious erosion. The striking difference between the two models began an important debate about what should be done, in which the models were used to present and explore the various options.¹⁵ Thus historical analysis can be the trigger to development debate and it can also be used to generate so-called 'dream' models and maps, expressions of people's hopes for the future which can then form the basis of development action. *Historical transects* are another kind of diagram which represent changing conditions through time. Again they have traditionally been used in agro-ecosystem analysis and are usually compiled by walking through an area with some of the older inhabitants and recording their recollections of various conditions at key moments identified by the

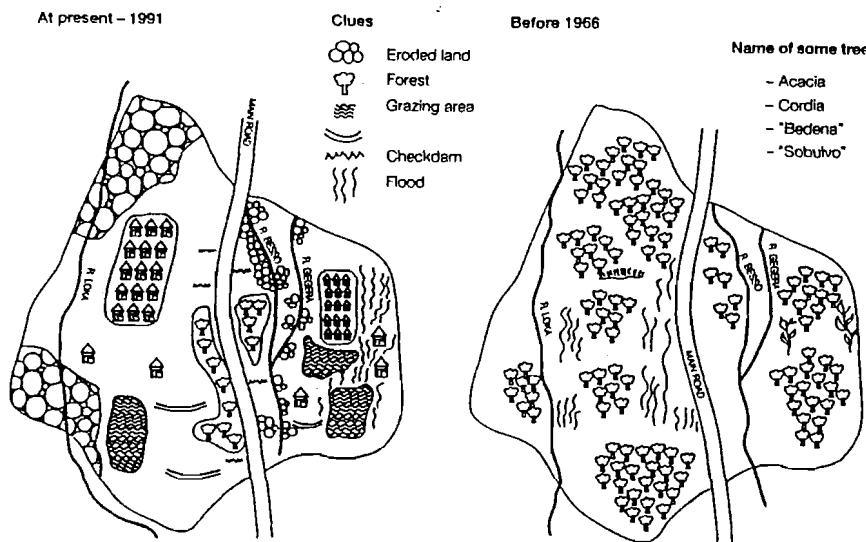


Figure 2 Landscape change: Abela Sipa Peasant Association, Ethiopia

time line. Figure 3 is a transect through time illustrating land-use trends in a village in East Java.¹⁶

Three main kinds of chart have been used by rural people to estimate or measure change and historical trends: counters, pie charts and straightforward trend lines. Stones, seeds or pieces of stick can be used as *counters* representing absolute or relative values. People can pile up these counters along a simple time line to express absolute values for things like harvest yields, price changes or population changes. They can also place counters in a matrix diagram to express relative values or scores which indicate certain differences over time. For example, one matrix might allow a narrator to express her preferences for certain crops and income-generating activities during five key years in the past.

Pie charts drawn on paper or the ground are another useful way by which people can express relative values and how these changed over time. Figure 4 shows two pie charts made by three elderly farmers which illustrate changing

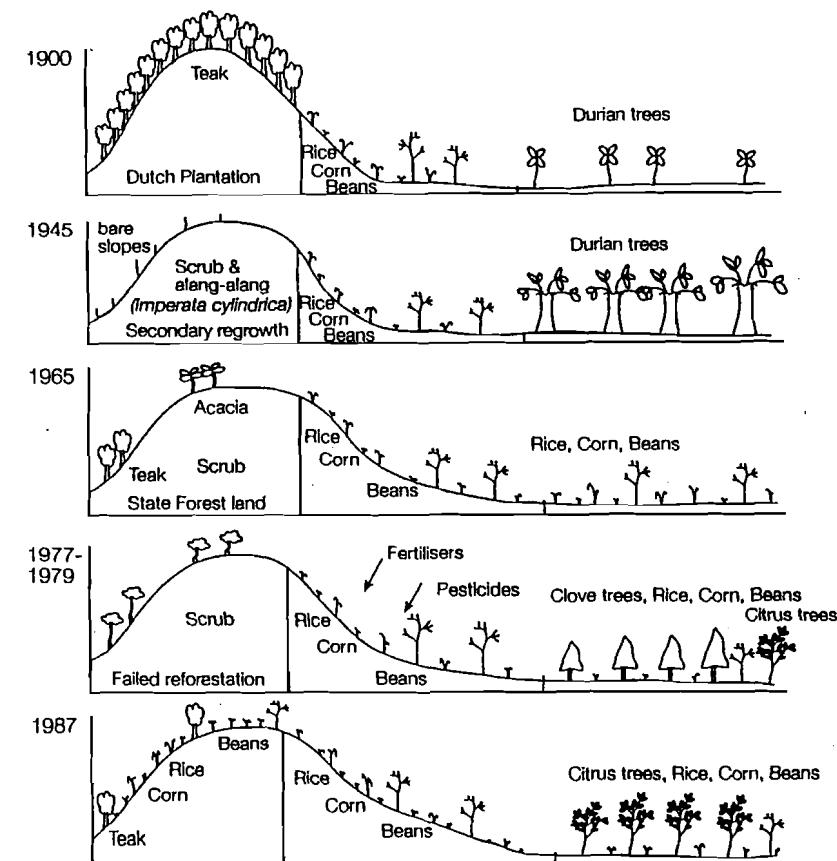


Figure 3 Land-use trends in a village in East Java

cropping and land-use patterns in a village near Dehra Dun, Uttar Pradesh, India, between 1950 and 1990.¹⁷

Trend lines are simple graphs in which people use a curved line to illustrate historic trends. A normal histogram or bar-chart can be used for the same purpose. Figure 5 shows a trend line drawn in the dust by an old farmer in Mahbubnagar district, Andhra Pradesh, India. The lines illustrate the increasing and decreasing trends relating to farmyard manure, pests, soil fertility, and fertiliser use.

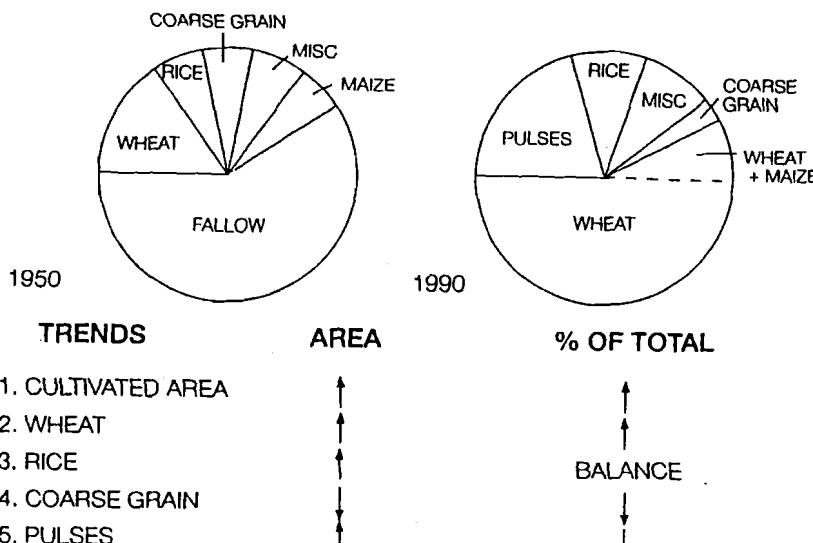


Figure 4 Cropping and land-use patterns in a village near Dehra Dun, Uttar Pradesh, India, 1950–1990

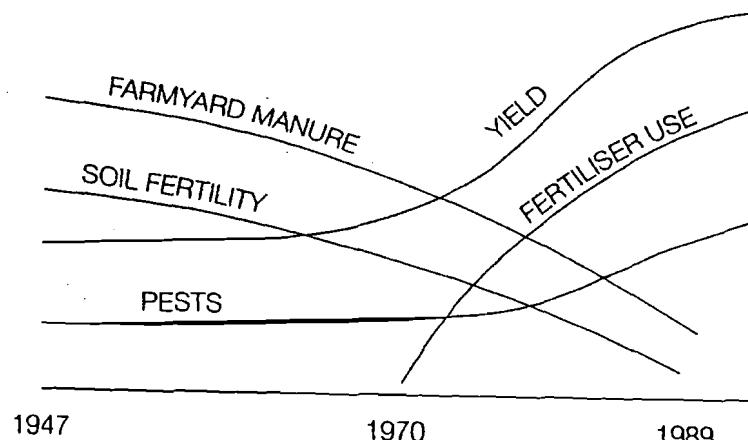


Figure 5 Trend line for Mahbubnagar district, Andhra Pradesh, India, 1947–1989

fertiliser and yields over forty years.¹⁸ Participatory diagrams are another way in which people can describe a past event and the processes it generated (flow diagrams) or the effect it had on their lives (impact diagrams).¹⁹

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DANIEL JAMES

Doña María's Story

LIFE HISTORY, MEMORY, AND
POLITICAL IDENTITY

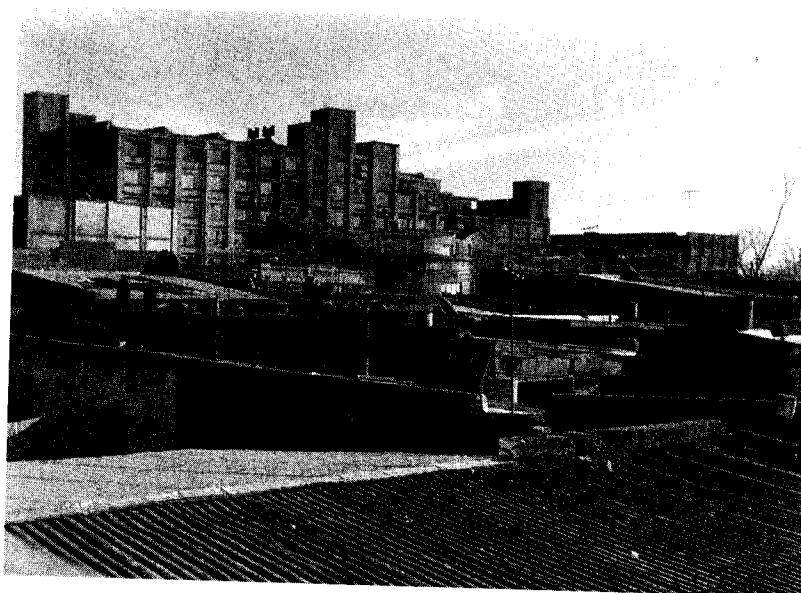
LISTENING IN THE COLD

*The Practice of Oral History in an Argentine
Meatpacking Community*

The trick is not to get yourself into some inner correspondence of spirit with your informants. Preferring like the rest of us to call their souls their own, they are not going to be altogether keen about such an effort anyhow. The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to.—Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*

I believe that we can promise to tell the truth, I believe in the transparency of language, and in the existence of the complete subject who expresses himself through it. . . . but of course I also believe the contrary. . . . “In the field of the subject there is no referent.” . . . we indeed know all this. . . . we are not so dumb, but once this precaution has been taken, we go on as if we did not know it. Telling the truth about the self, constituting the self as a complete subject—it is a fantasy. In spite of the fact that autobiography is impossible, this in no way prevents it from existing.—Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*

I first met Doña María Roldán in August 1985 in the house of Cipriano Reyes. I was beginning to study the origins of Peronist unionism in Berisso and had made Reyes's acquaintance. He had introduced me to several of his old union and “laborista” colleagues, and



Shell of the Swift meatpacking plant seen across the roofs of the conventillos of the calle Nueva York, Berisso, 1996. Courtesy Norberto Gullari.

one day he announced we would be meeting the "first female shop steward" in the Swift plant, and someone who had played an important part in the emergence of the union in Berisso. The meeting in Reyes's front room was a little formal. Doña María evidently had been told about the English professor who was researching the old days of Berisso's golden past, the emergence of the meatpacking union, the mobilization of 17 October 1945, the formation of the Partido Laborista, and, of course, the role of Cipriano Reyes. Although I don't think that there had been any formal prior arrangement of an appropriate script, it was clear that during our meeting Reyes, as he was in other similar meetings, was very much the master of ceremonies, and Doña María willingly, and convincingly, played her role. The meeting lasted perhaps forty minutes, and I filed it away as an interesting encounter, and I filed Doña María away, too, as a potential future source of information on Berisso's social and labor history.

I next met her eighteen months later when I returned to do a

more prolonged stretch of research and began to seek out informants who could provide me with oral testimonies about Berisso's past, in particular its labor history and the history of work in the meatpacking plants. Although she had clearly kept to Reyes's script in our previous meeting, I had been impressed with her articulateness and apparently well-tuned memory. The fact that she had been among the first group of shop floor representatives in Swift drew me to her. She had been an active participant in the struggles of the 1940s, a militant in both the union and the Partido Laborista. I first went to her house in Berisso in January 1987, with the aim principally of obtaining from her empirical information that I was missing in my attempt to reconstruct the unionization drive within the plants. There was also a hope on my part that I would emerge with the difficult to define but always sought-after commodity—a "feeling" for the period by way of some appropriate anecdotes Doña María might be able to recall for me. I assumed that our conversation, which I intended to record, would last a few hours. As it turned out, I ended up recording some thirty hours of interview over a nine-month period, visiting her house on average once a week to tape conversations, though I was frequently there more often.

One reason for the change in my intentions was clearly the self-evident one that I found Doña María's testimony of great interest. Yet this was not primarily for the reasons I had initially intended to interview her. The testimony, which came to over six hundred pages of typed script, is a rich, multilayered, often puzzling narrative. It does contain passages that add considerably to an understanding of many basic issues that I wished to document and understand better. Doña María's account, for example, of the difficulties encountered by the activists during the unionization drive of 1944–45, or her recounting of her experiences, and those of other women in her section, of the Taylorist system of work organization, the "Standard," adds considerably to our objective knowledge of these issues. Indeed, the collection of oral testimony can be of enormous help in constructing the history of a working-class community such as Berisso.

On the one hand, oral history can provide access to basic empirical information unobtainable from more traditional sources, such as

newspapers, municipal archives, and company records. In Berisso, for example, knowledge of the early history of the union movement in the packing plants is difficult to obtain from sources such as union newspapers for the simple reason that until the 1940s there was no such thing. It is only in the 1940s that a union newspaper appears with any regularity. Many of the sources traditionally used for historical research in working-class communities are, therefore, not available in the case of Berisso.

It would scarcely seem necessary at this juncture to argue that oral history can offer important access to areas of historical knowledge. The debate on objectivity and empirical validity with its explicit privileging of the written document can no longer be sustained on the old terms. The shifting in the terms of the debate can be traced in the difference between a book such as Paul Thompson's *The Voice of the Past*, with its essentially defensive posture concerning issues such as objectivity, the failings of memory and representativity, and a text such as *The Myths We Live By*, published a decade later and edited by Thompson and Raphael Samuel with its explicit celebration of the unique status of the knowledge generated by oral sources.¹

Oral sources can also take us beyond the limits of existing empirical data. Although we do know a considerable amount about the implementation of rationalization schemes within the plants from sources such as company archives, how the workers felt about these changes is far more difficult to deduce from this sort of material. Doña María's account addresses the issue of how these schemes were experienced and handled by historical actors. Oral testimony speaks far more directly to this domain of working-class experience. The usefulness of oral testimony goes, of course, beyond the working environment. We have, for example, the casual mention in conversation that it would be unthinkable in the Berisso of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s for a man to go out socially on a Saturday night without packing his revolver. It was simply part of his dress—a normative accompaniment. This opens up a social and cultural universe largely beyond the realm of official statistics. Where such statistics do surface in sources such as newspapers and police and judicial archives they refer to basic indices of criminality; or perhaps more precisely to those occasions when violence occurred. The

oral statement, however, when contextualized, speaks to a far more mundane, taken-for-granted level of experience. In a related vein, the use of perfect, Oxford-intonated BBC English by Don Rodolfo Caride when I started to ask him questions—an English acquired entirely on the job from his English bosses in the time and motion department of the Swift plant—bespoke a world of deference and paternalism, cultural power and symbolic violence.

In the case of Doña María's narrative it became increasingly clear to me as we talked that although her testimony was a rich potential source of empirical information, it was both limited in this sense and also involved something else besides. The limits were, of course, partly to do with the problem of memory, its limits, its failing, and its distortions. The issue of memory will certainly be a focal point of the chapters that follow. But what of the "something else" that I intuited as being involved in Doña María's narrative? One reason for the problems, the limits confronted in using this narrative primarily as a source of empirical knowledge, is that it involves a largely passive role for Doña María, as simply a repository of more or less coherent, more or less available, historical data. Yet it was clear to me before long that even in response to my most "factual," "information-seeking" questions Doña María was narrating, telling me a story about her life, reconstructing her past in a selective way that would both legitimize it to me and make sense of it to herself.

Contemporary oral history now rarely invokes the kind of claim to having privileged access to hitherto ignored historical facts and experience based on the practice of a sort of "naïve realism." Influenced by trends in literary criticism that emphasize the importance of narrative and the construction of texts—and that have tended by extension to see historical reality as another text—oral historians are increasingly aware of the limits of oral testimony as a source for expanding our stock of historical facts about the recent past. The form of oral narrative is often taken now to be as significant as the content.

Increasingly, oral historians such as Luisa Passerini, Ronald Grele, and Alessandro Portelli have begun to challenge us to treat the subjective, textual quality of oral testimony as unique opportunities rather than the obstacles to historical objectivity and empirical rigor.

they had seemed to an earlier generation of practitioners.² As the editors of *The Myths We Live By* contend: "At the same time the individuality of each life story ceases to be an awkward impediment to generalization, and becomes instead a vital document of the construction of consciousness."³ Portelli is equally forthright. At the start of one of his essays he offers both a concession and an affirmation: "The oral sources used in this essay are not always fully reliable in point of fact. Rather than being a weakness, this is, however, their strength: errors, inventions and myths lead us through and beyond facts to their meanings."⁴ In particular, oral testimony enables us to approach the issue of agency and subjectivity in history.

Yet once more we must beware of falling back on the assumptions of a naive realism, of presupposing a mimetic quality in oral narratives as they express consciousness and feeling. For the issue of using oral narratives to gain access to the domain of consciousness, of "lived experience," is one of the issues complicated by an attention to oral testimony as narrative. If oral testimony is indeed a window onto the subjective in history—the cultural, social, and ideological universe of historical actors—then it must be said that the view it affords is not a transparent one that simply reflects thoughts, feelings as they really were/are. At the very least the image is bent, the glass of the window unclear.

Thus the relationship between personal narratives and history—as indeed between autobiography in general and history—is complex and problematic. Life stories are cultural constructs that draw on a public discourse structured by class and gender conventions. They also make use of a wide spectrum of possible roles, self-representations, and available narratives. As such, we have to learn to read these stories and the symbols and logic embedded in them if we are to attend to their deeper meaning and do justice to the complexity found in the lives and historical experiences of those who recount them.

