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Oral history

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As an oral historian I greeted the opportunity to draw on my own experience with enthusiasm. Could this be the ultimate in reflexivity? I apply my own method to myself. For once I have the opportunity to hold the floor instead of taking a back seat at the interviewee's performance. But, as an oral historian I also know how complex these interrogative exchanges can be, how much may be revealed, partial, or forgotten, hidden or silenced. How best then to deal with an area of work in which I have lived for getting on for thirty years? I will need to find a way to balance my own engagement and emergent research practice with a detachment that is inclusive of others' experience. Should I reproduce the interrogative characteristic of oral history with an account written in the form of an interview? Lacking the probing insights of another might present problems for the equal presentation of all the different aspects of the self.[1] In fact this will not be my first published reflection on being an oral historian. But then my earlier attempt was a personal reflection on how I had been changed by oral history practice rather than a review of my engagement with the method (Bornat, 1993). This feels like much more of a challenge.

What follows is not a 'how to' manual. Several of these already exist drawing on experience of oral history work and research in different national and cultural settings (Lummis, 1987; Douglas et al., 1988; Finnegan, 1992; Yow, 1994; Ritchie, 1995; Bolitho and Hutchison, 1998; Thompson, 2000; http://www.oralhistory.org.uk). Instead the chapter falls into three sections following a chronology of involvement in oral history as a research method. Each section focuses on an issue that emerged at a particular point in my own development but which, in my opinion, continues to have significance for the practice of oral historians. In tackling each of these my intention is to illustrate key aspects of a method while highlighting linked debates. The three issues that I identify are: the interview as a social relationship; the transcript and its ownership; and multidisciplinary analysis. The story and the selection are obviously my own. I make no claims as to rights, wrongs or leadership. I simply offer my experience.

As a starting point I provide a description of oral history as I see it today and a delineation of its boundaries with other, cognate, areas of research methodology. Like any other social or historical phenomenon, oral history is a product of shifting paradigms and unbending structures as well as individual initiative and opportunism. In the end I have settled for writing an account that should identify the key issues with which oral historians have engaged but from my own position and perspective. There will be bias, partiality, silence, some revelation and much forgetting, but that is the nature of oral history, and for some people its very interest and significance.

DEFINING AND DELINEATING ORAL HISTORY

The turn to biography in social science (Chamberlayne et al., 2000), coupled with a more open, sometimes grudging, acceptance of the contribution of memory in historical research described by Paul Thompson (2000: ch. 2), has resulted in a proliferation of terms, schools and groupings often used interchangeably, some with a disciplinary base, others attempting to carve out new territory between disciplines. Labels such as oral history, biography, life story, life history, narrative analysis, reminiscence and life review jostle and compete for attention. What is

common to all is a focus on the recording and interpretation, by some means or other, of the life experience of individuals. Though there are shared concerns and, to an extent, shared literatures, there are differences, in approach and in methods of data collection and analysis.

One way of grouping these different terms is by reference to their relation to the subject, the informant, interviewee or respondent. Oral history, life history, reminiscence and life review tend to focus on the idea of the interviewee as an active participant in the research process. The conscious and willing participation of the person being interviewed means that the nature and conduct of the interview itself becomes a dominant feature of the research process. Oral history draws on memory and testimony to gain a more complete or different understanding of a past experienced both individually and collectively (Thompson, 2000). Life history takes the individual life and its told history with a view to understanding social processes determined by class, culture and gender, for example drawing on other sources of data, survey-based, documentary, personal, public and private to elaborate the analysis (Bertaux, 1982). The difference between the two is very fine and the two terms are often used interchangeably.

Both oral history and life history, as Ken Plummer argues, draw on 'researched and solicited stories … [that] do not naturalistically occur in everyday life; rather they have to be seduced, coaxed and interrogated out of subjects' (2001: 28). Both oral history and life history share common disciplinary heritages in history and sociology, though the influences of psychology and gerontology are increasingly playing a part (Thompson, 2000; Bornat, 2001).

In contrast, biographical and narrative approaches to life story telling tend to be characterized by analyses that place great emphasis on the deployment of psychoanalytically based theorizing during and after the interview at the stage of data analysis. As Robert Miller suggests, the narrative interview is understood in terms of the individual's conscious and subconscious 'composing and constructing a story the teller can be pleased with' (2000: 12). From this perspective the interview is understood as a social relationship in which 'Questions of fact take second place to understanding the individual's unique and changing perspective' (Miller, 2000: 13). The contribution of the researcher to this process is spelled out by Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson:

> As researchers … we cannot be detached but must examine our subjective involvement because it will help us to shape the way in which we interpret interview data. This approach is consistent with the emphasis on reflexivity in the interview, but it understands the subjectivity of the interviewer through a model which includes unconscious, conflictual forces rather than simply conscious ones … . (2000: 33).

Such an approach, though it allows for active reconstruction and fluidity in the telling of a story, inevitably draws on the theoretical framework employed in its explanation. Paradoxically, given the focus on subjectivity and theorizing the perception of the individual, it may shift the balance of power away from the teller and towards the interpreter.