We also need to be aware of the tension that exists between the notion of oral testimony as an empirical information-gathering tool and the notion of the oral interview as the production of a joint narrative produced by the interviewer and the interviewed. The text produced by this "conversational narrative" is not only structured

by cultural conventions. It is also an essentially social construction, permeated by the interchange between the interviewer and her subject, and also permeated by other communal and national narratives. In addition, it has a profoundly ideological character.⁵ If literary criticism has been instrumental in fostering a growing sensitivity of oral historians to the narrative qualities of the texts they study, we must also credit the influence of postmodernist anthropology for emphasizing the complex authority relations involved in the production of an oral text. The authorial shaping of ethnographic narratives and the attendant textual and rhetorical devices used to construct an apparently objective and authoritative account of another's life and society have now been firmly placed on the agenda, and oral historians ignore such warnings at their peril.⁶

The tension implicit in the production of this conversational text can indeed call into question the entire basis of the oral history project. The pitfalls attendant on this situation are partly epistemological in that they deeply affect the status of even the "hard" empirical evidence garnered from such interviews, signaling as they do the existence of subtexts and silences, evasions and tropes, used to filter, to resist, to deal with, and to confess. A too literal "realist" reading of the "evidence" produced in these narratives can be both blind and deaf to the nuance implied in such strategies. Partly, too, the pitfalls involve a more personal domain—they have to do with differences in expectations between the interviewer and interviewed, about the different status and prestige involved, the different allocations of cultural capital implied in interactions between young and old, formally educated and uneducated, foreign and native. Ultimately, too, the pitfalls speak to our ability, talent, willingness, and commitment to listen.

Many of the issues raised here are, as I have indicated, increasingly present in writings on oral history. Yet I was only dimly aware of most of them in 1987 when I began interviewing Doña María and others in Berisso. My awareness of the methodological and epistemological problems grew, as I confronted issues emerging from my own practice as an oral historian in Berisso. In this sense theory clearly followed practice, as I was forced to seek understanding of

problems that were confronting me daily in my interactions with informants. But theory is not something that oral historians would seem to take to with much enthusiasm. Indeed, the directness of the genre, the apparently self-evident status of the communication and knowledge produced in oral history texts, has a powerfully doxic effect, compounding the traditional claims of orality to provide unmediated access to self-knowledge and knowledge of another. The best-known texts of the genre have largely eschewed conscious reflection on the conditions of their own production, a fact that both derives from, and helps sustain, the populist appeal of such works.⁷

Now, in the case of Latin America it is true that by the time I had embarked on my project in Berisso there was a growing body of work of potential relevance for oral historians. The field of *testimonio* studies was already booming. Centered primarily on the texts produced by Mexican and Central American women, these studies were to problematize fundamental issues of voice and agency, memory and silence, and the nature of subaltern cultural production.⁸ Yet much of this critical production remained within the fields of literary criticism and romance studies, and to a lesser extent cultural anthropology. Despite a few prescient voices, very little of this had affected Latin Americanist historians. Whatever other borders were being crossed in these endeavors, the frontiers between disciplines still remained remarkably impermeable.⁹ The announced era of blurred genres and joyous interdisciplinary miscegenation was to be largely confined to the safely ghettoized terrain of cultural studies.

A defining moment for me came halfway through my stay in Berisso in 1987. I am tempted to call it a sort of epiphany, though I am aware of the temptation to construct myths of origin, parables that help retroactively rationalize paths that ended up being followed. At the very least, however, I can truthfully say that the incident forcefully confronted me with the limits of a historian's commonsense pragmatism in dealing with, and understanding, certain crucial dilemmas with which I was faced. The incident occurred in the middle of winter and involved a long interview I did with a middle-aged Peronist militant. Doña María had mentioned him to me, as had other friends and contacts I had already made—

he was someone known for his militant past, he had been particularly active in the era known as the Peronist Resistance as a young, firebrand leader in the Armour plant and a leading protagonist in several crucial mass meetings of that era that had ended in gunfights and general mayhem. Although his family was of an impeccable Peronist lineage, there was also something, more alluded to than explicitly spoken by my contacts and by Doña María, which suggested that this was someone whose personal and family history were beyond the normal. As I later learned, his father was famed for stopping non-Peronists in the street and haranguing them, two of his brothers had died in mysterious circumstances apparently related to their militancy, and he himself had been closely tied to a Trotskyist group when he was active in the plants. After an initial meeting over lunch he invited me to visit the following Saturday a group of which he was a leading member called Centro de Adoc-trinamiento Justicialista. Our lunchtime conversation had whetted my appetite—he clearly had a lot to tell me about the Resistance period and the internecine battles within Peronism in the post-1955 era, especially as they related to the meatpackers union. So I went. The meeting was actually held over lunch on the site of a center they were building from scratch with their own labor. Over a *buseca*—a Genovese stew made of tripe—on a freezing day in the shell of this building and in the presence of other associates of the center he proceeded to give me a version of the history of the plants, his role in it, and a general evaluation of the importance of Perón and justicialism. It was a strange occasion, not least because I was freezing, eating something I didn't like, and because of the presence of some Paraguayan laborers who were being paid to build the place. During the meal some of them proceeded to get drunk, mostly at the times when my host was being most eloquent about Perón—this simply heightened an underlying tension that was really one of status within the working class between the core group of affiliates and new migrants into Berisso who were still largely marginal both geographically and socially within the community. After several hours of taping his monologue with the occasional Paraguayan interruptions we parted with an agreement to meet the following week at his house.

In reviewing later what had transpired I confirmed my initial impression that what I had got had been a particular story/narrative, a version of the past that had left out as much as it contained—it had been particularly evasive about the internal disputes. It seemed to me that the obvious reason had been the presence of an outsider and the desire not to wash dirty linen in public. At times indeed he had scarcely veiled his annoyance when I had pressed him for more details about disputes: he had said, "I don't know why you want to go back over that, I've already explained it." Yet he couldn't deny it altogether because he knew that I already had enough details—in fact, I had already interviewed one of the other protagonists. Also, he had to take into account the listening public. He was clearly the designated narrator of this group—by far its most articulate member, its intellectual core, guardian of its history, its official storyteller. And yet precisely because of his privileged status he was not free to invent, erase, elide at will. However much it may have seemed to me that I had listened to a monologue, what I had in fact witnessed was a dialogue between himself and his listeners/his public and, at a remove, with myself, the outsider. His story had to remain credible, and this credibility was rooted in several elements—among them notions of truth telling. As Henry Glassie asserts in his wonderful book *Passing the Time in Ballymenone*, both academic and local historians do much the same thing: "Whether they teach at Oxford or wheel turf in Ballymenone, historians get the facts as accurately as they can get them, but since the past has passed they cannot get all the facts, or get them all right."¹⁰

There was also some more profound referential pact between storyteller/local historian and the community and its needs, and this was something that went beyond my insight about his not wanting to wash dirty linen in public. The story he told me had to be based on the truth—but as in all effective storytelling, it also could be manipulated truth. Not at will, according to individual whim with arbitrary intent, but rather according to tacit, largely unspoken consensus between both audience and narrator about present needs, priorities, and imperatives. These were in turn arrived at through negotiation and concession with other alternative narratives within this community. As such, his annoyance with my desire to turn the

narrative back to the details of past divisions, to center his recollections on the internal fights and the sad chronicle of the decline of the meatpacking plants in Berisso, was rooted in a different appreciation of the uses of history and the stories in which it is embodied. He wanted to use the story to draw wider conclusions about the sources of community strength, about survival, about the overcoming of differences, about the unifying power of Peronism and the role of Perón in achieving that. My insistence on the academicist notion of "getting it right" of course threatened to open old wounds, to expose the more unseemly underbelly of Peronist unionism, but this was not the sole or even, I think, the main reason for his evasions and omissions.

Much of what I have just said is the result of later reflection. At the time I was convinced that with sufficient persistence I could come up with the goods. As with any good ethnographer or oral historian, effective questioning would track the beast of historical objectivity, the facts, down to its layer. Evasion would be ultimately useless. The informant could run, but faced with the array of devices at my disposal—along with a basic assumption that I was smarter than him—he could not ultimately hide. At the time I had not encountered postmodern anthropological speculations about the construction of ethnographic knowledge and authority. Later, as I reviewed the interview in the United States, I read James Clifford's essay, "Power and Dialogue in Ethnography." There, I found the following quote from Marcel Griault, drawn from his meditations about the practice of ethnography in Africa:

Active ethnography is the art of being a midwife and an examining magistrate, by turns an affable comrade of the person put to cross-examination, a distant friend, a severe stranger, compassionate father, concerned patron, a trader paying for revelations one by one, a listener affecting distraction before the open gates of the most dangerous mysteries, an obliging friend showing lively interest for the most insipid family stories—the ethnographer parades across his face as pretty a collection of masks as that possessed by any museum.¹¹

I was struck by how accurately this described what I had been engaged with in Berisso. It would be nice to be able to report that

one of these masks had stood me in good stead in the interview at his home. In fact, the encounter, when it arrived, was both deeply disturbing and frustrating and also a humbling lesson in the pitfalls awaiting the overarrogant oral historian. When I attempted to take him back over the union story, he impatiently repeated the essence of his previous accounting. When I interrupted him to ask for clarification, he finally exploded: "You just want to get things from me, but you don't tell me anything about yourself, about what you think, about your ideas. What do you value? What do you think of Perón?" I was taken aback but sufficiently astute to realize that the fact-finding, inquisitorial mode that I had adopted was in danger of self-destructing. I had to try another tack if only to maintain any open channels of communication. I had to embark on the terrain that he wanted to explore—which I was slowly coming to realize was his principal interest in me and in our relationship. He was, in fact, challenging the entire premise of my activity, the power relationship I had taken for granted and which underlay my sense of myself as the author, the constructor, the editor of the historical knowledge that would come out of our encounter. He wanted some form of genuine dialogue and interchange, but also, more than that, he wanted this to be the basis of my listening to what he most wanted to say. And what he wanted to say certainly had to do with the larger-scale social history data I was bent on acquiring, but it was framed within a personal key and had to do with his place in that broader history, his sense of himself, the meaning of his life.

I would like to be able to say that with my slow coming to awareness of what was happening I was able to construct some new, more adequate "fable of rapport" and adopt a more appropriate mask. Unfortunately, the dialogue that followed was a fractured, deeply awkward encounter. He spoke of his life, of how he had attended college under Perón, how he had been involved in various drama groups, had written poetry, and of how all that had stopped with Perón's ouster, when access to education had been cut off and he had had to enter the plants. How he had been disoriented by Perón's overthrow, bitter about the changes in his life chances, hotheaded and hence drawn into non-Peronist left politics. How he had been blacklisted from the plants and during the 1960s had come to realize that he

had been wrong, had been manipulated by the Trotskyists and had misjudged many of his former Peronist opponents. He had eventually sought reintegration into the movement, where he had become involved in something like cadre education, ending up in the early 1970s working for the Juventud Sindical Peronista—a union group closely tied with the Peronist right and José López Rega. He had also continued to be involved in drama and poetry as well as propagating official justicialist ideology. He had produced several pageants about Perón and Justicialism and their relationship with Christianity. At one stage he recited a long excerpt from his major prose poem on the theme.

By this time in the interview I realized that I had totally misjudged my informant and that I was very much out of my depth. The life story he was telling me was a complex story of disillusion, youthful error, and ultimately redemption all told in a tone of great emotionality. At many times he would seem on the verge of breaking down, his voice would crack and his eyes fill with tears as he spoke in Christian terms of forgiveness, love, and Perón and recite the Veinte Verdades (twenty truths) of Peronism.¹² Interwoven into this narrative were obviously elements of remorse and pain associated with the deaths of his brothers and the internecine warfare within Peronism in the 1960s and 1970s. It was clearly important for him to make me understand, to engage me in a discussion among equals about the intellectual underpinning of his life, about the moral choices he had made, about the Great Tradition (Peronism) that made sense of the Little Tradition (Berisso) in which he had lived out his life.¹³

The problem was that I was unable to adequately live up to my part of the implicit bargain being proposed here. Although I knew that my initial pretence of uncovering the sordid, if exciting, untold story of rank-and-file Peronism was no longer viable, I could not bring myself to enter fully into the new arrangement. I would like to be able to say that this was due to my refusal to embrace the bad faith involved in adopting a new mask. It wasn't. It was, I think now, a mixture of many things. In part, it was ideological wariness, especially as he spoke of his associations with the extreme right wing of Peronism. It was also due to intolerance and im-

tience on my part, a lack of sensitivity about his core beliefs—the Veinte Verdades and all they implied.

Something else also underlay my reluctance to engage with this man, and this was, I think, a profound sense of discomfort. It was in one sense a physical unease. The day was bitterly cold, the sort of winter cold that distinguishes Berisso from even La Plata, a scant eight miles away. It is a damp cold that comes straight off the estuary and is borne on the wind and which can penetrate you to the bone. His house was typical of many in Berisso constructed during the Peronist regime; it was made of concrete, with a cold slab floor and a single gas-fired space heater to give a sparse warmth. The interview started at dusk as the temperature was dropping. So I was cold, but this is hardly the entire explanation for my discomfort. I was used to Berisso's winter by this time; I had conducted other interviews in similar conditions. Indeed, Doña María's house was if anything colder. My physical discomfort was intensified by a sense of gloom that permeated the house and that had much to do with the presence of his wife, who was in the house but who played no part in the interview. There was a palpable tension between them; her body language, her gestures, and her glances spoke of resignation and resentment that I intuited had to do with the poverty of the household, evident in ancient furniture, the lack of paint on the walls, and the lack of food in the kitchen. I read in her presence an ironic comment on her husband's performance for the outsider. It was as if she were used to his claims and his emotions, as though she had resigned herself to the fact these would never translate into anything substantial in terms of some minimal comforts and basic hopes. Whether he was a Trotskyist or a Peronist, their lot would not change.

This sense of intruding on an intimate drama compounded what was an instinctive wariness on my part, a reluctance to empathize with the emotionalism with which he imbued his story and its telling. I felt like a voyeur and found the sensation deeply disturbing. He, of course, noticed my reserve, and the interview wound down. I have never returned to formally interview him. We meet on the street, exchange greetings, but my chance of access to whatever the

deeper meanings of his story could be has gone, and with it even my chance of uncovering, through him, the key to the empirical information I had so craved at the start.

I am not sure that I learned any immediate lessons from the encounter I have just recounted. Its status as a morality tale has been largely constructed with hindsight. My interviews with Doña María continued, and although we had our good days and our bad days, nothing approaching this sort of breakdown ever occurred. My relationship with an elderly woman was, evidently, far more comfortable than that with a middle-aged man. I had established a degree of intimacy with her, I was welcomed by her family, and she had progressed from addressing me as "professor" to calling me Danielito. And yet the incident lingered in some semi-conscious way as something that I realized I would have to analyze sooner or later. When I did permit myself to think about it aloud—always in Buenos Aires, with friends, at a bar, never in Berisso—the simplest answer to the question why I had not been able to rescue the interviewer/interviewee relationship with him was to state the obvious: I had found his brand of religiously intense right-wing Peronism impossible to empathize with. But although this answer allowed me to bask in the genuine rapport that I had with Doña María, it could not hide the fact that the experience had raised issues that went beyond an extreme individual case of empathic failure between historian and informant. Beyond my distaste for his brand of politics were there not other, more general issues raised about the practice of oral history?

One that certainly occurred to me on later reflection had to do with the notion of truth telling, so powerfully raised by this incident. It is by now a commonplace of narratology that stories are not iconic renderings of actual sequences of events; all narration involves reconstituting events concerning a narrator's life or the history of the wider community.¹⁴ And yet the criteria upon which such reconstituting takes place are scarcely arbitrary and are, it would seem, in the Western world overwhelmingly linked to requirements of truth and factuality. Although we can be open to

other cultural possibilities, Henry Glassie's conclusions about the mandate to tell the truth among his Northern Irish local historians in Ballymenone would seem to hold in Berisso, too. After telling us that Oxford historians and their colleagues who wheel turf in Ballymenone do much the same thing, Glassie goes on to elaborate: "When they string facts into narratives, they will create something other than the factual past, if only by dint of omission, and the dynamics of presentation, but they do not do so to fool people but to help them by driving at a truth larger than that trapped in the factual scraps. . . . their joy is finding, holding, manipulating truth."¹⁵ Whether the narrative was being performed in the Centro de Adoc-trinamiento Justicialista or in Doña María's kitchen, my informants showed a similar respect for the truth.

And yet it seems that this is more complicated than Glassie would allow. For a start we must distinguish between the different levels of narration produced in the oral transcript. At one level, certainly, we could say that our subjects are able and willing to adopt the dominant narrative form of professional historical discourse, framing their narrative within the canons of expository narration.¹⁶ In this sense they largely adopt a version of the formal political and historical discourse of their interviewers. The sources of such a discourse are multiple, ranging from formal school curricula to televised historical documentaries to historical narratives embedded in political traditions. Doña María would often move into such a mode, as she recounted crucial events in the history of Peronism or events that had happened in the union. Such a narrative was normally marked by a phrase such as "whether we like it or not, that's history and we can't ignore it."

On another level, we find that much of oral testimony consists of a far more informal conversational narrative, framed as personal experience stories, anecdotes, gossip. The two levels cannot be artificially separated. Indeed, the commonest way in which History is recalled is precisely in this minor key. As James Fentress and Chris Wickham argue: "No matter how keyed into historical culture one is, one's memories of major events—World War 2 for instance—can turn into simple exercises in day-to-day survival at home or at the front or sources of isolated anecdotes, whether terrifying, ter-

rible, amusing or life affirming."¹⁷ Different types of memory—col-lective and individual—also correspond to these different levels. But to these different levels of narration, and memory, we can apply dif-ferent evaluative criteria concerning truth telling.

It is clearly important to try and verify the factual accuracy of historical material found in oral interviews from other sources. Yet I think that very often this, too, is largely an exercise in profes-sional glorification on the part of the academic historian. We fre-quently know "the facts" better than our informants. And there is a price to be paid for the aggressive interrogation of factual accu-racy. As Glassie observes, "Dates alienate. They are a means to kill the past and bury it in irrelevance."¹⁸ Glassie's Northern Irish histo-rians know this instinctively, though it is doubtful that their Oxford colleagues would agree. Indeed, it is part of our role as historians, our professional ideology, to enforce different criteria. My own pro-pensity for aggressive intervention along these lines was evident in the case I have just recounted. My search not just for dates but for "historical information" in general led me to endanger the en-tire relationship. With Doña María, too, rereading the transcript has brought home to me the frequency and insistence with which I would interrupt her to insist on dating or on other forms of cate-gorizing.

The damage done by such insistence can go much further than burying the past in irrelevance. Ronald Grele has argued that there is a fundamental tension in the oral history interview between nar-rative and analysis:

If oral history is a conversational narrative this conversation often takes place in opposition to the power of the narrative. . . . while we destroy narrative as such the interviewed rapidly try to reestab-lish it. . . . the role of the interviewer is crucial but we fulfill it by adding details, forcing memory to its limits, destroying its very nar-rative capacity. We don't treat it like a story that keeps developing and that carries us along, rather we treat it like an object of analysis and deconstruction.¹⁹

If we add to this the fact that there are frequently great discrepan-cies of cultural and social capital involved, too, in the social field

within which the interview is structured, then we can appreciate the very real potential for symbolic violence that could result from the insistence on the professional ideology of the historian.²⁰

If the rigid application of criteria central to the professional ideology of historians has serious implications for the knowledge produced at this level of narrative discourse, its impact at the level of conversational discourse is even more problematical. Perhaps a comparison of oral history and autobiography can help us appreciate this issue. Philippe Lejeune in his analysis of autobiography as a genre emphasizes the importance for autobiography of what he calls the referential pact, the commitment on the part of the teller to "tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth" about her life. It is this that marks autobiography as a referential text exactly like scientific and historical discourse and that distinguishes it from fiction. The oath that underlies the autobiographer's pact is along the lines of "telling the truth as it appears to me, in as much as I can know it, making allowances for lapses of memory, errors, involuntary distortions etc."²¹ Yet there is, according to Lejeune, a fundamental difference between the pact of the historian or journalist and that which underwrites autobiography: "In autobiography it is essential that the referential pact be *drawn up*, and that it be *kept*; but it is not necessary that the result be of the order of strict resemblance. The autobiographical pact can be, according to the criteria of the reader, badly kept without the referential value of the text disappearing (on the contrary)—this is not the case for historical and journalistic texts" (22–23). I would only add that on the contrary it is the case for oral history texts, or at least those predominantly framed within conversational narrative discourse. What test of verification could we possibly think of applying to the subjective experience recalled at this level? As Lejeune notes, "Autobiography tells us precisely, here is the advantage of its narrative, what it alone can tell us" (22). We are not talking about criteria of resemblance measured against an externally verifiable referent. The referential pact associated with the oral history text is likely to be, as with autobiography, premised on notions of fidelity to meaning rather than to criteria of strict accuracy associated with information.

We could perhaps also think of the distinction I am making in

terms of the growing body of work on life story as a fundamental sociocultural practice focused on the narrative shaping of personal experience. In contrast to the more traditional model of life history "focused mainly on diachronic change within anthropology's traditional paradigm of naturalism or realism," life-story research "focuses on the cultural scripts and narrative devices individuals use to make sense of experience. [It] emphasizes the truth of the telling versus telling the truth."²² Charlotte Linde, one of its foremost theorists, has defined the life story as consisting "of all the stories and associated discourse units, such as explanations and chronicles, and the connections between them, told by an individual in his/her lifetime."²³ This clearly directs us, once more, toward oral sources as narrative and the appropriate analytical procedures needed to interpret them. (This will be the central concern of chapter 2.)

Oral history texts are made up in varying degrees of both of these models, and each requires its own careful listening, the careful application of criteria of evaluation concerning truth and accuracy. Informants themselves are frequently aware of the distinction and the different expectations this generates are part of the, often implicit, bargaining that goes on within any interview situation. The abrupt interjection that transformed and ultimately unraveled my relationship in the cold house in Berisso was, I think, in large part occasioned by my informant's sense that I had failed to recognize such distinctions. He had told me the "true" history of Berisso, the union and his role in it in the public setting of the Centro de Adoc-trinamiento Justicialista. Now, in his home, he expected that his life story would elicit another sort of attention and judgment on my part.

The issue of truth telling in oral testimony is, then, intimately related to the question of the nature of the relationship between the oral historian and her subject and the status of the knowledge produced by that relationship. Despite the rapport that existed between myself and Doña María, was the basic drive of what I was attempting to do with her all that different from what I had attempted to do, but failed, with my male informant? Despite the lesson that this parable told about the pitfalls awaiting the overly arrogant oral historian, the basic metaphor that informed my approach continued to

be that of the detective uncovering secrets, breaking codes, tracking down beyond the grave the hidden meanings of Doña María's life. The following chapters stand as testimony to that enduring passion, which is in some fundamental way basic to the analytical function of historical discourse. It is simply what historians do. But what are the presuppositions of this approach and the strategy of representation associated with it?

In the first place it seems important to recognize what is going on when the oral historian produces a text that claims to speak about, and for, another. To bridge the gap between two radically heterogeneous fields of experience, between the historian and the other, between myself and Doña María, is to engage in what Alberto Moreiras has called prosopopeic representation. In an essay on testimonio autobiography Moreiras defines prosopopeia as "a mask through which one's own voice is projected onto another, where that other is always suffering from a certain inability to speak." As Moreiras goes on to argue, "The relational mediation is then always unequal and hierarchical, even at its most redemptive."²⁴ This would seem to be an unavoidable truth that no claims to empathic identification on the part of ethnographer or oral historian can fully offset. In recent times the figure of the "redemptive ethnographer" giving voice to the oppressed other in a process of reciprocal text production has appeared in various guises. Certainly, oral history's fundamental claim to distinguish itself by giving a voice to the voiceless, to those who do not enter the dominant narrative of history, shares this redemptive urge.

An implicit part of this trope is also the claim to a sort of "horizontal affinity" between the two sides engaged in the ethnographic relationship.²⁵ I personally find it hard to imagine such a claim of affinity between myself and Doña María. Clearly it could not have a gender basis. I could, perhaps, claim a class-based affinity. My parents were workers, both from mining communities. I grew up in a household permeated by a union and left-wing culture. I was frequently struck by parallels between Doña María and my mother. But I have spent my adult life moving ever further away from those roots, and the cultural alienation of social mobility has done its work. I admired Doña María and felt a deep affection and respect for

her, but this falls far short of the sort of emotional fusion through which a self is apparently projected onto an alter ego. Whatever the innate attraction of the "passion to swim in the stream of their (the native's) experience" may be, this is, as Clifford Geertz warns us, ultimately an illusion.²⁶

It may, of course, be a necessary and productive illusion, a powerful heuristic weapon. In an extraordinary scene from the documentary film *Number Our Days*, in which she speaks of her work among the elderly members of a Jewish cultural center in Venice, California, the anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff speaks of her move away from research on the Huichol Indians of Northern Mexico to the study of elderly Jews by explaining that "after all I will never be a Huichol Indian, but I will be a little old Jewish lady." It was very probably this conviction that enabled her to produce the profound ethnographic representations embodied in the book of the same title. At the very least this gesture may provide the basis for an effective "hermeneutics of solidarity," which is certainly preferable to the objectivizing appropriation of much traditional analysis. It may be, too, that there are reasons to question the overemphasis on the dire consequences of the hierarchical and unequal character of prosopopeic representation. Although we might agree that at a level of abstraction this is unavoidable, at the concrete level of the interview situation we may find countervailing tendencies.

One presupposition of the pathos of pessimism that informs much postmodernist ethnographic speculation concerning representation is the figure of the interviewee/informant as victim whose memory and identity are appropriated and exploited. I would suggest that this seriously underestimates the power of the interviewee to negotiate the conditions under which communication takes place in the interview situation. Let me give an example. Very early in our interviews Doña María and I had the following exchange:

DJ: How did the strike of ninety-six days come about?

DM: Because this woman, this one, that one all said to themselves. . . . Me, for instance, who taught me? The book of life, not the university, pardon me, professor, the university is the best that humanity has because there you learn and the shadows of the mind disappear

and wisdom emerges but you know that the university of life is beautiful. When I put my children to bed at night many times with only a warm tea and a piece of bread and then cried and wet the pillow and my husband would say to me, this will get better, don't cry, that's where I learned. . . . pain taught me to free myself.

In the months that followed she frequently repeated this claim. We could interpret this in several ways. It is certainly a claim to establish footing, to equalize the gap in cultural status between a university professor and a meatpacking worker. The recent work on life-story construction has alerted us to the fact that there is generally an underlying mandate that life stories achieve coherence through a cooperative effort between teller and addressee.²⁷ We will elaborate on this theme in future chapters. However, here I want to stress the fact that I present particular problems for Doña María as the addressee of last resort in our relationship. In the first place, she had to make the assumption that I, as many outsiders were, would be critical if not hostile toward Perón and Peronism. Many of her stories had already been negotiated within Berisso with other addressees in mind. This fact is not necessarily a handicap. Indeed, it is precisely one of the preconditions of any possibility that the historian/interviewer can move from the individual to collective questions of agency and consciousness in later analysis.

Beyond this, the claim is also an assertion that there is a level of experience and knowledge to which I do not have access. And this is because I haven't lived it and had the experiences on which it has been based and because it is of a fundamentally different status. It comes from the heart, from the emotional core of a person, from the pain of life, which are radically different criteria from the book-learning criteria of the university professor. Without knowing or caring about it, Doña María is expressing the distinction between emic and etic, experience-near and experience-distant ways of knowing.²⁸ She is also, of course, telling me about the limits of empathy and prosopopeic representation, that there are things that I cannot understand or perhaps should not know. What would the most adequate response to such a claim be on the part of the oral historian? One possibility is that offered by Doris Sommer in an in-

fluential essay within testimonio criticism, in which she enjoined the reader/critic to respect the secret, to treat the claim as an ethically unpassable border that no form of interpretative representation should seek to cross. In her terms the reader should remain "incompetent" in the face of this "resistant text."²⁹

Yet I do not think that Doña María is claiming an absolutely unbridgeable gap. Far from radically problematizing communication, we could interpret her claim as the first step in negotiating the conditions under which it might take place. Such conditions would ideally allow her to both posit her secret, the uniqueness of her suffering-based experience, and articulate her interpretation of her life and worldview. The possibility that the conditions for such an outcome can be negotiated in any interview situation is an uncertain one. Certainly, my experience in Berisso is a warning against overconfidence regarding this wager. And yet it might also offer a clue as to what might be needed. In my story of a failed encounter in a cold house the fundamental failure in my mind was my failure to listen, my refusal to submerge myself and my criteria in a gesture that would have signaled my willingness to engage my interlocutor on his own terms.

Although we might express this in semiotic terms I think that at root it is best framed as an ethical issue. Indeed, it is striking to note how some of the most profound meditations on this issue have been framed in these terms. Marc Kaminsky, the editor of Barbara Myerhoff's posthumously published collected essays, speaks of her concern for what she called the "pathos of the absent listener." Filling the void left by such absence was one of the fundamental roles of the ethnographer. In Myerhoff's own personal case Kaminsky assures us that listening was "a sacralization of a secular vocation" that was based on a unique "gift as a listener":

Immersed in this full and unusually intense attentiveness, received by a listener who offered herself as a "partner in security" . . . ; met moreover by someone whose steadiness of attention by turns offered a supple, accepting, lucid, brilliant auditor, Myerhoff's interlocutors felt free to think and feel through dimensions of their experience that they had not owned or connected before. She was often present

at the saying out loud for the first time of something often lived with, subliminally. The interview felt emancipatory. The gathered material registered the sense of discovery.³⁰

The tone of these observations is strikingly similar to remarks made by Pierre Bourdieu in his meditation on the interviewing practice drawn from the interviews collected in *La Misère du Monde*. Although he maintains that "there are limits to the procedures and subterfuges that we have been able to think up to reduce the distance" between interviewer and interviewed, Bourdieu claims in the end that any "true comprehension" must be based on "attentiveness to others and an openness toward them." This sort of attention would be the opposite of the "ritualized small talk" and "inattentive drowsiness" normal in social conversation. For Bourdieu the interview that arrives at true comprehension "can be considered a sort of spiritual exercise, aiming to attain, through forgetfulness of self, a true transformation of the view we take of others in the ordinary circumstances of life." He concludes that "the welcoming disposition, which leads one to share the problems of the respondent, the capacity to take her and understand her just as she is, in her distinctive necessity, is a sort of intellectual love."³¹

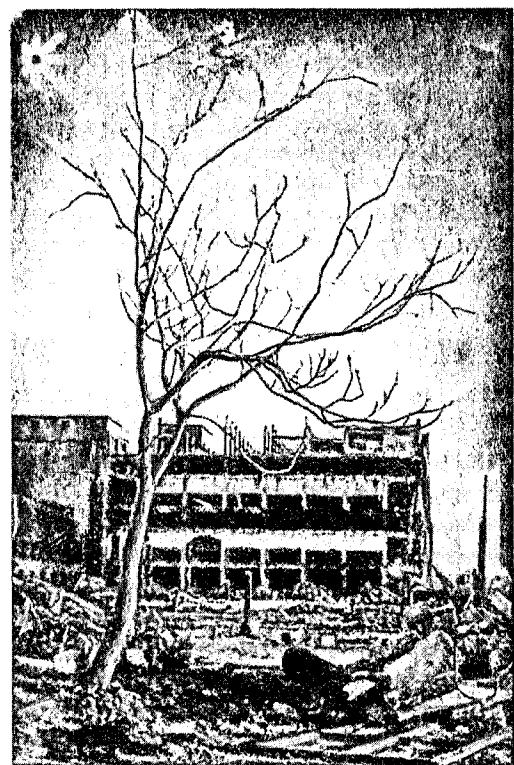
Fifty years earlier, in a text that struggled in a uniquely powerful way with the problems of representation and that has been strangely forgotten in the current speculations on the theme, James Agee spoke in a similar vein. Although the "nominal subject" of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is "North American cotton tenantry as examined in the daily living of three representative white tenant families," Agee goes on to affirm: "Actually, the effort is to recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence, and to contrive techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis and defence. More essentially, this is an independent inquiry into certain normal predicaments of human divinity."³² Agee brought love, passion, guilt, anger, and an extraordinary ear for listening to his tortured effort to translate a "portion of unimagined existence" for his educated Northern audience.

The question of memory permeates the oral history project, though memory is mostly treated in oral history texts as a conundrum and

a problem whose noxious implications need to be minimized. It is rarely seized on, interrogated as a unique resource, a collective and individual expression of the past in the present. In one of his essays Alessandro Portelli comments that memory is ineradicably bound up in an orality constantly seeking to counter the impermanence and unrepeatability inherent within it. Orality, thus, values memory, but its practice is determined by the difficulty of remembering, of holding the past in place and keeping access to it open. Telling stories is one way—perhaps the most pervasive—through which we "take up arms against the threat of time."³³ Recording those stories and then transcribing them is, indeed, frequently justified in terms of conserving memories and traditions that would otherwise fall victim to the impermanence of orality. Although we may recognize the function of the oral interview in providing a space within which individual and social memory can be retrieved, it is worth considering the existence of other memory sites that call on other processes of commemoration. Narrative may be the dominant mnemonic resource available to both individuals and communities, but it is not the only one.

At the beginning of the 1980s a local photographer in Berisso, Oscar Merlano, heard that the Armour plant, which had been closed since 1969, was to be torn down. It was already common knowledge that for years people had been raiding the building, walking off with sinks, tiles, and many other things. Merlano decided to secretly enter the building and record what was left in a series of photographic images. At the time his motivation was simply to record something that he felt needed to be preserved, something that he intuitively felt to be important to the community, following a conservationist's instincts. At the height of the military dictatorship there was little hope that these photos might have any public role. After the return of democracy to Argentina in 1983 he and a friend, Raúl Filgueira, one of Berisso's best-known poets, put together a slide show with soundtrack to commemorate the plant and its workers.

The show was titled "Requiem for a Frigorífico," and it was presented to the public in late 1984 in the meatpackers' union hall, which was crowded with many former workers from the plants, among them Doña María. The slides depicted the different sections



The abandoned
Armour plant
shortly before its
disappearance, Berisso,
1980. Courtesy Oscar
Merlano.

of the plant, much of which had begun to fall apart after more than a decade of abandonment. The script of the soundtrack,* written by Filgueira, both drew on and helped construct a narrative of an immigrant working-class community confronting the hardship of industrial labor to build modest lives of decency and dignity against powerful odds. I have spoken to many of the old-timers who were present. All the testimony emphasizes the emotional impact of the commemoration. Many were openly weeping; others seemed dumbfounded, staring silently at the stark images. I have since seen the show in the house of Merlano, accompanied by Raúl Filgueira, in whose home I often stay when in Berisso. It is an event worth considering for what it might tell us about memory and commemo-

*The script of "Requiem for a Frigorífico" was given to me by the author. Translations are mine.

ration. In particular we may ask, why was the memory embodied in the Armour commemoration such a profound emotional experience for those who had witnessed it?

To begin with, although the visual content of this commemoration was striking, we need to also be aware of the narrative framing of these images. Filgueira's script fulfills many functions. On one level, he performs a task expected of the community's principal historian by laying out the basic chronicle of Berisso's past from the foundation of the regional units of Quilmes, San Vicente, and Magdalena in 1774 until Berisso's emergence as an autonomous municipality in 1957. As part of that chronicle he also includes a history of the cattle-processing industry from the first salting plants established by Juan Berisso in 1871 to the building of the two frigoríficos in the first decades of this century. All this is familiar for his audience, as is the story that he derives from the chronicle—Berisso's construction as a community of immigrants: "Almost in unison with your surprising appearance, a current of immigrants arrived that filled the town with new musical sounds and virgin words, a mixture of national and foreign languages, but which enabled the inhabitants of your tower of Babel to understand themselves after all was said and done." And these immigrants from all over the globe will found, together with native Argentines, a community of labor: "And these immigrants joined their desire for progress with the spiritual need that is work, going together with the Argentine born to the hiring office, sharing both courage and fear. Wagering their future and that of their families on a yes or a no." This, as I have said, is a familiar story drawing on deeply entrenched communal and national narratives. Its images can be comfortably and nostalgically evoked. Filgueira does not, significantly, draw attention to other narratives of social and political conflict, the fight for unionization, the emergence of Peronism. He could easily have done so. He knew of them and had participated in them. However, as the community's historian, he is, in Henry Glassie's words, "mediating between life and death by selecting a few of the multitudinous facts from the past and arranging them for other people to see and hear." Glassie emphasizes the criteria on which such selection is based: "Selection and arrangement are guided by the historians' reading

of society's needs: what should people know about the past so that they can live in the future?"³⁴

But Raúl Filgueira is also a poet. Although he researches an infinity of topics about Berisso's past—its musicians, its soccer teams, its clubs—his preference is to write poetry. As a poet, he knows that he must do more than evoke nostalgia. He takes as his central theme memory and mourning. This is signaled clearly in the title of the commemoration: this is a requiem for a frigorífico, and a requiem is "a mass for the repose of the soul or souls of a dead person or persons."³⁵ It is also signaled by the dominant poetic device he uses to construct this requiem: the text is an extended apostrophe. Literally a turning away, a digression, to address a (usually) absent person or thing, apostrophe is also in Barbara Johnson's words, "a form of ventriloquism which enables the speaker to throw voice, life and human form onto the addressee . . . to call up, animate, the absent, the lost, the dead."³⁶ This device will involve the personification of the mute, the inanimate. The opening line of the script announces this explicitly: "Before we begin our dialogue, you and I . . ." The frigorífico will become a living person that breathes and suffers and ultimately is threatened with death. More than that, it will be rendered as an intimate friend, as the poet uses the familiar Argentine form of the second person singular, "vos": "How much time has passed, my solid and noisy little brother! How I still remember you with your heart of machinery and your piping for arteries."