Drawing up distinctions and definitions can lead to false boundary construction. It would be wrong to present oral history and life history approaches to interviewing as ignorant of the social relations of the interview or of the varied subjectivities of the interviewee. Luisa Passerini has discussed how 'silences' in workers' accounts of the fascist 1920s in Italy left her baffled until she understood how these pointed to the reality of their daily experience and the need to adjust her own understanding of life at that time (Passerini, 1979). Al Thomson's research with Anzac survivors of the First World War took him into an exploration of the ways in which these very old men had lived with experiences that at times had conflicted with the public account and yet had arrived at a 'composure' that enabled them tell their stories in ways that felt comfortable and recognizable to themselves and to Thomson, their interviewer (Thomson, 1994: 9–12). In a collaborative interview with Linda Lord, a former New England poultry worker, Alicia Rouverol argues that what appears as a 'richly layered, seemingly contradictory narrative' provides a more complete understanding of what losing your job means (Rouverol, 2000). Feminist oral historians and ethnographers helped to shift the focus towards the subject by initiating debates that explored the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, raising questions about shared identity, oppression and ownership as well as voice and perspective (see, e.g., Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Gluck and Patai, 1991; Sangster, 1994; Summerfield, 2000).

Reminiscence and life review are related approaches that at times are used interchangeably with oral history and life history. Where reminiscence is the focus, then the activity of remembering tends to be directed more towards the achievement of an outcome for the speaker or speakers involved. Reminiscence, while it is also a normal part of everyday inner life, when it is encouraged on a group or individual basis seeks to evoke the past with a view to bringing about a

change in, for example, mood, social interaction or feelings of self-worth. Life review, as proposed by Robert Butler (1963), is carried out on a one-to-one basis with a professional or practitioner who seeks to help someone to understand and reflect their life as a whole, accepting it in all its aspects, as it has been lived (Bornat, 1994: 3–4). Life review is more of an intervention than a research method. However, it is certainly the case that the life history or oral history interview often has a strong life review aspect within it. Interviewees sometimes express themselves as welcoming the opportunity to reflect and describe new understandings about themselves, others, and events they have experienced.

Life review, subjective reflection, interrogation, recounting and silencing, oral history is in its many aspects, Alessandro Portelli argues, both genre and genres (Portelli, 1997: 4–5). We can say this now, but what about then, when I started?

THE INTERVIEW AS A SOCIAL RELATIONSHIP

The first issue I want to look at is the implication of the interview as a social relationship. Interviewing is the defining method of oral history and awareness of the complexities of intentions and emotions on both sides of the microphone was something that took me a while to acknowledge.

Back in the early 1960s, had I been looking for what I have just described, I would not have found it. Something called oral history existed by name in the USA where Allan Nevins had established an oral history project at Columbia University in 1948. Nevins's aim was to establish a record of the lives of those of significance in US society. This was quite different, as Grele and Thompson both point out, from an initiative some ten years or more earlier, when the Federal Writers' Project and indeed the Chicago School of sociology had been recording and drawing on the life experiences of former black slaves, workers and migrants (Grele, 1996: 64ff.; Thompson, 2000: 65).

In the early 1960s when I was a sociology student there was no sign of any of these developments in any of the courses I followed. I was a student, and also a member of the Communist Party actively engaged in recruiting members, supporting causes and selling the *Daily Worker*. To say that now is to take an intellectual risk just as it was then. To call yourself a Marxist was to invoke ridicule in those Cold War days, but it did mean that you allied yourself in intention if not in practice with challenges to oppression and with a commitment to change at community, national and international levels. It also meant that you were interested in how to make things happen and in theorizing about this.

I mention all this because the rather practical and committed side of my existence as a student was quite separate from what I met up with in most lectures and seminars. My department (Sociology, University of Leeds 1962–5) may or may not have been typical, but the sociology we learned was wholly theoretical in its teaching, even on the methods side. The sociology we learned began with Marx, Weber and Durkheim and then leapt to Parsons and structural functionalism with a brief glance at C. Wright Mills on the way. In parallel we learned about administrative, social and institutional change in what was then the UK together with some social psychology, but were offered no theory that appeared to make sense of all this, apart from Marxism. Parsons, Lipset and Merton read like Cold War rationalizing and US ethnocentrism where class, social conflict and critical analysis were kept in a theoretical bell jar. Our own Marxist academics at Leeds were divided between Trotskyism and the Communist Party and though their lectures are the ones that inevitably inspired me most,[2] I sensed that they were isolated within the teaching group. I might have been saved for sociology if someone had introduced me to the Chicago School.

Methods owed a great deal to positivist thinking and attempts to consolidate the discipline and its outputs as reliable. I see from my lecture notes that the role of methodology in the social sciences was to: provide formal training; increase the social scientist's ability 'to cope with new and unfamiliar developments in his (*sic*) field; to contribute to interdisciplinary work; and organize principles by which knowledge of human affairs can be integrated and codified'. Interviewing was, rightly, given equal prominence with survey design, questionnaires and scaling. We were given detailed guidance on interviewing in a reading by Maccoby and Maccoby. This contrasted standardized and unstandardized techniques but with the caveat that however much we might standardize words and questions, this would not be a basis for comparison since 'the same words mean different things to different people' and 'when one asks a standardized question, one has not standardized the *meaning* [their emphasis] of the question to the correspondent' (1954: 452). I learned that 'the *content* [their emphasis] of the communication … will be affected by the status relationships'

(1954: 462). Maccoby and Maccoby's overview includes references to Kinsey and Adorno's work as well as other studies that drew out the implications of the interview as a social relationship and awareness of interviewer 'error' (1954: 475). It was all fascinating stuff, but sadly we were given no opportunity to try out the method for ourselves.