The poet knows that this animation will provoke much pain. At the beginning he warns the frigorífico that the dialogue they will have will provoke "feelings, resentments, or melancholies" that "will burst forth uncontrollably, like blood through a broken artery." He knows where to locate the source of these emotions. The frigorífico is a metaphor for many things:

There I began to understand that, within your apparent indifference you generated in addition to proteins the solidarity between workmates. . . . you were not only a building with cold cement walls, no factory is just that because it contains implications and calories of the men who inhabit its walls.

After this he specifically enjoins the frigorífico to exercise its memory—"Do you remember when?"—and he proceeds to enumerate the examples of solidarity called up by his reanimated friend: "The fraternal gesture of the compañero who pats you on the back and congratulates you when your daughter turns fifteen"; "an intersectional soccer match or a drama group, brought together by those who think that there should be more to life than sweat"; "the formation of new families through romances started on the production line"; "a union protest to get a better standard of living." Filgueira is calling on his audience to remember and relive the gamut of these experiences.

Above all, he is invoking the ghosts of the dead, those who "despite the sick passion of some who would destroy you, still wander your decrepit interior" as "shadows of those who resist abandoning you completely." This invocation struck a powerful chord with his audience. Jaime Teixidó, a longtime communist militant in the plants, told me as he recalled the Armour ceremony:

I sat down once to write a leaflet calling for the nationalization of Swift. But I didn't just want to talk about the four walls, the machinery . . . I was also thinking about all the people who died there. I began to make a list of the people I had known . . . because they don't only kill animals there, they killed people too, . . . Jesus . . . my sister died of TB at forty-eight, after working in the picada, I went through the list, so-and-so fell down the stairs, so-and-so hit in the head. . . . well, they should put up a plaque to all those people, it was a very cruel thing . . . and I was thinking of that as I watched.

Doña María, too, had intimate reasons to mourn the frigorífico's dead. Her husband had died from injuries suffered in the plant. For her, attending the commemoration brought out the ingratitude toward the dead:

That show was a tremendous thing, there wasn't a dry eye. . . . they tore the Armour down. . . . that shouldn't have happened to us, of course feelings don't count for anything, the spiritual side isn't there, because this was our second home, in there many men and women

who are no longer with us, have left their lives, they've been thirty years inside there working, but really working, leaving their last drop so that the companies could be multimillionaires. . . . it was a tremendous ingratitudo to do that to those buildings.

Filgueira is drawing on a profoundly ambivalent emotional response. This is no elegiac reminiscence for a golden age. At the same time as the frigorífico is a site of solidarity in which memories of profound human relationships can be located, it is also the "monster that ate many people."

In the poem that ends the show the poet touches another chord, as one of the spectral figures who haunt its interior speaks of the approaching death of the frigorífico: "You seem a corpse that does not want to die," "advancing toward your own requiem, exhaling your last death rattle." But the apostrophized friend is not simply moribund, it is a fractured and wounded presence:

I look at your fractured skeleton,
with your bones exposed to the air
your severed tendons
symbols of a spasm of impotence
and that cross that tells us:
when a factory closes
many people die
many streets die
and peoples enter their death throes
on their way to underdevelopment.

The impact of all this was compounded by the fact that at the time of the ceremony the Armour site was already an empty space, abandoned to grass and wind with scarcely a brick remaining. The company had almost overnight finished the work that a decade of abandonment had begun. So the requiem is already an attempt to fix in memory, conjure up something that has been physically eradicated. The spatial coordinates of memory are crucial for both individual and social remembering; they provide the grid on which memories can be localized and mapped. As Paul Connerton, following

Maurice Halbwachs, has noted, "We conserve our memories by referring them to the material milieu that surrounds us. . . . It is to our social spaces . . . to which we always have access . . . that we must turn our attention if our memories are to reappear."³⁷ The mourning associated with this event is, thus, complex. It was mourning for lost loved ones, for lives wasted in the plants, for lives enjoyed, friendships, solidarities, jokes, loves, and hates. But it was also mourning for a physical and social space that was lost and with it, perhaps, the possibility of recovering through memory the identities and experiences evoked by this mourning. The requiem ends up destabilizing the very process of commemoration it sought to energize and animate, and the abandoned memory site itself becomes a source of grief and mourning.

The photographic images reinforced this process of commemoration and mourning. The connection between photos and memory has frequently been noted. As John Berger comments, "The camera saves a set of appearances from the otherwise inevitable supersession of further appearances."³⁸ Another name for this supersession is forgetting, and photography in some basic way resists this. Yet it does so in its own special way, a way that intensifies mourning. Christian Metz has noted that photography perpetuates memory, but it does so by "suppressing from its appearance the primary marks of livingness while nevertheless conserving a convincing print of the object." Metz calls this convincing print a "past presence." In this sense, he claims that photos are similar to funerals and other rituals in that they have the double function of remembering the dead but also remembering that they are dead and that life continues. In this way, according to Metz, photography points toward the healthy working through of the feelings of grief and loss that constitute Freud's definition of mourning.³⁹ In a certain sense, then, attending the event in the meatpackers' hall was akin to being present at a funeral wake, or keeping a photo in memory of a loved one.

The mourning process associated with the remembering produced by these photos has both a collective and an individual register. As photos, the images taken by Merlano conform starkly to the conventions associated with documentary photography. On their own, published in a magazine, or exhibited in a gallery, separated

from the poet's commentary, they might convey a generic, timeless image of industrial decline as representative of Pittsburgh or São Paulo as of Berisso. They might provide information but no access to meaning and experience. Merlano's photos escaped that fate and acquired their power when contextualized within the arena in which they were shown and framed by the narrative that placed them in time and space. As such, they became powerful instigators of memory. Such memory clearly has a collective dimension. The closing of the packing houses, the destruction of the physical site of the Armour plant, was a wound in the fabric of memory in Berisso that had never been addressed in any public setting before. For a brief moment that night in the union hall, such a wound could be expressed and tended to in the unimpeded play of remembrance and commemoration.

The outlines of this social memory are present in Raúl Filgueira's narrative and inevitably frame the individual memories provoked by the commemoration ceremony. We could say that, in some way, the experiences and memories of the individual meatpackers acquired their meaning only insofar as they resonated within this broader social narrative. Yet having said this, we need also to recognize what one scholar has called "the tension between the personal moment of memory and the social moment of memory making/memorializing."⁴⁰ We ultimately experience our memories as peculiarly our own. The poet himself offers us an insight into the dialectic between personal and collective memory provoked by the photos. The images of the frigorífico, he tells us, brought to his mind the memory of his immigrant father coming out of the packing house at midday to receive his lunch from his youngest son and to sit down and eat it on the grass at the side of the railroad lines that brought cattle to the plant:

My father while he chewed hurriedly looked deeply at me. Perhaps he wanted to tell me many things. Tell me of his Spain, of his village of El Ferrol, where his trade of fisherman allowed him to harvest fishes; explain to me that when he came here he had to accept eating the fish that others caught. Perhaps he wanted to ask my forgiveness for the poor life that he could barely offer his family. But

he neither said anything nor told me anything, possibly considering that I would not have understood him. It's a shame he didn't take the chance.

In this recollection, we can, perhaps, see the interplay of what Walter Benjamin called the "dual will to happiness." Certainly we can recognize the Proustian moment, the elegiac moment of retrieval of the past remembered with a profound nostalgia that gives the elderly poet access to his childhood. For Benjamin there is also what he called the hymnic moment, the moment when the significance of a remembered event or experience becomes clear for the first time in a moment of recognition that flashes up triggered by "images we never saw before remembering them." The poet probably had frequent access to his memories of his lunchtime meetings with his father, yet it was perhaps only now at the end of his life that, provoked by the stark images of an abandoned factory, he was able to recognize its profounder meanings, which resonated with his past and present life: the failure of father/son communication, the unconfessed shame of poverty, the yearning for another, different, better life.⁴¹

This recollection also speaks of the difficulty of accessing and translating such memories and confronts us with the limits of even the most sensitive hermeneutics of solidarity. The commemorative act in the meatpackers' hall that night expressed a vibrant, emotion-laden collective memory. But this collective memory must, too, have its quota of inaccessible and untranslatable personal memories. Stuart Hall has said that photos are marked by the multi-accented traces that history has left behind. The difficulty for interpretation, he says, is that "these are traces without an inventory," at least not one present within the frame of the photo. It is this inventory that can, in part, be provided by the "privileged" interpreter with elements at her disposal from outside the visual frame, such as the poet's narrative framing. But this inventory must have its limits, as it surely does in my case, as evidenced by my frequent recourse to the qualifiers "perhaps" and "potentially." There may well be meanings beyond the hermeneutic reach of even the most empathetic viewer or listener.

Indeed, in Benjamin's terms we might say that only if collective and individual, voluntary and involuntary, memory are brought together can even partial access occur. In his essay on Baudelaire, Benjamin offered some insight into the possible conditions under which this might happen: "[the *mémoire involontaire*] is part of the inventory of the individual who is in many ways isolated. Where there is experience in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine with material of the collective past. The rituals with their ceremonies, their festivals . . . kept producing the amalgamation of these two elements of memory over and over again. They triggered recollection at certain times and remained handles of memory for a lifetime."⁴²

For Benjamin, the idealized vehicle in the past who might act as bearer of this memory was the figure of the storyteller. The storyteller could translate individual memory and experience and offer it to the community: "It is not the object of the story to convey a happening *per se*, which is the purpose of information; rather, it embeds it in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening" (59). But Benjamin recognized that this was at best an insecure wager, citing Proust himself to the effect that "it was a matter of chance whether the problem could be solved at all." If Proust's eight volumes "conveys an idea of the efforts it took to restore the figure of the storyteller to the present generation" (59), it would seem to behoove the oral historian or ethnographer to approach the issue with appropriate modesty.⁴³

In part, this modesty must be regarded as a reflection of the status of the memory recovered by the oral historian, which is a complex amalgam that partially corresponds, as we noted above, to the different sorts of narrative discourse generated by the interview situation. This memory combines different levels: an episodic, present-based memory attached to the quotidian and the mundane; a preformed memory centered on stereotypes that can reveal general views of the world; and, finally, "hymnic moments" of profound remembrance linked to life experience. Whether the oral historian can access, recognize, and then translate these is a matter of luck and some skill, though it is precisely these hoped-for, mainly illusory, epiphanies that keep us going. We could, of course, associate the ability to en-

courage this sort of profound remembering with the skill displayed by the "brilliant auditor" in the interview situation. It is interesting, in this regard, to note how Kaminsky's description of Myerhoff's interview practice parallels almost exactly Benjamin's account of the profound remembrance associated with involuntary memory: "[Her] interlocutors felt free to think and feel through dimensions of their experience that they had not owned or connected before."

Another reason for modesty on the part of the oral historian concerns the recognition of the difficulty of answering the question: under whose injunction does the recovery of memory take place? A pessimistic answer to this question argues that the memory embodied in the oral history text is a decontextualized, inadequate memory trace recollected for the historian's needs. It is a pure substitute, "of no use to he who remembers, even if it arouses nostalgia." The very act of writing/transcribing "shows that this act of memory is not a creative act."⁴⁴ And yet it would seem, once again, that this represents an oversimplification of the dynamics of the interview conversation.

The memory recovered in the oral history project is not the invention of the historian, though she certainly helps shape it and can perfectly well disrupt it. The issue of memory is not uninteresting for many respondents; indeed, it is often at the root of their desire to participate. For the elderly in particular, remembering can be both a moral and a psychic priority. On a cold, bright day in mid-June, six months after we started our interviews, Doña María and I took a bus down to the calle Nueva York, the street that led to the two packing houses. As we walked along the dock that ran along the two plants, we could see the empty shell of the Swift plant and we could survey the overgrown field that had been the site of the Armour plant. After a long silence Doña María spoke:

You know this used to be like a city within a city. It was lit up twenty-four hours a day. I worked over there for many years, and my husband worked here. . . . but my grandson said to me the other day, "You know, abuela, grandfather gave his whole life working over there and now there isn't a brick left. When they pull Swift down there will be nothing to remind us of what you did in there." You

know he's right. . . . When I die my great-grandchildren will have no memory of our struggles and our lives.

I took it as both a statement of fact and of implicit desire. It was the nearest we ever got to discussing what she wanted out of our interviews.

No one has addressed the issue of the process of "re-membering" among the elderly as passionately as Barbara Myerhoff. Marc Kaminsky summarized the meaning of this notion for her: "Through 're-membering' the old people's rituals, storytelling and other cultural performances become forms for constituting a collective subject, a social individual in whom the ancestors live on renewed."⁴⁵ This powerful redemptive claim centers on the notion of "remembering" as a practice of memory distinct from ordinary recollection and is embodied in cultural practices such as storytelling, which are vital to the psychological health of the elderly. The importance of re-membering lives is nowhere more explicitly stated than in the words of Shmuel, the taylor and central character of *Number Our Days*. In his last conversation with Myerhoff, Shmuel laments that his village and the Jewish culture of eastern Europe have all been erased by the Holocaust and other cruelties of history. That past and his loved ones exist now only in his stories—"all those people and all those places, I carry them around until my shoulders break." But even this burden does not suffice:

Even with all that poverty and suffering it would be enough if the place remained, even old men like me, ending their days would find it enough. But when I come back from these stories and remember the way they lived is gone forever, wiped out like you would erase a line of writing, then it means another thing altogether for me to accept leaving this life. If my life goes now, it means nothing. But if my life goes, with my memories, and all that is lost, that is something else to bear.⁴⁶

Now it may be the case that Myerhoff exaggerates her claim. Certainly, we need to be aware of the process of forgetting, which can be of as much interest to the oral historian as the culturally creative process of re-membering lives that Myerhoff celebrated. Indeed,

any process of remembering is inevitably shaped by what is omitted, silenced, not evoked. More than that, it is also clear that for some old people the ethical imperative not to forget is more than offset by the pain associated with certain memories. One woman, who had worked in the Armour plant and attended the slide show, turned down my request to interview her about it. Her life in the plant had been "a very sad time," and she didn't want to be "forced to remember things that would cause me pain." She would later prove to be more than happy to talk about her participation in the social and cultural life of the Ukrainian ethnic association. The Armour commemoration had, in her case, simply provoked a memory that she did not wish to share, an experience she did not wish to transmit.⁴⁷

In part Shmuel's legacy—the fate of his memories—depends on Myerhoff, his brilliant auditor and cocreator of his "re-membered" life. In a similar way the survival of Doña María's memories also depends on my good faith and skill as a listener. I suspect that all of us who undertake to record these sorts of extended life stories share, at some level, Myerhoff's contention that "such re-membered lives are moral documents and their function is salvific, inevitably implying, 'All this has not been for nothing.'"⁴⁸ Such a belief provides the ethical basis for the project we have embarked on. But there is also an element that inevitably escapes the dimension of the individual listener, and the efficacy and ethical content of the narrator/listener relationship. And that element has to do with the problematic status of modern memory.

In part we have already alluded to one source of this problematic status. We have spoken of the process of mourning for a past that is inevitably slipping away, as orality tries to stem the consequences of its own impermanence. It can do this by mobilizing the mnemonic resources available in the photographic image and the written narrative. Yet both of these imply a degree of distantiation. Orality presupposes a certain level of communal, social negotiation and control of meaning—though this certainly has its limits. The written document—the transcribed oral text—and the visual image will be ultimately controlled by others and escape the control of community interpretation. Beyond this, however, there lies the broader issue of the transmission of collective memory. As Andreas Huyssen notes,

a central paradox of the postmodern West is that the society of "mnemonic convulsions" is also a society permeated by a "culture of amnesia."⁴⁹ Part of this culture of amnesia is precisely the crisis of collective transmission of social memory. We could express this by asking the question: what are the sites and social practices of remembering that could carry out the social transmission of memory in the contemporary era? Both Benjamin and Myerhoff confronted this question, and both sought answers in the collective realm. Benjamin offers us the brief clue that individual and collective memory could be triggered through rituals, ceremonies, and festivals produced by society. For Myerhoff the ability to re-member could be fostered by providing the social space within which individuals could perform the cultural practices that give access to deep memory. Part of the crisis of contemporary memory in working-class communities is precisely the crisis of such social spaces that have fallen victim to the destructive power of de-industrialization, social dislocation, and simple irrelevance. In Berisso we might say that the fate of memory still hangs in the balance. It certainly still possesses resources that can underwrite social memory. We would, however, be foolish to ignore other tendencies. Even the vibrant memory of lives of labor centered on the *lieux de mémoire* of the packing house has a very tenuous purchase on contemporary memory, as the generations of packing-house workers rapidly dwindle in numbers.

"THE CASE OF MARÍA ROLDÁN
AND THE SEÑORA WITH MONEY IS
VERY CLEAR, IT'S A FABLE"

*Stories, Anecdotes, and Other Performances
in Doña María's Testimony*

A tale or anecdote, that is a replaying, is not merely any reporting of a past event. In the fullest sense, it is such a statement couched from the personal perspective of an actual or potential participant who is located so that some temporal, dramatic development of the reported event proceeds from that starting point. A replaying will therefore incidentally be something that listeners can empathetically insert themselves into, vicariously reexperiencing what took place.—Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk*

When we speak of life stories, much depends on whether we mean *life stories* or *life stories*. We may insist that these stories are true—these people exist, and they relate events that actually happened—and, therefore, interviews allow us to glimpse the actual experience (*life*). Or we may work with the assumption that we are dealing with verbal artifacts (stories) shaped by the narrators' self-perception, by the encounter with the interviewer, and by the interviewer's perception and interpretation of them and their words. The impossible dream of attaining absolute "authenticity" and "lived experience"

9. Valerie Yow, "'Do I Like Them Too Much?': Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa," *The Oral History Review* (Summer 1997): 55-79.



Oral History Association

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Author(s): Valerie Yow

Source: *The Oral History Review*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Summer, 1997), pp. 55-79

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of the Oral History Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3675397>

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“Do I Like Them Too Much?”: Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa

by Valerie Yow

Twenty years ago this might have been an unspeakable topic. Oral history textbooks and articles in the *Oral History Review* scarcely mentioned this in the 1970s and early 1980s. My students would talk about their reactions to an interviewing experience, sometimes mention their realization about how an interviewing project had changed them. I remember vividly a student who told me that in interviewing Jewish immigrants in Providence she had touched on their experiences in the Holocaust and that this had forced her to change drastically her views about justice and human society. I also remember remarking to a student after I had listened to a tape, “I wonder why you didn’t pursue the topic the narrator mentioned?” And she said, “I didn’t hear him say that.” And a colleague asked me, “You didn’t want to write about your narrators’ race prejudice?” And I said, “Never even thought about it.” And then I added, “Do I like them too much?”

I was aware of some effects on myself but not nearly as cognizant of the influences of interviewing women mill workers as I should have been. Now I sometimes catch my breath when I read critically a play I’ve written or an essay on oral history I’m working on and see appear something told to me twenty years ago.

But usually we treated such concerns as if they were not an integral and important part of the interview—they didn’t occupy the main stage, they were the side show. They were, as anthropologist Paul Rabinow, has described them, “corridor talk”—the remarks you made about your reactions to your research while you were standing with a colleague in the corridor. You were about to go into the room where you would discuss the really important

Valerie Yow is the author of *Recording Oral History: A Practical Guide for Social Scientists* and a biography, *Bernice Kelly Harris: A Good Life Was Writing* (Forthcoming, Louisiana State University Press). She wishes to thank Linda Shope and Ronald Grele who critiqued an early version of this essay and as always offered thought-provoking observations.

research matters.¹

In this essay, I'll outline the conceptual shift which makes acknowledgment of the interviewer's reactions to, and intrusions into, research speakable. I'll briefly survey disciplines that use the in-depth interview as a research method because all contributed to the change in the paradigm. Last, I'll suggest questions the interviewer can ask to become more aware of the impact of the process on himself or herself and of the interviewer's influence on the research and analysis.

When I refer to interview effects on the interviewer and to the ways the interviewer interacts with narrator and with content, I include motives for doing the project, feelings about the narrator, interviewer's reaction to the narrator's testimony, and intrusion of the interviewer's assumptions and of the interviewer's self-schema into the interviewing and interpretive processes.

At times subjectivity has been discussed in the literature as cognitive process as opposed to observable behavior; this is not the definition I use here. Rather, I use the traditional definition of objectivity as value-free research which requires the elimination of researcher intrusion.

Most often, in the early years of the Oral History Association, there was not any acknowledgment that the interviewer was affected by the interviewing. There was not even a lot of discussion about the effects on the narrator—sometimes, two or three sentences, and at the most, a paragraph here and there. James Hoopes' oral history manual (1979), for example, advised students to ask themselves this question, "As far as you can tell, what was the interviewee's idea of you, and how might it have affected what he said?"² He suggested students spend a few minutes examining their own preconceptions, especially about the narrator.³

Elliot Wigginton started publishing his writings about the Foxfire projects in the 1970s. Wigginton described the way students interviewing members of their own community began to re-

¹ Paul Rabinow, "Representations Are Social Facts: Modernity and Post-Modernity in Anthropology," in J. Clifford and G. E. Marcus (Eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 253.

² James Hoopes, *Oral History: An Introduction for Students* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 127.

³ *Ibid.*, 84.

spect their own culture and themselves.⁴ Possibly, Wigginton’s statements about students being changed by the interviewing they were doing was acceptable because these were adolescents learning to like history. They could be seen as impressionable.

But it is *Envelopes of Sound*, first published in 1975, that articulated an awareness both of the effects of the interview process on the interviewer and of the effects of the interviewer on the process. Alice Kessler Harris wrote in the introduction to the book that oral history researchers began to realize that the interjection “of the historian, first as interviewer and transcriber and later as analyst, posed serious theoretical problems.”⁵ One of the things that worried oral historians, she said, was that they knew the “intrusion of differences between the interviewer and his subjects, distinctions in dress, speech, and manners imposed on the subject a set of classbound attitudes that inevitably distorted the information . . .”⁶

In Ronald Grele’s interview with Studs Terkel which the book presented, the issue of interviewer’s intrusion into the interview came up again when Terkel said, “You try to be objective but sometimes you become involved with the narrator.”⁷ And later, in a roundtable discussion entitled “It’s Not the Song: It’s the Singing,” Saul Benison talked about how he had been changed by oral history interviewing. Grele commented,

There is some kind of dialectical process that occurs in which you are working jointly on something and you come to share the creation itself. In my own mind, there’s always the problem of detachment because, as a historian, I have to stand back.⁸

Alice Kessler Harris answered him,

I’m not so sure that that’s not an asset, in some sense. I think that to become emotionally involved, while it’s true that it violates the first canon of the historian, which is objectivity, nevertheless, puts you intimately into a situation and thus enables you to understand it in a

⁴ Elliot Wigginton, *The Foxfire Book* (New York: Doubleday, 1972).

⁵ Ronald Grele, ed. *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History* (Chicago: Precedent Publishing Company, 1975), 2.

⁶ Ibid., 2-3.

⁷ Ibid., 35.

⁸ Ibid., 81.

way, I think, you can't understand it if you remain outside the situation.⁹

Benison added that there is no such thing as objective history—such a thing would be like reading the telephone book.¹⁰ In the last essay in *Envelopes of Sound*, Grele reminded readers that “the relationship created by the interaction of the interviewer and interviewee” requires analysis of the social and psychological kind.¹¹

Another notable exception in the 1970s is Luisa Passerini’s article, published in *History Workshop*, entitled “Work Ideology and Consensus Under Italian Fascism.” She frankly acknowledged that oral history research is subjective and argued that we have to be able to use subjectivity—both for narrator and for interviewer—in understanding social history because both invest events with meaning.¹²

Acknowledgment that the historian is not an objective observer was admitted on other occasions, as well. Oscar Handlin’s *The Uprooted*, published in 1952, was a study in which the author frankly declared he had a passionate interest.¹³ Martin Duberman candidly reflected on his reactions to the historical movement he observed and described in *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (published in 1974):

Yet the issue is not, I believe, whether the individual historian should appear in his books, but *how* he should appear—covertly or overtly. Every historian knows that he manipulates the evidence to some extent simply because of who he is (or is not), of what he selects (or omits), of how well (or badly) he empathizes and communicates. Those “fallibilities” have been frequently confessed in the abstract. Yet the *process* by which a particular personality intersects with a particular subject matter has rarely been shown, and the intersection itself almost never regarded as containing materials of potential worth. Because “objectivity” has been the ideal, the personal components that go into historical reconstruction have not been candidly revealed, made accessible to scrutiny.¹⁴

⁹ Ibid., 81-82.

¹⁰ Ibid., 85.

¹¹ Grele, “Movement Without Aim: Methodological and Theoretical Problems in Oral History,” *Ibid.*, 127-143, see p. 136.

¹² Luisa Passerini, “Work Ideology and Consensus Under Italian Fascism,” *History Workshop Journal* 8 (Autumn 1979): 82-118.

¹³ Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted* (Boston: Little Brown, 1973).

¹⁴ Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (London: Wildwood House, 1974), 12.

In the preface to *All God's Dangers*, historian Theodore Rosengarten stated frankly that to him Ned Cobb is a hero.¹⁵ In 1979, in an article for the anthology, *Telling Lives: The Biographer's Art*, Rosengarten wrote that he would raise the question of love in social science inquiry. He commented that this was an embarrassing thing to do, but we need an accurate description of the relationship of the interviewer and narrator so we can figure out what is going on. He dared to write,

Perhaps we divest our motivations of love because we fear an attack on our objectivity. Yet, no claim of objectivity survives the generation in which it is made.”¹⁶

Undoubtedly, Rosengarten was influenced by participation in political debate in the 1960s when a new ethos among students was evolving—a conviction that a scholar must do the work that is meaningful to her or him, that detachment edges one towards perfunctory research and dull interpretation.

And like many historians, he may reveal the influence of Benedetto Croce's and R.G. Collingwood's writings on the philosophy of history. Both were read routinely in graduate courses, and both stressed the centrality of the observer. Following Croce's lead on this, Collingwood argued that the historian cannot be objective, even in beginning the research. He said that it is only when we have a problem in mind that we can begin to look for evidence.¹⁷ Collingwood reminded historians that history cannot exist outside of human consciousness—a statement that puts the interpreter at the center of the process of understanding the past.

Both Croce and Collingwood were usually shunted aside, however, as historians clung to the idea of objectivity in historical research. The 1970s and early 1980s were the years, after all, when quantification of historical data was uppermost in many historians' minds and nobody admitted having an emotional connection to numbers. Oral historians, on the defensive anyway because we

¹⁵ Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York: Avon, 1974), xix.

¹⁶ Theodore Rosengarten, “Stepping Over Cockleburs: Conversations With Ned Cobb,” *Telling Lives: The Biographer's Art*, ed. Marc Pachter (Washington, D.C.: New Republic Books, 1979), 113.

¹⁷ Robin George Collingwood, “The Philosophy of History,” *Essays in the Philosophy of History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 137.

were using the testimony of *living* witnesses, wanted to show that our method was a rigorous, disinterested pursuit of truth and therefore respectable. As interviewers, we were simply observers of verbal behavior.

By the early 1980s, however, there was a discernible chink in that armor, that soon became a gaping hole. In *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession*, Peter Novick traced the notion of objectivity among historians and concluded that although in the eighties many continued to adhere to an “antitheoretical and antiphilosophical objectivist empiricism” and praised historical writings for approaching objectivity, among others a strong current of skepticism was developing.¹⁸ Now historians were more and more prone to pay attention to their “hidden ideological agendas.”¹⁹

Much questioning of the ideal of scientific objectivity was going on in other disciplines, as well. Concurrent developments that led to acknowledgment of effects on the researcher and of the researcher on the process of research were taking place in anthropology and sociology (both influenced by hermeneutics and phenomenology), biography (influenced by psychoanalytic writings), and feminist theory. So, while I don’t see much “trickle down effect” in the economic sphere, I do see a “trickle over effect” in the cultural sphere as ideas developed in one discipline are taken up and considered by people working in another discipline. Oral historians could hardly escape being vitally interested in, and influenced by, scholars in these disciplines who were using the recorded life review in research. Kristin M. Langellier observed that “the personal narrative as a communication phenomenon crosses disciplinary boundaries everywhere and every which way.”²⁰

Novick summed up the influence on historians of the paths other disciplines were taking toward candid acknowledgment of the subjective nature of research:

¹⁸ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 593 and 595-596.

¹⁹ Ibid., 596.

²⁰ Kristin Langellier, “Personal Narratives: Perspectives on Theory and Research,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 9/4 (Oct. 1989): 243. Clifford Geertz treats this topic and reminds readers of Clyde Kluckholm’s statement that a degree for anthropologists is a license to poach (and for the rest of us as well). “Blurred Genres,” *American Scholar* 49 (1980): 167.

The influence of antiobjectivist currents of thought coming from other disciplines is difficult to evaluate exactly and all but impossible to trace in the case of any given individual. But in the aggregate they clearly made many historians aware of how problematic received views of objectivity had become in contemporary thought. . . .²¹

The impact of hermeneutics and phenomenology on social science disciplines shows up occasionally even in the late 1950s and early 1960s.²² For example, Abraham Kaplan in *The Conduct of Inquiry: Methodology for Behavioral Science* published in 1964 argued that no human observation can be “immaculate”:

We always know something already, and this knowledge is intimately involved in what we come to know next, whether by observation or in any other way. We see what we expect to see, what we believe we have every reason for seeing....In sum, in making an observation we are not passive but active; and we are doing something, not only with our eyes and our minds, but also with our lips, hands, feet—and guts.²³

It was the seventies, however, when the examples of the influence of the new paradigm first became numerous in sociology although the stance that objectivity is the proper goal for social ob-

²¹ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 596.

²² Both hermeneutics and phenomenology require us to question our own assumptions and prior understandings. According to the main tenet of hermeneutics, we as researchers must realize that the very questions we ask come from the world we live in, the scientific attitude that we assume is itself something we learned in our culture. The very language we use comes from a culture that we swim in as a fish in water. Phenomenologists also assert that we are in a dialectical relationship with the phenomenon we study: in this interactive process going on, we are influencing even while we are being influenced. See discussion by Lawrence C. Watson, “Understanding a Life History as a Subjective Document: Hermeneutical and Phenomenological Perspectives,” *Ethos* 4/1 (Spring 1976): 98, 103–105. See also David Linge, “Editor’s Introduction,” in Hans Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). Alfred Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, trans. George Walsh and Frederick Lehnert (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967). The parallel movement in the physical sciences at this time in which the possibility of an objective description of the natural world was questioned (after all, even such things as the behavior of amoebae is described from the viewpoint of the observer) was of interest to feminist theorists who were questioning the objectivity of men in a male-dominated society. See, for example, Josephine Donovan, *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions of American Feminism* (New York: Ungar, 1987), 183.

²³ Abraham Kaplan, *The Conduct of Inquiry: Methodology for Behavioral Science* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1964), 133 and 136.

servers was dominant (and still is).²⁴ The decade opened with Rosalie Wax's book *Doing Fieldwork* in which she admitted the effects on her of fieldwork among Japanese Americans, saying that it had made her a different person.²⁵ (It is not clear just how.) At the end of the decade Shulamit Reinharz in her book *On Becoming a Social Scientist* summed up the struggle between the two paradigms: "Social camps are split between those who wish to depersonalize the process of knowing in the hopes of obtaining universal, "pure" knowledge and those who acknowledge that since the self of the observer is always implicated, it should be converted into an invaluable tool."²⁶

And in the seventies, a few manuals on the in-depth interview for sociologists took up the discussion. There was the excellent book by Raymond Gorden, *Interviewing: Strategy, Techniques, and Tactics* published in 1969, which does present a discussion of effects of the interviewing process on the interviewer. Gorden defined a "triadic relationship," that is, "The interrelationships between the nature of the *information* sought, the nature of the *respondent*, and the nature of the *interviewer*. . . ."²⁷ Jack Douglas' text, *Investigative Social Research*, also discussed the interactive process of interviewer and narrator extensively.²⁸ At the end of the decade, two textbooks were published, *Qualitative Sociology: A Method to the Madness* and *New Rules of Sociological Method: A Positive Critique of Interpretative Sociologies*, which dealt with the effects of the interviewer on the interview.²⁹ Also, at the end of the decade sociologists founded the journal *Qualitative Sociology*.

²⁴ See Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1967). James Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979).

²⁵ Rosalie H. Wax, *Doing Fieldwork: Warnings and Advice* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 179.

²⁶ Shulamit Reinharz, *On Becoming a Social Scientist: From Survey Research and Participant Observation to Experiential Analysis* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1979), 127, 241-243.

²⁷ Raymond Gorden, *Interviewing: Strategy, Techniques and Tactics* (Chicago: Dorsey Press, 1969, first edition).

²⁸ Jack Douglas, *Investigative Social Research* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1976.)

²⁹ Howard Schwartz and Jerry Jacobs, *Qualitative Sociology: A Method to the Madness* (New York: Free Press, 1979), 123. Anthony Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method: A Positive Critique of Interpretative Sociologies* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 19 and see especially the chapter "Some Schools of Social Theory and Philosophy," 23-70, for a discussion of the impact of phenomenology on sociological theory.

and began to publish articles by interviewers like Arlene Daniels who admitted how much she had invested two of her narrators with glittering personality because *she* needed for them to have a glittering personality.³⁰

Anthropologist Victor Turner argued in the foreword to an ethnographic study by a sociologist that one can have “an objective relation to one’s own subjectivity,” and can therefore use self-scrutiny to gain greater understanding of the research one is engaged in.³¹ In anthropology in the sixties, a few researchers were developing ethnographic theory based on this awareness of the intrusion of one’s self into the research and interpretation of data. “Reflexivity” was a term used more and more often. In *Reinventing Anthropology* (1969), a collection of essays scrutinizing the discipline, Bob Scholte described the question anthropologists confronted in his essay, “Toward a Reflexive and Critical Anthropology:”

If our perceptions, descriptions, and analyses are influenced by language, and if our language is in turn related to a given cultural setting, then our efforts are potentially subject to various “ethnocentricities of meaning.” Nor can a scientific language be assumed to be neutral. . . . It follows that all ethnographic descriptions and any ethnological analyses derived from such accounts are, and must be, part hermeneutics, that is, interpretive activities based on contextual information and mediated texts.³²

Many anthropologists who were writing in the 1970s, used reflexivity as a means of critiquing and understanding their own research process. Anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff described her work, the recording of life histories of Jewish elders: “How a tale is heard and how profoundly it affects the one who hears it as well as the one who tells it is an important theme in my work.”³³

Peter Novick commented on the anxiety caused by the debate among anthropologists concerning subjectivity in research: “Of all the social science disciplines, it was in anthropology that the ‘objectivity question’ assumed the greatest centrality in recent decades,

³⁰ Arlene Kaplan Daniels, “Self-Deception and Self-Discovery in Fieldwork,” *Qualitative Sociology* 6/3 (Fall 1983): 210.

³¹ Victor Turner, Foreword to Bennetta Jules-Rosette, *African Apostles: Ritual and Conversion in the Church of John Maranke* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 8.

³² Bob Scholte, “Towards a Reflexive and Critical Anthropology,” in Dell Hymes, ed. *Reinventing Anthropology* (New York: Pantheon, 1969), 440.

³³ Barbara Myerhoff, “Telling One’s Story,” *Center Magazine* (March 1980), 28-29.

and where it was most divisive.”³⁴

Outstanding anthropologists, such as James Clifford³⁵ and Clifford Geertz³⁶, argued persuasively that subjectivity must be acknowledged, indeed that it can be used to enhance understanding of the research process. Dennis Tedlock used as his model intersubjectivity: it is the researcher’s questions as well as the informant’s answers that must be scrutinized, he argued. It is the *dialogue* that is important.³⁷

A remarkable book, *People Studying People: The Human Element in Fieldwork*, published in 1980, presented essays dealing with the role that the researcher’s emotions play. Authors Robert A. Georges and Michael Jones declared frankly: “In this book we have attempted to counter the view, widely held and generally reinforced by conventional fieldwork guides and manuals, that individuals can conduct fieldwork involving people studying people without being human.”³⁸ Just three years later, George Stocking edited a collection of essays on ethnographic fieldwork, *Observers Observed*, which revealed the ways the ethnographer’s desires, fears, and eccentricities impinged on the work of such well-known anthropologists as Bronislaw Malinowski and Franz Boas.³⁹

In the 1980s, Renato Rosaldo became a spokesman for the argument that the ethnographer “occupies a position or structural location and observes with a particular angle of vision.” He reminded readers that age, gender, outsider’s position, identification with a particular political regime, and certain life experiences all influence what an ethnographer learns in fieldwork. “The truth of objectivity has lost its monopoly status,” he stated.⁴⁰

³⁴ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 548-549.