My practice took place outside the university lecture room, in discussions on doorsteps, on the street, in the student union and in 'Party' education classes and meetings, with garment workers, engineers, miners, teachers, clerks, typists and other Communist Party activists, including members of the large branch of academics and the 'secret' branch of overseas students whose membership threatened their safety in their own countries. After three years of this divided life I decided that sociology, as I had come to understand it, was not for me. Had I but known it, at the other end of the country a new sociology department set up at the University of Essex had begun with quite a different set of expectations of its students. Peter Townsend's recruitment of a historian, Paul Thompson, and a radical US sociologist, Dorothy Smith, shaped a curriculum that was both historical and practical (Thompson and Bornat, 1994: 44–54). Students were encouraged to engage with current issues and, unheard of at undergraduate level, do their own fieldwork.

None of what I had been exposed to was really an adequate preparation for postgraduate research. I had decided to turn myself into a labour historian and to try to forget about sociology and learn the historian's methods. I knew from my own reading and political life that history as a discipline had become much more interesting. Some historians were apparently keen to make links with sociology (Jordanova, 2000: 67ff.). I had read E.H. Carr (1961) with great enthusiasm for what sounded like a case for the politically and socially committed historian, but more important for me was the output of Marxist and social historians such as E.P. Thompson, G.D.H. and Margaret Cole and Eric Hobsbawm. They had introduced working people into the history curriculum and were not afraid to use terms such as 'class' and 'exploitation'. It felt as if history was more within reach. Indeed, Eric Hobsbawm has recently explained the ascendancy of British Marxism within history in the 1950s and 1960s as being due in part to 'the virtual absence from British intellectual life (outside the London School of Economics) of the sciences of society' (Hobsbawm, 2002: 18). He also gives credit to the Historians' Group of the British Communist Party, 'a body that encouraged academic activities'.[3]

For my topic I settled, after a false start, on the activities of a Yorkshire wool textile trade union between 1880 and 1920. My aim was to find out about the workings of the labour movement in contexts where life was ordinary and less marked by exceptionality. I immersed myself in union minute books, newspapers and official papers. After a while, someone pointed out to me that several of the trade unionists I was interested in were still alive. This was a connection I somehow had failed to make. I have an old notebook, labelled 'Interviews', whose contents show that I did indeed talk to some trade unionists and Communist and Labour activists whose memories went back to 1914 and earlier. However, all the teaching I had apparently absorbed about interviewing methods seems to have left no trace. Now that I was a historian I was more interested in finding out about a past that I was certain was there, intact and to be discovered. It was not the talk or the language of trade unionism I was interested in, nor indeed personal experience, but rather facts about people and events. I consulted these retired experts in much the same way as I engaged with the crumbling pages of the *Yorkshire Factory Times*. I identified issues, elicited responses and took notes. Reflection on the social relationship of the interview and of interviewer bias eluded me. Nor did I appear to be aware of levels and differences of meaning in what I was told. And sadly, the idea that these accounts might be worthy of preservation in their own right simply did not occur to me. All that remains of these encounters are my rather sketchy notes, made at the time. Such as they were, these interviews served my needs as a historian, as I then understood that discipline, offering the world an explanation as to why an industry that employed a large proportion of women in the West Riding of Yorkshire was so weakly unionized. I struggled on with my mountains of documents and with ever-improving skills in note-taking and archive working.

Things were to change after getting married, working on a project investigating race and employment in Bradford, and having two children I went back to my PhD. However, now I was registered at the University of Essex, in the sociology department. It was 1973 and Paul Thompson and colleagues were just completing the first major oral history project in the UK (Thompson, 2000). I was to be introduced to a different way of doing both sociology and history.

It may seem extraordinary that as a professed Marxist (following 1968 I left the Communist Party) it had not occurred to me that the people I was so interested in finding out about might

actually have a perspective that was in itself a valid source. With retrospective fairness I would have found it hard, within the discipline of history, to discover examples that might legitimate such an approach. Indeed, the much respected Hobsbawm is still, in 2002, unable to accept sources drawing on memory as having validity:

> I am also struck by a certain flight from the actual past as in the flourishing and fertile field of memory studies that has shot up since about 1980. Here we are concerned not with what was, but with what people think, feel, remember or usually misremember about it. In some ways this can be seen as a development of themes we pioneered, but we explored these things in an entirely different intellectual context. (Hobsbawm, 2002: 19)

The History Workshop Movement that had begun in 1967 (Rowbotham, 2001: 123ff.) provided the intellectual context for many of us at this time. And though many of the texts that Raphael Samuel so wonderfully referenced in his later reviews of the debates about empiricism, labour, culture, theory and people's history (Samuel, 1981: xv–lvi) were an inspiration, I was yet to make up my own mind about the provenance of memory-based sources in academic debate.