³⁵ James Clifford, “Introduction: Partial Truths,” *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, eds. James Clifford and George Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 14.

³⁶ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), see especially pp. 10 and 23.

³⁷ Dennis Tedlock, “The Analogical Tradition and the Emergence of a Dialogical Anthropology,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 35:4 (Winter 1979): 387-399.

³⁸ Robert A. Georges and Michael O. Jones, *People Studying People: The Human Element in Fieldwork* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 153.

³⁹ George W. Stocking, Jr., Ed., *Observers Observed: Essays on Ethnographic Fieldwork*, (Madison: University Of Wisconsin Press, 1983).

⁴⁰ Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), see especially pp 19-21.

At the same time (the 1970s) that the philosophical writings in hermeneutics and phenomenology were becoming more widely known in the social sciences, a few biographers were bravely admitting that they were anything but detached, objective observers. Often they described explicitly the influence on their work of psychoanalytic theory, especially Erik Erikson's model of stages of development and the Freudian concept of transference. Therapists are used to asking themselves, “Why am I reacting to this client the way I am? Am I attributing to this client personality characteristics of someone in my past or feelings I have had in my past?” But biographers also began to use the concept of transference to analyze their writing. And Erikson's model of stages of development led them to ask, “What are the issues I'm confronting in my own life now? How does this research relate to these questions I have now about how to live a life?”

A collection of articles on writing biography, *Introspection in Biography: The Biographer's Quest for Self-Awareness*, edited by Samuel Baron and Carl Pletsch and published in 1985, offered reflections by biographers who were writing in the seventies. In one of the articles, Richard Lebeaux said he chose his subject Henry David Thoreau during the period of the anti-war movement because he saw Thoreau as one of the founding fathers of the counterculture. He wrote, “Thoreau, with his stress on individual action, nonviolence, and the preeminence of the natural, was highly compatible with my ideological and emotional needs.”⁴¹ Later Lebeaux used this awareness of affinity to examine the process of his research and interpretation, to take a step back and look at what he had done. Trained in English and sociology, he said that he had used Eriksonian and other psychoanalytical concepts to critique his writing.⁴²

Carl Pletsch ended the book *Introspection in Biography* by stating, “Biographers have felt obliged to subscribe to the ideal of objectivity. But biography is the perfect enterprise in which to transcend that ideal and show the value of assimilating subjectivity in a larger conception of knowledge.”⁴³

⁴¹ Richard Lebeaux, “Thoreau's Lives, Lebeaux's Lives,” in *Introspection in Biography: The Biographer's Quest for Self-Awareness*, eds. Samuel Baron and Carl Pletsch (Hilldale, New Jersey: Analytic Press, 1985), 232.

⁴² Ibid., 238.

⁴³ Ibid., 360.

Among psychologists who were using the life review method in their research, there was a growing awareness of the ways the researcher interacts with the informant and the process. Psychologist Thomas Cottle, carrying out life studies, noted in 1973 that we interviewers watch ourselves as much as we watch our narrators. He wrote,

As best we can, therefore, we play out political roles, the politics, that is, of our own experiences together, hoping to combat the asymmetries produced by the culture, the society, our age, sex, and race and social standing, and by the rights and privileges that put me at an advantage. . . . There is little, then, about this form of research that allows for so-called objective inquiry.⁴⁴

By 1983, Ken Plummer in his chapters “The Doing of Life Histories” and “Theorizing Lives” in *Documents of Life* offered specific questions the researcher/writer must ask about how he or she has influenced the research and interpretation, such as, how have my attitudes, demeanor, personality, and expectancies shaped the outcome?⁴⁵

In the 1970s, almost at the same time as the developments in the writing of biography and the conceptual changes among some sociologists and anthropologists (and even a few psychologists who were using the life review as a research method), feminist theorists were raising questions about relationships of power in society. Working separately in the fields of English, education, anthropology, psychology, sociology, and history, but also talking together, they discussed the ways class position and sexual asymmetry operated in interpersonal relations. Their ideas were inevitably applied to the interview situation.

Sociologist Dorothy Smith made an early commentary on research methodology from the feminist point of view by arguing that “objective” sociology has depended upon class and sex bases. Now it is impossible, she wrote, for “sociology to evade the problem that our kind of society is known and experienced rather differently from different positions within it.”⁴⁶ In 1975, *Another*

⁴⁴ Thomas Cottle, “The Life Study: On Mutual Recognition and the Subjective Inquiry,” *Urban Life and Culture* 2/3 (October 1973): 349-350.

⁴⁵ Ken Plummer, “The Doing of Life Histories” and “Theorizing Lives” in *Documents of Life* (no. 7 in the Contemporary Social Research Series, general editor M. Bulmer. London: Allen and Unwin, 1983), 84 and 103.

⁴⁶ Dorothy Smith, “Women’s Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology,” *Sociological Inquiry* 44/1 (1974): 12.

Voice: Feminist Perspectives on Social Life and Social Science, a collection of original articles by sociologists, edited by Marcia Millman and Rosabeth Kanter, presented work on the influence of gender on every aspect of society, even interpersonal relationships in research.⁴⁷ The 1977 edition of *Frontiers* was devoted entirely to oral history as a way of recovering the history of women. Sherna Gluck and other contributors speculated on how the difference in culture between interviewer and narrator—“including gender, race, class, ethnicity and regional identification”—affects the interview.⁴⁸ In an article “Feminist Criticism of the Social Sciences” for the *Harvard Educational Review* in 1979, Marcia Weskott declared that the ideal of objectivity, by trying to eliminate subjectivity, prevented the searcher from realizing that meanings are arrived at through the intersubjectivity of subject and object.⁴⁹

And feminist researchers using the in-depth interview were concerned with how the dominant position of the researcher—who knows all the questions to ask and by implication all the answers—can subdue the narrator. By the late 1970s, they began to publish assertions that the cult of scientific objectivity was a means of maintaining the researcher in a “one-up” position.⁵⁰ Liz Stanley and Sue Wise in “Back Into the Personal or: Our Attempt to Construct Feminist Research” argued,

We reject the idea that scientists, or feminists, can become experts in other people’s lives. And we reject the belief that there is one true reality to become experts about. We feel that feminism’s present renaissance has come about precisely because many women have rejected other people’s (men’s) interpretations of our lives.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Marcia Millman and Rosabeth Moss Kanter, eds., *Another Voice: Feminist Perspectives on Social Life and Social Science* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1975).

⁴⁸ Sherna Gluck, “What’s So Special About Women: Women’s Oral History,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies* 2/2(Summer 1977): 7.

⁴⁹ Marcia Weskott, “Feminist Criticism of the Social Sciences,” *Harvard Educational Review* 49:4 (1979): 425.

⁵⁰ Ibid. See also Ann Oakley, “Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms,” in *Doing Feminist Research*, ed. Helen Roberts (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 30-61; and Judith Stacey, “Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?” in *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, ed. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1991), 111-119.

⁵¹ Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, “‘Back Into the Personal’ or: Our Attempt to Construct Feminist Research,” *Theories of Women’s Studies*, eds. Gloria Bowles and Renate Duelli Klein (London: Routledge, 1983), 194-195.

Feminists pointed out that the notion of scientific objectivity is androcentric.⁵² They talked about how the questions men asked and what they chose to define as important, using their objective scientific methods, had led them to leave out a lot of information about women.⁵³ They decided they would have to use subjectivity. In the spring issue of the *Oral History Review* in 1987, historian Kathryn Anderson summed up a realization many shared: "Reviewing my interviews, I have found that my training in the history of facts and action triumphed over my awareness of a decade of historical research pointing to the importance of relationships and consciousness in women's lives . . ."⁵⁴

That same spring, Daphne Patai's article in the *International Journal of Oral History*, "Ethical Problems of Personal Narratives, or Who Should Eat the Last Piece of Cake?" emphasized that the possibility of the interviewer's exploitation of the narrator is built into every research project.⁵⁵ The implication of her work is that we cannot go about research without questioning ourselves, our biases, our purposes, our reactions to the narrator and the process, and the effects our research have on the narrator.

In the eighties, a flood of articles by women in specific social science disciplines critiqued positivism. In *Analyzing Gender: A Handbook of Social Science Research*, published in 1987, editors Myra Marx Ferree and Beth Hess, summed up feminists' critiques of positivism developed over nearly 20 years:

Feminist methodology rejects the positivist division between theory and practice, between the researcher and the "object" of research. The image of science as establishing mastery over subjects, as demanding the absence of feeling, and as enforcing separateness of the knower from the known, all under the guise of "objectivity," has been carefully critiqued even in reference to the physical sciences. Elements that are present in scientific knowing but devalued because they are associated with femaleness—intuition, empathy, and

⁵² Susan Geiger, "Women's Life Histories: Method and Content," *Signs* 11 (1986): 338.

⁵³ Ilene Alexander, Suzanne Bunkers, and Cherry Muhanji, "A Conversation on Studying and Writing about Women's Lives Using Nontraditional Methodologies," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 3 & 4 (1989): 99.

⁵⁴ Kathryn Anderson et al, "Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History," *Oral History Review* (Spring 1987): 109.

⁵⁵ Daphne Patai, "Ethical Problems of Personal Narratives, or Who Should Eat the Last Piece of Cake?" *International Journal of Oral History* 8 (February 1987): 5-27.

passion—are ignored in the positivist account and eventually distort the actual process of doing science.⁵⁶

Critiques like these notwithstanding, mainstream sociology, psychology, economics, and political science continue to champion the ideal of scientific objectivity in research. Historians, according to Novick, have not arrived at a consensus.⁵⁷ However, qualitative sociology, ethnography, biography, and feminist theory have embraced this conceptual shift to insist on awareness of the interactive process involving interviewer and narrator, interviewer and content.⁵⁸

Has the paradigm shifted for oral history? Reading articles in the *Oral History Review*, I notice that a rejection of old notions of objectivity was very much influencing how some oral historians thought about what they were doing in the late seventies and early eighties. Beginning in 1987, however, in nearly every article in the first volume in that year, writers discussed their motivation and feelings about the interviewing project they were engaged in. From that time, contributors have often explored the ways their class, gender, age, or ethnicity affected their interaction with the narrator. And they have briefly mentioned the ways their reactions to the narrator affected the research and interpretive processes.⁵⁹ They have talked about the interview as a collaborative effort, not between authority and subject but between two searchers of the past

⁵⁶ Myra Marx Ferree and Beth Hess, *Analyzing Gender: A Handbook of Social Science Research* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1987); see also Marilyn Strathern, “An Awkward Relationship: The Case of Feminism and Anthropology,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 12:2 (1987): 276-292.

⁵⁷ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 592.

⁵⁸ See especially recent work such as the sociological text by Sherryl Kleinman and Martha Copp, *Emotions and Fieldwork* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1993); the work of anthropologists like Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989); in collections of writers’ observations of their process in writing biography, such as *The Challenge of Feminist Biography*, eds. Sara Alpern, Joyce Antler, Elisabeth Perry, and Ingrid Scobie (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

⁵⁹ See especially articles in *The Oral History Review*, such as Blanca Erazo, “The Stories Our Mothers Tell” *Oral History Review* 16/2 (Fall 1988): 23-28; Micaela di Leonardo, “Oral History As Ethnographic Encounter” *Oral History Review* 15 (Spring 1987): 1-20; John Forrest and Elisabeth Jackson, “Get Real: Empowering the Student Through Oral History” *Oral History Review* 18/1 (Spring 1990): 29-44; Robert S. Newman, “Objectivity and Subjectivities: Oral Narratives from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam” *Oral History Review* 21/2 (Winter 1993): 89-95; Richard Candida Smith, “Review Essay: Ronald Grele on the Role of Theory in Oral History” *Oral History Review* 21/2 (Winter 1993): 99-103. See also the volume *International Annual of Oral History, 1990: Subjectivity and Multiculturalism in Oral History*, edited by Ronald Grele (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992).

and present. In the recently published collection of essays, *Interactive Oral History Interviewing*, Allan Futrell and Charles Willard declared, “We want to emphasize the emerging relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee as the key component in understanding the meaning created during the interview.”⁶⁰ Certainly, the paradigm has shifted in oral history.

As practitioners and instructors we have to be more than just aware of this shift in the paradigm for oral historians, we have to begin incorporating the concept of reflexivity into our writing and teaching. In the past, it was always easier to talk about effects on the narrator than to take a hard look at ourselves, at how we affect the process of research and analysis, how we are affected. And we historians have concentrated on providing full citations for the location of the document rather than on the search itself or on our process during the search and analysis; it has not been our custom to put our reflections on the ways we reacted to the documents into print. But we need to not only question our own work, we need to place the published writing in a total context which includes revelation of our own agendas when the reader needs this information to evaluate the research. The fear is sometimes expressed that every research article or book will deal with the researcher’s personal experiences and the research topic itself will take second place in the presentation. I am not advocating that the researcher’s personal reactions become the emphasis of the research. What I am suggesting is that when we pretend there is nothing going on inside of us that is influencing the research and interpretation, we prevent ourselves from using an essential research tool. And in some cases, the reader needs to know what influenced the research and interpretation.

Anthropologist Victor Turner’s goal of having “an objective relation” to our own subjectivity is something to aim for.⁶¹ Devereux expressed this stance well, “The scientific study of man . . . must use the subjectivity inherent in all observation as the royal road to an authentic, rather than fictitious, objectivity.”⁶²

⁶⁰ Allan Futrell and Charles Willard, “Intersubjectivity and Interviewing,” in *Interactive Oral History Interviewing*, Eva M. McMahan and Kim Lacy Rogers, eds. (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994), 84.

⁶¹ Turner, forward to *African Apostles*, 8.

⁶² George Devereux, *From Anxiety to Method in the Social Sciences* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), xvii.

Do I try to have my cake and eat it, too? Yes. I am talking about two aims which I see as indissoluble, not antithetical—(1) understanding the subjective aspects of the research and interpretation so that (2) we can carry out the project with as much objectivity as possible and use subjectivity to advantage. A value-free research process, the definition of objectivity I use here,⁶³ is not possible. But the intent of that definition is that we should not ignore evidence because it does not fit our prior assumptions—we have to be conscious therefore of what our prior assumptions are. To my mind, objectivity in research has two aspects: (1) the collection of all information, including the subjective, bearing directly on the research question and (2) the critical examination of the evidence with the methods of examination themselves under scrutiny. These aspects of research can only be goals, not actual attainments: we can never gather all the evidence, we can never be completely aware of all researcher intrusion. And the “complex web” in the interpersonal relations in an interview prevents us from sorting things out in discrete boxes.⁶⁴

Although this matter of researcher influence on the research is often mentioned now in oral history literature, it is not often dealt with in any detail. Even works on intersubjectivity have little to say that is specific about effects on the interviewer.⁶⁵ This kind of analysis is not simple or easy, but we can glean some information

⁶³ In the presentation of Louise Tilly's essay, “People’s History and Social Science History,” and responses, “Between Social Scientists: Responses to Louise A. Tilly,” *The International Journal of Oral History* 1985: 6 (1):5-46, definitions of objectivity in social science research were blurred but seem to refer to using subjective elements in the document as opposed to “hard facts.” Louisa Passerini called attention to the fact that the two concepts, objectivity and subjectivity, cannot be separated, see pp. 22-23. And Ronald Grele noted that the selection of facts to present depends upon many factors, some of them subjective. “Louise A. Tilly’s Response to Thompson, Passerini, Bertaux-Wiame and Portelli, With a Concluding Comment by Ronald J. Grele,” *Ibid.*, pp. 40-46.

⁶⁴ Charles L. Briggs offers a critique of Durkheim’s notion that “social facts exist independently of the observer” and draws attention to the “complex web” of interpersonal relations in the interview. Charles L. Briggs, *Learning How to Ask: A Sociolinguistic Appraisal of the Role of the Interview in Social Science Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 21-22.

⁶⁵ Notable recent exceptions to this are articles in the *International Annual of Oral History, 1990: Subjectivity and Multiculturalism in Oral History*, ed. Ronald J. Grele (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992). See Michelle Palmer, Marianne Esolen, Susan Rose, Andrea Fishman, and Jill Bartoli, “I Haven’t Anything to Say’: Reflections on Self and Community in Collecting Oral Histories,” pages 167-189, see especially p. 176-177; LuAnn Jones, “Voices of Southern Agricultural History,” pages 135-144.

from research in psychology and communication studies relevant to this topic of reflexivity in oral history interviewing—particularly, the research on how the ways we think about ourselves influence our judgment of the narrator.⁶⁶ In any one-on-one situation, we are bombarded with many stimuli—so many that we have to focus on certain aspects of the other person's behavior and ignore others. We have to be selective, and we may select according to what we value. What we value comes from thinking about our own experiences. Psychologists Hazel Markus and Jeanne Smith described the assumption researchers make about this phenomenon: the self-structure (sometimes referred to as the self-schema) is comprised of thoughts and feelings about the self in certain domains and influences the individual's perception of others in those domains.⁶⁷ This assumption has been tested and research results do indicate that "self-relevant qualities (traits and behaviors) can figure in the description of others."⁶⁸

Furthermore, it appears from the research that we notice variation in the behavior of others in those areas of pre-defined importance to us. Markus and Smith explained: "Thus when some aspect of the stimulus (the person-to-be-perceived) is relevant to an area that is important to the perceiver, this aspect is likely to be focused on and elaborated with information from the individual's own self-structure."⁶⁹

The schema about the self is only the beginning. In the plural, there are constructs based on gender, class, age, race, ethnicity, and ideology which influence how the interviewer relates to the narrator. These schemata, or preconceived ideas about what a person or situation should be, are learned in the subculture we grew up in or live in as an adult.⁷⁰ Raymond Gorden gives the example

⁶⁶ E. Mintz, "An Example of Assimilative Projection," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 52 (1956): 270-280. H. J. Goldings, "On the Avowal and Projection of Happiness," *Journal of Personality* 25 (1954): 50-57. See the volume, M. Sherif and C. I. Hovland, *Social Judgment: Assimilation and Contrast Effects in Communication and Attitude Change* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961).