My first experience as an oral historian was to dispel any reservations. At Paul Thompson's suggestion I went back to the West Riding and interviewed 21 men and women who had worked in the textile industry before 1921. While I was being presented with data that I could transcribe, manage, analyse and organize, what really led to a long-standing commitment was the process of interviewing. Using an audio cassette recorder that allowed me and the interviewee to relax and simply talk, with the aid of a prepared questionnaire,[4] was astonishingly fresh and revealing. I found myself hearing how people lived with an industry, how it permeated their lives both domestic and industrial. These were not activists but rank-and-file textile workers recalling their young days in the mills. Using the categories of my questionnaire as the basis for my analysis, I generated a whole new set of themes that offered an explanation, in part, as to why a union led by men who were openly committed to equality for women was so unrepresentative in its organization. It seemed that the system of pooling wages in families, though a shared insurance against the uncertainty of employment, did not protect women and young people from marginalization within the workplace and as wage-earners. Union subscriptions were collected in workers' homes and thus a gendered division of domestic labour was carried into the workplace and, by extension into the union's organization (Bornat, 1980, 1986).

The immediacy of the recall, the sense of speaking directly to the past, completely captivated me. I was entranced by these older men's and women's accounts, their language and forms of expression. This was enough, but what I simply was not prepared for was their expressed enjoyment and commitment in return. I was astonished one day in Slaithwaite, Colne Valley, when an older woman in her sheltered flat thanked me for interviewing her. It simply had not occurred to me that this might be a two-way process in which the interviewee had her own agenda and interest (Bornat, 1993).

What made oral history feel different, and still does, was the sense of working with someone to present a past that was and still is full of meaning. At that stage I was not yet fully aware of the possible dimensions of this process. In those early days, criticisms that oral history was taking a positivist, fact-driven and uncritical approach to memory and the past (Popular Memory Group, 1998) were beginning to be tackled, but if other oral historians were shifting their understanding I was not (Thomson et al., 1994: 33–4).[5] My own political positioning, as a socialist and feminist, provided an essentialist cloak shielding me from complexities within the process. No major epistemological issues arose for me. My understanding of the method was more in the nature of the liberation of truth, the reclaiming of ground by people whose voices were not heard or usually called upon. Oral history in this sense provided me with a new political project in which historians and their subjects could be on the same side. That there might be contestation around the recording and its presentation and 'The confrontation of … different partialities – confrontation as "conflict" and confrontation as "search for unity" – … one of the things which makes oral history interesting' (Portelli, 1991: 58), I was yet to discover.

THE TRANSCRIPT AND ITS OWNERSHIP

Working outside the academy with community groups and individuals to produce local publications, exhibitions, plays, videos and, more recently, multi-media events based on memory and recall was always a likely channel of activity, given that the method involves direct engagement with members of the public and assurances that their accounts, their witness to the past, is a valuable public asset. Working with people to

achieve the production of their own accounts of the past presents challenges to the oral historian who feels a commitment to a political or emancipatory role for oral history while at the same time attempting to maintain some kind of critical rigour. Is it possible to work collaboratively with people and retain some form of critical understanding of the past while committed to an emancipatory role for oral history?

A key contribution to such a debate was the collection of papers written by US feminists and edited by Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (1991). These are, in the main, a refreshingly honest exploration of methodological dilemmas arising from essentialist and emancipatory assumptions that had tended to mystify the relationship of researcher and researched. Several contributors reflect on experiences where interviewees, other women, challenged their motives and interpretations, where victim or oppressed statuses were not readily assimilated or when generational differences were underacknowledged. Debating with feminists, Martin Hammersley identifies the tension between academic research and practical demands and pressures and argues for an 'institutionalized inquiry' that is independent of particular political or practice objectives. Independence is required, he argues, in order to widen investigations beyond 'relatively narrow and short run concerns' (Hammersley, 1992: 202).

I am not sure whether independent 'institutionalized inquiry' would help wholly to resolve issues of critical rigour and ownership. Indeed, the very heterogeneity and localism of much that can be described as community history would tend to militate against any kind of fixed base or professional specialism. However, recognition of the need for a 'balance between inquiry and the other necessary elements of practice, and appropriate judgement about what it is and is not appropriate to inquire into' (Hammersley, 1992: 202) might well help to support public historians in their dealings with other people's ideas of the past.

In the mid-1980s, at a time when community history projects were burgeoning throughout the UK, I was employed as a lecturer in older people's education by the Inner London Education Authority's Education Resource Unit for Older People (EdROP).[6] As part of my job I was able to answer a request to run an oral history project on the Woodberry Down council estate in Hackney, one of the poorest of London's boroughs. The request came from a social worker, keen to re-establish in their own and others' eyes the historical and social identities of the estate's oldest tenants. Woodberry Down had at one time been one of the London County Council's show estates. Built directly after the Second World War, it incorporated, when completed, many of the most advanced features of social housing provision, including schools, shops, a library, a health centre and an old people's home, and occupied land next to two reservoirs in what had been regarded as one of north London's most pleasant residential settings. By the late 1980s it was run down with several of the amenities under threat,[7] and the generation of families who were among its first tenants were retired with children in the main living elsewhere.

A colleague and I were the facilitators and as EdROP was able to supply recording and transcribing equipment for what was deemed older adults' learning, we were well resourced. After six months of tape recording with a core group and a few others more loosely associated we had accumulated sufficient material, many hours of recorded interviews, photographs, and documents copied from local archives to produce a display and, by 1989, a book (Woodberry Down Memories Group, 1989). The main narrative was unimpeachably balanced for both older and younger tenants. This was the story of a group of people, and a housing authority with a shared commitment to public housing. They were an ethnically mixed group with members whose backgrounds were Jewish, Italian, Punjabi, Venezuelan and white north London. Their story was one of individual and collective hardship, their own individual deserving status and community harmony. Some were well known on the estate for their past roles as tenant leaders, others were more easily recognized among the church congregation. Most had worked hard to furnish their flats and to provide their children with a start in life that they themselves had been denied. Woodberry Down was very much a part of that better start and their commitment to social housing tenancy apparently complete, even at its most vocally critical.

This is the story that appears in the book. It was the one that the group was most happy with and, in truth, it also appealed to my understanding of social and housing history generally. We spoke with one voice as I mainly restricted my role to one of facilitator rather than investigator. It felt like an emancipatory collaboration drawing on the agency of older people who were willing collaborators in producing a story in which they had a vested interest. Establishing themselves as active and differentiated people and their estate, their public space in the Habermasian sense (Habermas, 1989), as a worthy and politically significant development was their means to critically

challenge those contrary voices and accounts that consigned them to the stigmatized and passive status of being old and a council tenant.

I was, however, as were the group, aware of other narratives, missing accounts, conflicting versions. Though my co-worker was black and we made a deliberate target of black pensioners in our publicity, we were never able to recruit an African-Caribbean older tenant as a permanent member of the group. There was, consequently, no story of being a black tenant on an estate with a history of multi-racial and multi-ethnic tenancies. One woman who showed interest was not willing to be recorded, so, given the nature of the book's key source, she remained unrepresented, an interesting issue in itself.

Flats on the Woodberry Down Estate were hard to come by initially. People had to prove need, sharing with parents or in-laws, becoming parents, guaranteed one of the cheaper flats. Among the stories, hidden in asides and comments, there was also mention of graft and favouritism in gaining access to the better flats and maisonettes. These were some of the spoken and hinted-at community stories that were not destined for public consumption.

On a broader political front was the issue of why the estate was built in its particular location. Some visits that I made to the then Greater London Record Office[8] to investigate when the decision to build the estate was taken raised the possibility of gerrymandering in the 1930s, when the estate's development was first mooted. It seemed that Woodberry Down might have played a part in the political manoeuvrings of the the Labour-run London County Council, led by Herbert Morrison. Stoke Newington (later to be absorbed into the London Borough of Hackney) was traditionally Conservative and was unwilling to house 'slum dwellers' from other parts of London (Woodberry Down Memories Group, 1989: 24). Were the first residents deserving recipients of post-war socialist housing policies, or were they the beneficiaries of 1930s struggles to change the political map of London? These are questions that are implicit in the account and that suggest a wider historical and political framework for the reconstitution of this particular community history. My interest in these questions identified me as an outsider to the Woodberry Down group, both professionally and politically. By not pushing them further, was I compromising my own position and critical rigour and so neglecting the 'longer term and/or … wider perspective' or was I recognizing that such questions might be 'counter-productive from the point of view of practice' (Hammersley, 1992: 202)?

When it came to presenting the account there were to be further compromises. Apart from linking text, provided by me, the bulk of the account was to come from the recorded and transcribed memories of the group. Together we selected those sections that best illustrated people's individual experiences while also providing evidence of what life was like on the estate in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. There were photographs too, some personal and some from the local archives. Encouraged by the process, some members of the group chose to write about occasions that were particularly memorable, such as getting the key to their flat. One member of the group, Sid Linder, said he couldn't write anything more than a betting slip; however, when it came to editing in his memories of growing up in the Jewish East End of London and an experience of anti-Semitism in the army in North Africa, he changed his mind and took the transcript away. What he brought back was a much sanitized, in language terms, version of the original, far away from the expressive cadences and turns of speech of the recording and even its subsequent transcription. His preference was for an account that was culturally neutral and grammatically correct, mine was for one that more accurately represented a particular, and historical, form of expression, Jewish East End speech.

How far apart the two versions were is perhaps evident from the following excerpts:

Transcription:

Sid: But I was lucky. I was popular because I was captain of the school. I used to give one of the boys – you have the football this weekend after the football match. The same in the army. I'll tell you something. Some people have never seen a jew. It was one Christmas I was in a big mob and we had a big canteen and we used to invite from other units to come into our canteen Christmas time and a couple of fellas sat here and of course I had my own pals you know, cos beer was rationed you see. So what we used to do – a lot of boys didn't drink so you used to say give me or give my friend, give us tickets and we used to save them and at Christmas we used to have beer. And there was a chap sitting there. We're all enjoying ourselves because some come from Oldham, some came from up north, most of them came from

up north and a chap turned round and said for no reason at all I don't like jews he said. I never said nothing but my pal he was a boxer, Billy Simms – so he said to him why don't you like jews he says. He said there's a jew pointing to me. He said go on I don't believe you. So as you know you carry a disc – did you carry a disc?

Les: Well you did in the army.

Sid: I carried a disc and my religion was on it you see. So he said go away from this table see. That's the only incident I had in the army.

Written account:

> I was lucky because I was captain of the school football team and was popular.
>
> There was similar prejudice in the army. There were people who had never even seen a Jew. I remember one Christmas in the army canteen sitting with my pals when for no reason at all someone who had joined our table started saying that he did not like Jews. My best pal Billy Simms who was a boxer said, pointing at me, 'He's a Jew'. The other bloke was amazed and said he did not believe it. Billy told him to clear off. That was the only incident I personally had in the army.