⁶⁷ Hazel Markus and Jeanne Smith, "The Influence of Self-Schemata on the Perception of Others" in *Personality, Cognition, and Social Interaction*, eds. Nancy Cantor and John F. Kihlstrom (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Erlbaum, 1981), see p. 234 for section I paraphrase here.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁷⁰ Peter A. Andersen, "Cognitive Schemata in Personal Relationships," in *Individuals in Relationships*, ed. Steve Duck (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1993), 16-18.

of the interviewer who asked a narrator living in an urban slum about parenthood. Her views were unlike his middle-class views and his disapproval was subtly communicated. His narrator did not respond so candidly after that.⁷¹

Howard Sypher, Mary Lee Hummert, and Sheryl Williams concluded that this self-schema research provides a “cautionary message” for the interviewer: “As interviewers, we must attempt to move beyond our own self-schemas, focusing the interview not on what is important to us in our lives, but what is important to our interviewees—regardless of the accuracy with which they actually recall events.”⁷²

Recently an example of this smacked me in the face. I was interviewing family members of a woman whose literary biography I was engaged in writing. I had read all of her published work, including her autobiography, and much of her documents collection in the archives. The first narrator came to my cottage to record. I was excited about finding the answers to the questions that had been flooding my mind. Soon I became aware of a feeling of great heaviness. By the end of the interview, although I managed to serve tea and express my gratitude to the narrator, I was depressed. I packed the tape away and did not listen to it for three months. When I did take courage and listened, I realized that I had wanted information on family relationships and on clues to this woman writer’s internal life. The narrator recounted external events, purely factual information. I had had unrealistic expectations of the narrator: I wanted him to think out loud along the lines I was thinking. He did not say what I thought was important—he said what in his view was important.

Now there is a body of research literature in communication studies, especially sociolinguistics, on the effects of gender in conversation. Some of these studies, but not all, are applicable to the interview situation. For example, a male interviewer may begin to

⁷¹ Raymond L. Gorden, *Interviewing: Strategy, Techniques and Tactics* (Chicago: Dorsey Press, 1987), 251.

⁷² Howard Sypher, Mary Lee Hummert, and Sheryl Williams, “Social Psychological Aspects of the Oral History Interview,” in *Interactive Oral History Interviewing*, ed. Eva M. McMahan and Kim Lacy Rogers (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Erlbaum Associates, 1994), 58.

feel some competition with his male narrator,⁷³ or a woman who is interviewing may express empathy only to find it is received by the male narrator as condescension.⁷⁴ Expertise, if the interviewer is a woman, may come across differently to the narrator than if the interviewer is a man: men may use expertise to establish authority while women may use expertise to get a feeling of empowerment from being helpful.⁷⁵

Age can also make a difference in what kinds of information the interviewer thinks is important. Attorney and historian Amy Tobol interviewed attorneys who had been active in a law school student organization which assisted southern civil rights attorneys in the 1960s and 1970s. She found that they were puzzled when she raised the question of whether they perceived of themselves as activists or lawyers and whether these roles seemed at odds with each other. She had trouble getting clear answers. She observed, "It occurred to me, particularly after I interviewed people who participated during the late 1970s and 1980s that I was speaking in 'nineties language' about 'sixties' experiences."⁷⁶ She had framed the question in terms of vital interests in her own life experience of the 1990s, but these were not terms they used to view their reality in the 1960s and 1970s.

Another facet of the interview situation is interviewer's need—whether instrumental or emotional. Barbara Erskine described her reaction to interviewing a man who had been a pilot during World War II. He talked about seeing his buddies in planes around him, dying. Suddenly his narration brought back to her own mind her father's death in a plane crash thirty years earlier. She said, "Dad's

⁷³ Don H. Zimmerman and Candace West, "Sex Roles, Interruptions and Silences in Conversation," in *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance*, ed. Barrie Thorner and Nancy Henley (Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1983), 125. H. M. Leet-Pellegrini, "Conversational Dominance as a Function of Gender and Expertise," in *Language: Social Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Howard Giles, W. Peter Robinson, and Philip M. Smith (Oxford: Pergamon, 1980), 102. For discussion of these findings applicable to the in-depth interview, see Valerie Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Practical Guide for Social Scientists* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1994), 129-134.

⁷⁴ Research findings summarized by Daniel N. Maltz and Ruth A. Borker, "A Cultural Approach to Male-Female Miscommunication," in *Language and Social Identity*, ed. John J. Gumperez (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 198.

⁷⁵ Leet-Pellegrini, "Conversational Dominance as a Function of Gender and Expertise," 98.

⁷⁶ Amy Ruth Tobol, "Talking to Advocates: Interviewing Law Students, Civil Rights Research Council Activists," paper delivered at the Annual Conference of the Oral History Association, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, October 19, 1995.

face momentarily became that of my informant. I had to ask myself, ‘Whose story am I listening to?’” She had not allowed herself to cry at her father’s funeral—the family needed her to be stoic and in control. Now she grieved with the narrator over losses. In this case, the sharing of a feeling, she believes, may have been “a spring-board to better interviewing.”⁷⁷

Still, another possibility in the interaction of two people is the process by which a person infuses into a current personal situation feelings about someone from the past.⁷⁸ Transference usually operates on an unconscious level, but it does not have to remain an unconscious influence. Transferring past feelings onto a person in a present situation can go on in any interpersonal encounter, including the oral history interview. I do not merge here the distinctly different purposes and methods of the clinical interview and the oral history interview, but the concepts are of some practical value for the oral historian.

For example, an interviewer may take an instant dislike to the senior foreign service narrator because he evokes some feelings of injustice another authority figure has caused. If you feel at the beginning of the interview a real dislike of the narrator, transference may be one of the influences impinging. Here the interviewer’s transference could set up a negative dynamic as he or she keeps challenging the narrator’s every statement even when it is not warranted. If you can get a minute to think it over (for example, taking time to check the recording device), you can make yourself aware of the negative feeling and gain some control over it so that you do

⁷⁷ Barbara Erskine, “Loss and Grief in Oral History,” paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Oral History Association, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, October 19, 1995.

⁷⁸ Karl Figli presents a discussion of transference in the oral history interview in “Oral History and the Unconscious,” *History Workshop Journal* 26 (Autumn 1988): 120-132. In this issue, there is a Special Feature on psychoanalysis and history. Transference is difficult to measure and therefore researchers have shied away from this topic in empirical research. Most often the research literature contains case by case analysis of the way transference and countertransference have operated. See Charles J. Gelso and Jean A. Carter, “Components of the Psychotherapy Relationship: Their Interaction and Unfolding During Treatment,” *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 41/3 (1994): 296-306. Charles J. Gelso and Jean A. Carter, “Level of Generality and Clear Thinking in Theory Construction and Theory Evaluation: Reply to Greenberg (1994) and Patton (1994),” *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 41/3 (1994): 414. See also Edward S. Bordin, “Theory and Research on the Therapeutic Working Alliance” in *The Working Alliance: Theory, Research and Practice*, Adam O. Horvath and Leslie L. Greenberg, eds. (New York: Wiley, 1994) 13-37, see especially 29-30 and 33-34.

not unconsciously prejudice the interview. Later, when you have time for reflection, you can ask yourself some questions about what might be causing the negative feelings.

Another example of this occurs frequently, I suspect: A narrator may be consciously or unconsciously relating to a younger interviewer as a daughter or son. Not only may transference be influencing narrators' attitudes in the interview but there may be transference as the interviewer responds to this. Micaela di Leonardo in *Varieties of Ethnic Experience* said that her middle-aged narrators often thought of her as a daughter—they fitted her into “an established role.” She enjoyed the warm rapport this infused into the interviewing. However, she was not so pleased when one narrator scolded her in a parental manner: “You mean Mommy and Daddy *allowed* you to have Thanksgiving away from home?”⁷⁹

When the feelings between narrator and interviewer are positive, the influence of this on the progress of the interview will usually be positive and you will have time later to muse over this. But I have found myself hesitating to ask some things of narrators for whom I felt affection lest my questions cause them discomfort. Awareness of this positive transference might help the interviewer to confront the narrator with the difficult questions that would have perhaps been avoided otherwise.

There is also the possibility that the interviewer can be too much invested in the topic, too closely identifying with a person or cause. In the interview mentioned above in which I sought information for a biography and became more and more dispirited, the narrator near the end said in his factual way that my subject’s husband died without a will. All the money and property was divided equally among his heirs so that at the end of her life, she had only her house and no money to heat it. He found her living in winter in one room of her house with only a little space heater for warmth. I had begun to identify with the subject of the biography so much that when he described her poverty, I felt such distress that his next words passed me by.

There is also the unique situation in oral history research with which psychological research is not concerned. In the oral history interview, just by virtue of the fact that you are recording the testi-

⁷⁹ Micaela di Leonardo, *Varieties of Ethnic Experience: Kinship, Class and Gender Among California Italian-Americans* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), 37.

mony means that both interviewer and narrator have in the back of their minds the presence of other audiences.⁸⁰ Both have a need to articulate a view of their reality consonant with the communities they identify with, an ideology they share. Ronald Grele described this as a “particular vision of history” which provides a context for each participant. Grele analyzed an interview with Mel Dubin, a cutter in the garment industry, union organizer for the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, and later an officer. Grele said that the narrative interwove four different historical strands: “his own autobiography, the history of the organization and success of the ILGWU, a history of the garment industry, and a brief history of the City of New York.”⁸¹ People involved in labor struggles, especially in his union, were Dubin’s imagined audience; his ideology was based on his conviction of the union’s championship of the working person. Undoubtedly, the interviewer asked questions soliciting information of interest to a different audience—labor historians and other academics who would pass judgment on his work. The interviewer’s ideology was similar to Dubin’s in that there is shown sympathy to the struggles of working-class men and women.

This consideration of the influence of ideology leads to a closely allied one, the influence on the research process of the community the researcher is identified with. Michael V. Angrosino in his article “Conversations in a Monastery” explained why he thought the monks were willing to talk to him. He was Catholic and he often stayed in the monastery for several days at a time, following the daily schedule of prayers and meals. They knew that he was “sympathetic with their aims.” They must have identified him with the community of practicing Catholics and with people who appreciate the monks’ way of life. He said, “I believe that I was able to overcome (or, at least, to mitigate) these resistance factors mainly because I was perceived as something of a participant-observer, that I had attended retreats at the monastery and had been involved

⁸⁰ Eva M. McMahan, *Elite Oral History Discourse: A Study of Cooperation and Coherence* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1989), 19. See brief discussion of Lacan’s idea that in any two-person conversation, there is at least a third audience present, George E. Marcus and Michael J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 31.

⁸¹ Ronald Grele, “Listen to Their Voices,” in *Envelopes of Sound*, ed. Ronald Grele (Chicago: Precedent Publishers, 1985, 2nd rev. ed.), 213 and 216.

in various community programs that had brought me into contact with some of the monks, including the Abbot.”⁸²

Consider how a *difference* in ideology can impinge. As long as we are interviewing people of similar ideology, there is no problem with empathy. (Possibly there is a tendency to make heroes of our narrators in this case.) Having empathy with someone whose values you abhor is difficult. Even if you repress an expression of disdain, body language and subtleties in the phrasing of the questions will reveal your attitude. William Sheridan Allen described his attitude about interacting with former Nazis in his research for *The Nazi Seizure of Power*—he needed to understand why and how people on all sides did what they did.⁸³ I think you would have to keep reminding yourself of this.

Sometimes, you simply cannot empathize with a narrator for good reason, but you have to be aware of what is happening to be in control of yourself and make a conscious decision about what to do. For example, you might explain briefly your point of view and respectfully remind the narrator that this is her or his opportunity to record for a wider audience. But expect the responses to be different from those the narrator would give a sympathetic listener. Interviewers who can respond to narrators with empathy can expect fuller answers, while an inability to have empathy may cut short the interview.⁸⁴

In summary, liking or not liking, feeling repelled by difference in ideology or attracted by a shared world-view, sensing difference in gender or age or social class or ethnicity, all influence the ways we ask questions and respond to narrators and interpret and evaluate what they say. As analyst and fieldworker George Devereux argued nearly 30 years ago, we must view our difficulties (and I would add, pleasures as well) as important data in their own right.⁸⁵

⁸² Michael V. Angrosino, “Conversations in a Monastery,” *Oral History Review* 19/1-2 (Spring-Fall, 1991): 60 and 71.

⁸³ William Sheridan Allen, *The Nazi Seizure of Power: The Experience of a Single German Town, 1922-1945* (New York: F. Watts, 1984), see author’s preface, x and xi.

⁸⁴ Deborah Davis and William T. Perkowitz, “Consequences of Responsiveness in Dyadic Interaction,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37: 544.

⁸⁵ George Devereux, *From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioral Sciences*, xvii.

There are specific questions to ask so that we understand what is happening:

1. What am I feeling about this narrator?
2. What similarities and what differences impinge on this interpersonal situation?
3. How does my own ideology affect this process? What group outside of the process am I identifying with?
4. Why am I doing the project in the first place?
5. In selecting topics and questions, what alternatives might I have taken? Why didn't I choose these?
6. What other possible interpretations are there? Why did I reject them?
7. What are the effects on me as I go about this research?
How are my reactions impinging on the research?

Now we have a paradigm that permits us awareness and use of the interactive process of interviewer and narrator, of interviewer and content. This kind of awareness is on the main stage—it's not the side show that it used to be.

10. Linda Shopes, "Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities," *The Journal of American History* (September 2002): 588-598.



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Author(s): Linda Shopes

Source: *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 89, No. 2, History and September 11: A Special Issue (Sep., 2002), pp. 588-598

Published by: Organization of American Historians

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Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities

Linda Shopes

Definitions and Delimitations

“Community oral history” is a protean term, invoked by scholars and grass-roots historians alike to describe a variety of practices developed for a variety of purposes. The term “community” itself is vague and conceptually limited, with generally positive associations and not entirely deliberate implications of commonality and comity. A community oral history project typically refers to one defined by locale, to a group of interviews with people who live in some geographically bounded place, whether an urban ethnic neighborhood, a southern mill village, or a region of midwestern farms. Yet “community” also refers to a shared social identity, and so we speak of interviews with members of the gay community, the black community, the medical community. In fact, many community oral history projects combine the two meanings of the term, focusing on a particular group’s experience in a particular place—steelworkers in Buffalo, Chicanos in El Paso, jazz musicians in Los Angeles.

Distinctions exist among broad genres of oral history. One axis of difference is defined by the provenance of interviews: At one end, there are interviewing projects developed by grass-roots groups to document their own experience; at the other, interviews conducted by scholars to inform their own research or to create a permanent archival collection for future scholarly work. In practice, most oral history projects fall somewhere between the two poles: historical society volunteers develop a project to document some aspect of local life in collaboration with the local college; a scholar, working on his own research project, makes contact with the retirees’ group of a union local as a means of entrée for interviews he wishes to conduct about the union’s history and along the way agrees to participate in a union educational program.

The second axis is defined by voice, that is, the extent to which the narrator’s voice or the historian/interpreter’s voice dominates the final product of the interviews. At one end are archival collections of interviews that are almost entirely in the narrators’

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voices; at the other are scholarly monographs in which the historian incorporates interviews along with other sources into his interpretation of the past. In fact, most oral history projects fall somewhere along this spectrum of possibilities.¹ Thus a filmmaker can produce a film about a community's experience using testimony from participants, contemporary accounts, and scholarly "talking heads" in various proportions; an author can organize evidence from interviews in multiple ways to construct a historical argument; a museum exhibition about a neighborhood can use short quotations from interviews as label text or play extended excerpts from the actual audio- or videotapes.

The multiple ways voice gets rendered in community oral history projects open up a range of interpretive questions. The intersection of voice and provenance further complicates matters—my point here is simply to map the terrain over which this essay roams. In the following discussion, I will address both practical and interpretive issues involved in using oral history to study communities, considering first the use of extant interviews and second the conduct of one's own interviews.

Using Extant Interview Collections

No comprehensive survey of extant oral history collections exists—the enormous number of collections, their diverse points of origin, and the rapidity with which new projects develop render this a futile exercise. While more specialized finding aids exist, the best tool for identifying interview collections relevant to a particular community study is the World Wide Web. A broadly defined search can easily turn up thousands of references: a quick review of those will generally identify the largest, most important collections; a more systematic review can often turn up more localized or idiosyncratic groups of interviews.²

What a Web search will *not* identify are interviews done by a scholar for his own research and retained in his possession or interviews done by local groups that may not have the resources or the know-how to develop even modest electronic finding aids—or even the awareness that the interviews may interest anyone outside their own communities. The former can sometimes be identified in the footnotes and bibliographies of published work on the topic at hand. The latter are more difficult to locate, but as essentially virgin sources of local knowledge, they may be well worth the effort to do so. One may find such collections through personal contact: Local librarians, archivists at local historical societies, oral history specialists at state and regional historical organizations, and project directors of major topical collections frequently know of oral history collections that, having never been properly archived or cataloged, have never been used by scholars. Another means of locating collections is a query to H-Oralhist, the H-Net-affiliated listserv maintained by the Oral History

¹ On ways oral history has been presented in written form, see Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison, 1997), 3–23.

² It is important to distinguish between online finding aids for oral history collections and online transcripts of interviews. Many oral history collections are listed and described online, but the number of complete interview transcripts online remains small.

Association; its more than thirteen hundred subscribers constitute a collective storehouse of useful leads and contacts. H-Oralhist's Web site is also a useful gateway to numerous collections.³

Having identified a cache of community interviews, how might the historian approach them, with what sorts of questions in mind? What might one expect to find? What strengths and weaknesses are typical of such interviews? To understand what is said and not said in interviews, it is important to understand their provenance: Who conducted them, when, for what purpose, under what circumstances? What broad assumptions and specific questions informed the inquiry? Answers to those questions may lie in a project's administrative records, including the schedule of questions developed for the interviews, biographical data amassed for both interviewers and interviewees, and the interviewers' research and interview notes. They can also be teased out of descriptive, promotional, and published materials issuing from the project. Placing extant interviews in the intellectual and social context of their generation allows the researcher to read them more astutely, to understand how the context unavoidably shaped the inquiry.

For example, some twenty years ago I was involved in a community documentation project in Baltimore, Maryland, that attempted to assert the viability of blue-collar urban neighborhoods against a host of contemporary threats. The goal was worthy, but in our eagerness to identify the social networks and institutional ties that held the communities we were documenting together, we interviewed few former residents, and when we did, we shied away from questions about why they moved away, about what they found unsatisfactory about the neighborhood. Nor did we interview those whose actions directly or indirectly threatened neighborhoods' viability: business people and employers who had relocated, directors of lending institutions, developers. Not surprisingly, our inquiry proved our point; it was also intellectually impoverished by our failures of historical imagination.⁴

In fact, locally generated oral history interviews frequently rest on naïve assumptions about what properly constitutes history and how to approach it. Interviews are typically structured around the life histories of individual narrators, rather than around critical questions about broad themes of social life that cut across individuals' experience. Questions probe the details of everyday life and the peculiarities of place; answers are replete with stories about ritual events and local characters and endless information about "what was where when." In such projects there is often little understanding of how the details might add up, little obvious coherence within a group of interviews, little understanding, in the end, of history as anything more

³ It is important to remind colleagues of their professional obligation "to deposit their interviews in an archival repository that is capable of both preserving the interviews and making them available for general research." See "Statement on Interviewing for Historical Documentation," *American Historical Association* <<http://www.theaha.org/pubs/standard.htm#Statement on Interviewing>> (June 10, 2002). To post a query or view the listing of oral history collections and projects, go to H-Oralhist <<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~oralhist/>> (June 10, 2002).