A transcript can only be a 'frozen' version of the original oral discourse, as Portelli argues (1991: 279), but the written version is a step much further. Stefan Bohman has pointed out how, although the written and interview versions draw on the author's conserved 'narrative repertoire', the interview 'employs a different language'. He suggests that the spoken language is 'conducive to greater directness and is more vivid' (1986: 17–19). However, there is a danger, the US oral historian Michael Frisch suggests, that carefully reproducing the 'narratives of common people or the working class' will 'magnify precisely the class distance it is one of the promises of oral history to narrow' (1990: 86). Perhaps Sid Linder sensed this possibility more keenly than I did. In the end I climbed down and the written version went into the book. The experience revealed to me how ownership of the finished text is inevitably a negotiated issue and also how transcription is itself open to complexity, being, as Ruth Finnegan suggests, 'a value-laden and disputed process' (1992: 198).[9]

Where do such exchanges and negotiations leave community oral history and the academic? Linda Shopes, a US oral historian, points out the benefits of community oral history for those engaged in the process and its outcomes, yet she also warns, among other things, against the danger of playing down conflict and the influence of external forces in accounts produced. She calls for a community oral history that is 'problem-centred', thus enabling links to be made between broader structural determinants as well as the identification of more complex issues at a more personal level that might otherwise be glossed over (1984: 153–5).

The challenges she sets are not exclusive to community-based oral history. The experience led me in a more sceptical and reflective direction and to review a previously uncritical commitment to an emancipatory role for oral history. I now had experience of the kinds of compromises involved in work that sought to be collaborative both at the level of the individual and the community and my own position as an academic in this process.

A MULTIDISCIPLINARY ANALYSIS

The burgeoning of activity in biographical and narrative methods across a wide range of disciplines might suggest that there is little to choose between different approaches.[10] In what follows, I want to indicate what I feel makes oral history persistently distinctive and how the method has responded to developments in data analysis. If I have moved in my perceptions of what being an oral historian entails, I am not unusual in this respect; as Penny Summerfield points out, the original impetus to oral history meant 'an emphasis on truth and validity rather than meaning'. More recently there has been a shift towards what she describes as 'greater awareness of the psychic dimensions' (2000: 92). Sensitivity to meaning at different levels has enabled oral historians to identify the significance of silences and subjectivity (Passerini, 1979), fabulation (Portelli, 1988), trauma (Jones, 1998; Langer, 1991) and gendered memory (Chamberlain and Thompson, 1998). What such analysis depends on and what I feel makes oral history a distinctive method is a continuing commitment to multidisciplinarity in its approach to data analysis. To illustrate this point, I am taking an example from research with colleagues into the impact of family change on older people.[11]

As part of a larger research programme we set out to investigate the implications for older people of the coterminosity of two sets of statistics, the ageing of the population and the increase in family change through divorce and separation. By the mid-1990s the proportion of the population over the age of 65 had reached 15 per cent of

the population, while in England and Wales, four in every ten marriages were expected to end in divorce (Haskey, 1996; OPCS, 1996).

These statistics raised questions for us about the nature of intergenerational relationships, the care and support of more frail older family members, and issues of inheritance and the sharing of family assets. In designing the research we chose a method, the unstructured life history interview with a sample of 60 interviewees,[12] because we felt this would allow people to use their own language to describe the changes they were experiencing. We were keen to identify meanings attributed to family used over people's lifetimes and also to avoid any fixed notion of what might be happening by use of terms such as 'stepfamily'. The term 'family change' seemed to us more appropriate than the more highly charged language of 'divorce', 'break-up' or 'stepfamily'. We were problem-focused, but in a way that we hoped people would respond to in their own terms and without prejudgement. In all we completed 60 interviews, mainly with people over the age of 50. (For a more detailed account of the project and its methods see Bornat et al., 1998.)

Though we had identified a set of questions, we had no prior theories that we were testing. This is very much an emergent topic for study which, as we began, had only a small literature attached to it, hence the need for an inductive approach that would enable us to develop our understanding and further shape our own ideas as to what might be happening as the data was analysed. The perspectives of those directly involved in family change were important to us. They were actors, with agency and views on what they were experiencing (Miller, 2000: 11). We were keen to enable people to reflect on their own lives over time and to be able to make comparisons, both generational and personal. For these reasons the life history interview presented itself as the ideal instrument.

All the interviews were fully transcribed and analysed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strass, 1967; Gilgun, 1992) that identified underlying themes within the data as well as a focus that emphasized consideration of the language used in relation to family change. Grounded theory tends to be the method of choice for most people working with life history data and oral history data. If the steps in data analysis are made transparent and are explained, it provides the most secure means to guaranteeing a method that, while it deliberately makes use of researcher insight and reflection, guards against allegations of subjectivity and lack of generalizability or theoretical relevance (Wengraf, 2001: 92–5).

What we were presented with at interviews were accounts of family change over a life-time. Recent trends towards divorce had been prefigured by separations explained by war, unemployment, migration, fundamentalist religious practice, evacuation, altogether a wide range of unsettling experiences belying any notion of an original state of family stability prior to the previous thirty years.