⁴ See Linda Shope, "Oral History and Community Involvement: The Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project," in *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, ed. Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig (Philadelphia, 1986), 249–63.



Raymond and Eunice English stand next to the remains of their home near Wallace, North Carolina, destroyed by floods in the wake of Hurricane Floyd in 1999. The Englishes were interviewed by Charlie Thompson of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, for its community history project, *Voices after the Deluge: Oral History Investigations of the Great North Carolina Flood*. *Photograph by Rob Amberg.* Courtesy Rob Amberg and the Southern Oral History Program.

than an accumulation of facts. A celebratory impulse also inflects many community interviews, both those that fall within what might be termed the “genteel tradition,” which views the past as a benign refuge from the unsettling present, and those akin to interviews conducted for the Baltimore project, motivated by the activist, history-from-the-bottom-up impulse of 1970s social history. The causes of this are manifold and reflect the deeply social nature of oral historical inquiry: a community insider, interviewing a peer, does not want to risk disturbing an ongoing, comfortable social relationship by asking difficult or challenging questions; a community-based history project is part of an initiative to encourage economic development, and interviews become a means of putting the community’s best face forward; a project seeking to affirm a group that has been socially marginalized decides that it would be disrespectful to air problematic or unsavory aspects of the community’s history that reinforce stereotypes. Even when interviews probe difficult aspects of personal or social history, the impulse is to celebrate the interviewee’s ability to prevail over or survive difficult circumstances, not an especially surprising tendency, given how deeply this trope is embedded in our national culture.⁵

⁵ On the limits of local oral history, see Linda Shope, “Oral History,” in *Pennsylvania: A History of the Commonwealth*, ed. Randall M. Miller and William Pencak (University Park and Harrisburg, 2002), 549–70.

Interviews conducted for scholarly projects, though less likely to succumb to the celebratory and ahistorical tendencies of community-driven projects, are not without their limitations. Typically, interviews with a scholarly provenance are narrowly focused inquiries, shaped by the investigator's very specific research questions. Unrelated areas of inquiry about which the narrator could nonetheless speak in an informed way are not pursued; hints of a more interesting story underneath the story are ignored.⁶ More subtly, scholarly interviewers, interested in details and anecdotes that support or illustrate their understanding of the subject at hand, at times fail to perceive that their own frames of reference may be incongruent with the narrators' and so ignore lines of inquiry that could get at the insider's view. Thus interviews conducted by scholars for their own work are frequently of limited value to other researchers with other research agendas. Nonetheless, prior knowledge of the intellectual agenda driving the interviews can help subsequent users assess their strengths and weaknesses.

Given the limits of both community-based oral history collections and interviews conducted by scholars for their own work, the most useful extant interviews for historians researching a community are likely to be those conducted under the auspices of ongoing oral history research programs as archival projects for the use of future researchers or by professionally run historical organizations as documentation projects. While it is important to assess such interviews in light of their provenance, their strengths are often considerable: typically they are framed around questions drawn from contemporary historiography and include multiple narrators, variously positioned within the community; they tend to range widely over individual narrators' life experiences so as to be of value to users with varying interests; they are generally the work of skilled interviewers who are knowledgeable about the subject at hand and unconstrained by the rules of polite conversation from asking hard questions about it.⁷

Whatever the provenance of the interviews one has identified and whatever their limits, the next step for the historian who wants to draw upon the evidence of oral history is to immerse herself or himself in the interviews themselves. It is a mistake to rely solely on visually skimming or electronically searching transcripts for a sense of what interviews contain or for specific information and useful quotes. Regrettably, transcripts are all too often inaccurate: some omit sections of an interview, others add material that is not there, yet others include significant errors. Moreover, information conveyed orally by tone, pacing, and inflection is lost when spoken words are translated into writing. So although researchers will understandably continue to rely heavily on transcriptions, it is important periodically to listen to the original tapes. A

⁶ On the limits of interviews conducted for individual research projects, see Ronald J. Grele, "Why Call It Oral History? Some Ruminations from the Field," *Pennsylvania History*, 60 (Oct. 1993), 506–9.

⁷ Major repositories of community oral history collections include the Southern Oral History Program, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, Waco, Tex.; Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University, Durham, N.C.; Center for the Study of History and Memory, Indiana University, Bloomington; T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge; Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul; Chicago Historical Society; Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History, University of Maine, Orono; Oral History Program, University of Alaska, Fairbanks; and South Dakota Oral History Center/Institute of American Indian Studies, University of South Dakota, Vermillion.

body of community interviews yields its riches only to a researcher with the patience for extensive, careful engagement with both transcripts and tapes. Because narrators generally speak about typicalities and common lifeways, the insights gleaned from interviews are cumulative, obvious only after one has absorbed hours of talk. They also often lie below the surface of the words, and it takes time to get at them. Any given interview can offer specific details and colorful anecdotes for a community study; a body of interviews, thoughtfully considered, can open up an understanding of the local culture, those underlying beliefs and habits of mind, those artifacts of memory that propel individual lives, give coherence to individual stories, and perhaps extend outward to a larger significance.

Let me give a couple of examples, based on my review of dozens of interviews conducted as local history projects throughout Pennsylvania, some generated by grassroots groups, others with more scholarly origins. Working my way through a stack of tapes and transcripts, I began to realize how consistently narrators formulated their stories of the past in relation to specific places. Memories, it seemed, were rooted in places; interviews were replete with references to streams, hills, homes, streets, stores, churches, theaters, farms. In some interviews, local history was defined almost entirely by specific places, quite independently of interviewers' questions. One narrator, for example, when asked at the end of the interview to identify "three of your most memorable experiences in Hershey" (the community under discussion), responded by linking memories to specific places: marrying her husband at the First United Methodist Church, attending the ground breaking for the Hershey Medical Center, and attending events at the Hershey Theater. Recollections of specific places often led to a chain of human associations, again suggesting narrators' need to locate memories someplace. "When we moved back home up the hill from the Bard farm, I was eight years old," one narrator began. He continued:

My mother raised turkeys. We used to carry them all the way from that hill, down across the old covered bridge to East Middletown and she sold them for eight cents a pound. . . . We'd cut back by Sam Seiders's farm and then we'd cut across old Ev Booser's farm in back of where Detweilers lived to the dam. . . . The Sam Demy farm later became Sam Seiders's farm and is now Simon Grubb's, Seiders's grandson's farm. Mrs. Seiders had a retarded brother. When [Sam] Hess [her father] sold to old man Bard, there was a \$2000 dowry set aside for this boy and the interest used for his keep. Sam Hess, before he died, had the stone house where Matt Seiders lived built for this boy. This was his home and the old mother's after the father died. When the mother died and he got worse, the relatives took turns with him and Matt bought his house.

Here information about a woman's contribution to the family economy, the transmission of property, and the care of the disabled in a turn-of-the-century community is embedded in a chain of associations about a specific piece of property.⁸

⁸ For the Hershey story, see Betty H. Baum interview by Monica Spiese, May 1, 1991, transcript, pp. 26–28, Hershey Community Archives Oral History Program (Hershey Community Archives, Hershey, Pa.). For the Seiders's farm story, see Clayton Heisey interview by Mrs. Herbert Schaeffer, Feb. 1, 1972, transcript, p. 6, Middletown Oral History Project (Middletown Public Library, Middletown, Pa.). There is a growing number of studies on the relationship between place consciousness and local identity. See Joseph A. Amato, *Rethinking Home: A*

While the profound attachment to place revealed in these interviews is hardly unique to Pennsylvania, it is suggestive of broader themes in regional culture—the deep strand of conservatism, tending in some toward parochialism; the localism evidenced by the division of the state into more than five thousand separate jurisdictions; the difficulties bedeviling efforts at regional planning. Although the place consciousness of these interviews may simply be the artifact of their creation as local history projects—local history is *de facto* about some place—I submit that the nearly automatic equation of local history with locale suggests how deeply place matters in individual consciousness and that a shared sense of identity, a sense of community, often includes a shared set of spatial referents. More to my point here, only by working through many interviews did I come to this insight.

The same exercise alerted me to yet another dimension of local culture, one that gives hints of how memories of the past give meaning in the present. Not surprisingly, given the dominance of industry in Pennsylvania's economy in the past two centuries, many oral history projects in the state, though ostensibly about specific places—Homestead, Nanticoke, Pittsburgh—really are collections of life-history interviews with (predominantly white and male) industrial laborers in those communities. If there is a single theme running through the interviews, it is the importance of "hard work" in the shaping of a person's life and identity. "Our people . . . they're the ones who built the steel mills to what they are today!" the union activist Adam Janowski stated proudly and emphatically in a 1976 interview with the historian James Barrett for the Homestead Album Oral History Project. "They took everything in stride, I'll tell you," he continued. "I seen them myself. I was a young man and I seen how hard those fellows used to work." This observation is repeated in one way or another in interview after interview, and narrators' consciousness of "our people," in Janowski's words, as hardworking undoubtedly reflects the material conditions of their lives.⁹

Most of these interviews are utterly silent on issues of race, itself evidence of the way community has been conceived and talked about. Here Janowski is unusual, for he revealed an explicitly racial dimension to his understanding of "our people," whom he defined this way:

After the [1919 steel] strike they wanted to lay [black strikebreakers] all off. At least they laid off ninety percent because the men was experienced in their jobs and the foremen could call the white man a goddamn hunk and tell him to get that goddamn thing moving! But they couldn't say that to a black man. He would pick up a bar and hit him over the head, you know? Our people took that all the time. They're the ones who built the steel mills.

Case for Writing Local History (Berkeley, 2002); David Glassberg, *Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life* (Amherst, 2001); and Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995).

⁹Adam Janowski interview by James Barrett, June 14, 1976, transcript, p. 12, Homestead Album Oral History Project (Archives of Industrial Society, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pa.).

Perhaps still bitter about black strikebreakers more than a half century later, undoubtedly mindful of the way “his people” indeed “took that all the time,” perhaps reading the black militance of the 1970s back a half century, Janowski suggested how white workers’ sense of themselves as “hardworking” is deeply racialized.¹⁰

Almost twenty years later, Theresa Pavlocak, an elderly resident of the anthracite coal region of eastern Pennsylvania, implied a similar connection between hard work and racial identity in an interview for the historian Thomas Dublin’s study of deindustrialization in the region. She remembered the Great Depression this way: “If you didn’t have job in the colliery, the men had no work. So they had WPA. They worked on the roads. You didn’t get welfare. We never got the welfare. We did it the hard way.” Further into the interview, she reflected on her generation’s lifetime of labor: “People were proud; they didn’t want no welfare. Not like now; people look for it. In those days, people were proud; they didn’t want it.” And toward the conclusion she commented on the success of her own and her friends’ children and contrasted it with the situation of some newcomers, often a euphemistic way of referring to recent black and Latino migrants to the region:

It seems like [our] children are all [moved] away from here and it’s just a new generation coming in here—different people. We have quite a bit of welfare. There’s a lot of new people moving in on welfare—in order to help them, for them to pay the rent. They get their rent and a few dollars, whatever they get. If they’re happy on welfare, I guess they stay there. Most of them don’t want to, though. No. Like all my friends’ children, they’re all educated or they’re away, they all have good jobs. My son, he has a good job.¹¹

Like Janowski, Pavlocak reveals an identity grounded in a generation of people who indeed worked hard and in a sense of difference from newcomers, who are sometimes not white and who presumably do not work as hard as they themselves did. For her, as Dublin has observed, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) projects of the 1930s, as well as the Social Security and black lung compensation benefits (for coal miners disabled by years of inhaling coal dust) that have more recently sustained many older people in the region, are not forms of “welfare”; nor is the difficulty of obtaining work in an era of deindustrialization understood as an explanation for newcomers’ apparent lack of ambition.¹² If we take Janowski’s and Pavlocak’s ways of viewing the past as fairly typical of their race, generation, and class, their interviews suggest how identity and memory are implicated in contemporary racial politics. Perhaps to overstate my point: Such insights, however modest, do not come from quickly scanning interview transcripts. Only slowly do underlying strands of a community’s culture reveal themselves, as interview after interview sounds the same themes; only occasionally does an interview provide a flash of insight that enables us to read the culture outward and make connections with broader historical concerns.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Thomas Dublin, *When the Mines Closed: Stories of Struggles in Hard Times* (Ithaca, 1998), 208, 214, 216–17.

¹² For Dublin’s commentary on the Pavlocak interview, see *ibid.*, 30–31.

Conducting One's Own Interviews

Perhaps, however, a search has turned up no interviews on the community under study or extant interviews do not adequately address the questions driving the inquiry. Perhaps the notion of engaging with people who have lived the history one is researching is intriguing; perhaps the broad theoretical questions about historical memory, narrative construction, and popular notions of history that underlie oral historical inquiry seem relevant to one's work. Perhaps too getting students involved in an oral history project seems to be a creative way of linking scholarship to teaching. For any of those reasons, a historian may want to undertake a community oral history project. My comments here are necessarily briefer than those in previous sections. There are numerous credible how-to guides to oral history, and anyone beginning an interviewing project should consult them.¹³ Here, I wish to address two points: ways of structuring community interviews to avoid common problems and oral history as an occasion for public history.

Having noted the problematics of community as an organizing principle for an oral history project and the limitations of many interviews that adopt it as a frame of reference, I offer the following suggestions for avoiding pitfalls. First, conceptualize a community history project around a historical problem or issue rather than a series of life-history interviews. A community is formed around the intersections of individual lives: What are the points of connection, tension, or alienation? What historical problem defines the community, and how can this problem be explored through questions to individual narrators? I find the latter question especially challenging, for how does one address an abstract concept or issue through the medium of lived experience? Suppose, for example, the problem is suburbanization, the development of a distinctly suburban community on top of what had previously been farmland and woods. What questions can the interviewer ask that connect an individual's experiences to the broad theme of suburbanization in ways the narrator can understand and address meaningfully? How is an individual's experience part of something bigger, and what sorts of questions make that connection, if not for the interviewee, then for the researcher?

Second, define the universe of narrators broadly. Historians are generally sensitive to racial, ethnic, and gender diversity, and one would expect a group of interviewees to reflect this sensitivity. But who else may have a meaningful connection to the problem at hand? We tend to interview insiders and people with a long-term relationship with a community. But what about outsiders and newcomers? What about people external to the community whose actions impinge on it? Ask: Whom am I missing? Using the example of suburbanization, it might be appropriate to interview different cohorts of residents, that is, people who moved in at different times; those who moved away from the area as well as those who lived there before it became a

¹³ Two of the best guides are Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (New York, 1994); and Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Practical Guide for Social Scientists* (Thousand Oaks, 1994). See also Laurie Mercier and Madeline Buckendorf, *Using Oral History in Community History Projects* (Los Angeles, 1992); and Rose T. Diaz and Andrew B. Russell, "Oral Historians: Community Oral History and the Cooperative Ideal," in *Public History: Essays from the Field*, ed. James B. Gardner and Peter S. LaPaglia (Malabar, 1999), 203–16.

suburb; those whose decisions led to the development of the suburb, including local officials, developers, and bankers. Including a range of narrators simultaneously deepens the inquiry and extends it outward, helping us understand both the internal complexity of the community under study and its relationship to a broader historical process.

Third, approach interviews in a spirit of critical inquiry. In part this means asking the hard questions that may cause discomfort, that address difficult or controversial topics, that may reveal ruptures in the community. More generally, it means defining an interview as a mutual exploration of the problem at hand, an opportunity for an informed interviewer to talk in depth with a knowledgeable participant about a subject of mutual interest. In an investigation of suburbanization, it may mean asking questions about money, mortgages, and taxes; expectations and values; achievements and disappointments; racial segregation or exclusion; gender dynamics; social divisions within the community. The conversation may not be easy, but the result may well be to foster a more nuanced and humane understanding of the way individuals live in history—which is what oral history does best.¹⁴

Finally, an oral history–based community study can quite logically become an occasion for public history, understood broadly as doing serious history for and with nonspecialists outside an academic setting. Insofar as an oral history interview requires formal engagement with a person who typically lies outside the scholarly world about matters that are nonetheless historical, oral history is de facto a kind of public history. And insofar as an oral history research project involves more than one narrator, there are built-in opportunities to expand the conversation outward, into a public discussion about history. This can take the form of a modest public program or history workshop, in which several narrators talk with scholar-interviewers about broad interpretive questions, or more extensive projects such as museum exhibitions, radio and film documentaries, and community publications in which those interpretations are presented to others. Two strong caveats, however. First, oral history is long-haul work. Making contact with community representatives, gaining entrée, cultivating trust, and then doing, analyzing, and presenting a body of interviews cannot be accomplished in one or even two semesters. It requires a commitment of years. Second, working with a community group to develop a public history project or program is complicated and at times contentious. Although oral history provides outstanding opportunities to democratize the practice of history—to “share authority,” in Michael Frisch’s resonant phrase—as interviewer and interviewee, scholar and community work together to understand the past, in practice the process requires negotiation, give-and-take, and considerable goodwill.¹⁵ Scholars do not get to exercise critical judgment quite so forcefully or conform to current historiographic thinking quite so deftly; laypeople do not get to romanticize the past quite so easily. Scholars can learn that local people often have thoughtful if haltingly articulated

¹⁴ For a thoughtful essay on the difficulties of doing local history, see Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (New York, 1993), 79–88.

¹⁵ See Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany, 1990).

understandings of how change happens; laypeople can learn how what is local has links to national and international developments. While there are fine examples of the process working well, at times negotiated history can be unsatisfactory to all parties—too critical and de-localized for community members, too uncritical and narrow for scholars. The tension points to a deeper issue: the essential disjunction between professional history and history as it is popularly understood. While it may at times be necessary to decline participation in a community project on principled grounds, it is precisely the opportunity such projects provide for opening up dialogue with the public about the nature of historical inquiry that, to my way of thinking, makes them eminently worth doing.¹⁶

¹⁶ On the development of community history in dialogue with communities, see Barbara Franco, "Doing History in Public: Balancing Historical Fact with Public Meaning," *Perspectives*, 33 (May 1995), 5–8; and John Kuo Wei Tchen, "Creating a Dialogic Museum: The Chinatown History Museum Experiment," in *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, ed. Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, 1992), 285–326.