Our approach was to read and re-read the whole transcript and to discuss emergent ideas and themes within the context of the whole life as narrated and described in the interview. Ideas and categories were compared and reviewed against the accounts we had collected as we searched for confirmations and contradictions of issues relating to family change by identifying common instances as well as uniquely telling accounts. The value of a life history or oral history approach lies in the opportunity it provides to take the whole life and also wider socio-economic and historical contexts into consideration when analysing the data. We might, for example, see how a particular experience of being a child was later followed up in becoming a parent while at the same time reading up for contextual reasons the social history of the Second World War or the car industry in Luton (where we carried out our fieldwork) and exploring the literature on attachment in later life. Multidisciplinarity meant that the methods of the historian, the gerontologist and the sociologist were brought to bear, and also, significantly, the psychologist, leading to our particular development of 'psychic awareness'.

An understanding of meaning for our oldest interviewees and for those younger people addressing issues of ageing was central to our analysis. The psychologist of old age, Peter Coleman, has argued both that recall of the past is an important contribution to well-being in late life, and that for some older people reminiscence is irrelevant and for others troubling (Coleman, 1986). Others have detected differences in the ways men and women remember, with women's narratives marked by greater diffidence and less assertion, though these differences are not necessarily fixed (Chamberlain and Thompson, 1996). As Coleman et al. (1998) point out, some women report gaining greater confidence in late life and those who survive to a late old age were often striving to express identity themes, particularly relating to family. Bearing in mind differences within and between age cohorts, against the tasks that Erikson (1950), a psychologist, identifies for old age, achieving 'ego integrity', finding meaning in a life story and perhaps accepting the events of a life, the conduct of an interview and its interpretation may have particular age-related

features. Reminiscence and oral history with older people has consistently been linked to the significance of identity maintenance or management in the face of significant life changes. The kind of ontological security that Giddens (1991) argues is central to self-identity seems to require strong narrative support in late life, particularly when 'disembodiment' becomes evident with loss of physical powers. At the same time older people may be facing challenges to their ability to exercise choice and control over their lives. Interestingly, despite the increasingly dominant role that older people play in late modernity, demographically speaking, Giddens has little to say about the implications of his ideas for ageing and self-identity, though he does argue that 'A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour nor – important though this is – in the reaction of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*' (1991: 54).

At this point it might help to introduce some excerpts from our interviews to illustrate how the multidisciplinary approach of oral history enabled a more broadly based understanding of family change from the perspective of the older generation:

PL

72, divorced first husband in 1975 (2 children), married a widower in 1981, no children. He died in 1993.

Did you mind her moving? I know you didn't want to say that to her but –

PL: No, but – well, no, not, I mean, I knew, do you see, I was married then to C — , you see, so, you know, and, as I said, it was, that was, you know, if that's what they wanted, I certainly wouldn't stop them. I know, you know, **you miss them, but you can't, once they're married, you just can't – they've got to put their husbands first, and their family first.** And I've got a nice relationship with both my son-in-law and my daughter-in-law, because I never interfere. I'm there if they want me. I don't agree with everything they do. But I've learned to – you don't say anything. And they work it out themselves. And, as I say, I've got a good son-in-law and a good daughter-in-law.

WW

Age 86, she divorced during the Second World War, remarried, widowed, five children from two marriages, daughter and granddaughter also divorced.

WW: Yes, wish they could be the same as us, you know. See but I suppose some parents, they're not all the same, you know. The thing is, parents, they should never interfere with the children when they're married. Because they've got their lives to live, but you're there, when they want you, you're there, and they're there, when we want. **Because they've all got their own little lives, haven't they? – when they're married. And that's how we like it. I mean, I'm on the phone, I can reach any of them and they'll be up here in a minute if I wanted them.** Any of them.

Mr and Mrs S

She married twice to two brothers, two children by first husband who died, daughter divorced, son and daughter married with children.

Mrs S: Because he does permanent nights, yes. So they might stay over the Saturday night. But only perhaps about once a month or six weeks. So, we're not in each other's pockets. But I mean, today, S was able to ring up and ask T — if he could fetch L — from school, because she'd got to take the baby to the clinic for his injections. So I mean, we're near enough for that. And that's good for the grandchildren, I think, and for T — . So, you know, that's handy. So, yes, it is – **I don't like to feel that I hang on to them. But I do like to know that I could get to them if I want, and she could get to me, if she wants me. And also her Dad.**

Excerpts such as these (with key text in bold) suggested that 'You're never too old to be a parent' and that despite changing relationships, longer narratives of family life provided not only a significant source of continuity but also of personal identity. While such observations were supported in the gerontology and sociology literature with Bengtson and Kuypers's notion of 'intergenerational stake' (1971; Giarrusso

et al., 1995). However, we could also draw on psychology to show that what we were hearing was the language of attachment in later life (Antonucci, 1994; Bornat et al., 1997) rather than simply the language of calculated investment (Finch and Mason, 1993).

My understanding of oral history is that it works best when approached in multidisciplinary mode. The richness of the data, in terms of the possibilities for levels and contexts of interpretation, suggests a need for access to the methods and theories of more than one discipline and a balanced approach ensures that no one emphasis predominates. We were not seeking an explanation in terms of unconscious motives or emotions, or 'silences' within interviews. Though we speculated, endlessly it sometimes seemed, as to the motives displayed within some accounts, we were not prepared to move into the position of all-seeing interpreters of possible meanings held by our interviewees. We identified certain existential issues and dilemmas relating to death, generativity and personal and social moralities, but theorizing that went beyond, into psychoanalysis, was unattractive on two counts. First, the differing backgrounds and disciplines that we brought to bear – historical, social work, psychological and gerontological – together offered a richer and more broadly structured source of questions and explanations, and second, we wanted, as far as possible, to represent people in their own words and in ways that maintained their own authority as witnesses to, and theorizers about, family change.

CONCLUSION

What have I learned from my experience as an oral historian that I seek to pass on to others interested in the method? From my first encounters it is the recognition of the interview as a social relationship and how this may be drawn on to derive richly individual accounts that would otherwise be hidden or obscured by differences of age, class and gender. From my work with community-based groups I would want to emphasize the need to maintain a problem-focused approach to history-making while acknowledging and supporting ownership rights for participants. Finally, from my experience of working in a more formal, social science context, I see oral history as opening up possibilities for work across discipline boundaries, enriching interpretation through links between past and present, acknowledging situated subjectivities and demonstrating how individual agency, expressed through language, meaning and memory, interacts with and serves to mediate and moderate the broader structural determinants of society today and in the past. All three aspects for me constitute a good enough 'intellectual context' (Hobsbawm, 2000: 19), true to oral history's original commitment in the 1970s and which encompasses the plurality and subjectivity of researchers and researched now celebrated thirty years later.

NOTES

1 Fiona Williams's (1993) solution to this problem, in an 'interview', was to separate out the personal reflection and chronology of life events in a main narrative, from a footnoted academic commentary.

2 Cliff Slaughter, the anthropologist and leading British Trotskyist, was my tutor and joint author with Norman Dennis and Fernando Henriques of *Coal is Our Life* (1956), a study of a Yorkshire mining community that, as Thompson points out, drew on interviews but neglected the historical context of the village and its people (2000: 90). Griselda Rowntree, like me a member of the Communist Party, came from the London School of Economics to teach us, among other things, the sociology of the family.

3 I perhaps should add that my stepfather, Allan Merson, was a member of the Communist Party History Group, so I was not remote from these influences.

4 I based my list of questions on Paul and Thea Thompson's original questionnaire, which is now presented in the third edition of *The Voice of the Past* as 'A Life-Story Interview Guide'. There it is described as '*not* [his emphasis] a questionnaire, but a schematic outline interviewer's guide for a flexible life-story interview'. In its different formats it has provided a basic tool for oral historians for twenty-five years (Thompson, 2000: 309ff.).

5 The criticisms of the Popular Memory Group (Thomson and Perks, 1998) are still debated. Accusations of empiricism, individual reductionism, objectification of 'the past' and neglect of power relations in the interview are still live. In a rebuttal, Thompson argues that the Popular Memory Group could only argue their case because they were unaware of the influence of subjectivity, in the writing of US and European oral historians such as Grele (1975) and Passerini (1979). However, he does concede: 'I think that we focussed on the objective dimension at the start because we felt we had to show conventional historians and social scientists that our material was not totally invalidated by the vagaries of memory' (1995: 28).

6 The Inner London Education Authority was a grouping of education authorities, covering early years, school and adult education in inner London with a large pooled budget and an enormous staff body of teaching

and support workers. Typical among its many innovative projects and initiatives that drew national attention was EdROP, which was set up in 1985 and lasted until 1990 when the ILEA was abolished by the then Conservative government.

7 In 2002 much of the estate was scheduled for demolition, the library and secondary school had closed as had the residential home for older people, and the social worker and her colleagues who had invited us to run the project were long gone, social services' managers having agreed retrenchment to an office some distance away. With regeneration money it was hoped to rebuild the estate and to preserve some of the more attractive blocks.

8 Now the London Metropolitan Archive.

9 There are legal issues of ownership that anyone undertaking taped interviewing needs to be aware of. EU copyright law gives rights of ownership to the person who gives the interview, which means that use by any other person, the interviewer for example, requires permission in the form of assigning copyright to that person. An example of a form assigning copyright is to be seen at http://www.oralhistory.org.uk.

10 A survey of life history teaching in higher education carried out in 1997–8 demonstrates just how wide a range of disciplines are represented. 1000 questionnaires were sent out and among the 94 replying who reported their teaching of life history were: History, Sociology, English and Literature, Media and Cultural Studies, Women's Studies, Archives and Librarianship, Education, Social Policy, Psychology, Anthropology, Folk Studies, Genealogy, Community History, Engineering, Information Technology, Linguistics, Music, Archaeology, Art, Drama, Historical Geography, Medicine, Medieval Latin, Political Science, Professional Development, Reminiscence Work, Social Science (Thomson, 1998: 31, 58).

11 Bornat, Dimmock, Jones and Peace, 'The impact of family change on older people: the case of stepfamilies', ESRC reference number L31523003. The project was part of the Household and Family Change Programme.

12 A total of 1796 screening questionnaires were sent out during a ten-month period in three electoral wards in Luton. 249 were returned completed. From these, 120 were identified as potential interviewees. All 120 were contacted and this resulted in 49 interviews. The remainder were obtained through contacts made with local groups, bringing the number of people interviewed to 72 (28 men and 44 women). They were characterized in the following way:

i 24 people had lived in a step-household (9 as a child, 7 as the partner of a step-parent, 8 as a step-parent).

ii 21 had experienced the formation of a step-household within their kin group.

iii 18 had experienced the formation of step-relationships (but not step-households) within their kin group.

iv 9 people's lives had been affected by separation but not re-partnering.

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