

- 5 See especially the debate between K. Worpole, J. White and S. Yeo in R. Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981, pp. 22–48.
- 6 The FWWCP was founded in 1976 and 'links some twenty or more working class writers' workshops and local publishing initiatives around the country'. For a useful account of the history of History Workshop see R. Samuel, 'History Workshop, 1966–80', in Samuel, *People's History*, pp. 410–417.
- 7 [See pp. 221–227 and 231–234 of the original article – eds.]
- 8 L. Passerini, 'Work ideology and consensus under Italian fascism', *History Workshop Journal*, 1979, no. 8, pp. 82–108; L. Passerini, 'On the use and abuse of oral history' (mimeo translated from L. Passerini (ed.), *Storia Orale: Vita Quotidiana e Cultura Materiale della Classe Subalterna*, Torino, Rosenberg & Sellier, 1978. We are grateful to the author for sending us a copy of this paper. See also her position paper given at History Workshop, 13: 'Oral history and people's culture' (mimeo, Nov.–Dec. 1979).
- 9 Passerini, 'Italian fascism', p. 83.
- 10 Passerini, 'Use and abuse', pp. 7–8.
- 11 R. Fraser, *Blood of Spain: The Experience of Civil War 1936–39*. London, Allen Lane, 1979. See also R. Fraser, *Work: Twenty Personal Accounts*, 2 vols, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1967.
- 12 We are grateful to Bill Schwarz for sharing his responses to this book.
- 13 'A people's autobiography of Hackney', *Working Lives*, 2 vols., Hackney WEA and Centreprise, n.d. For Centreprise more generally see K. Worpole, *Local Publishing and Local Culture: An Account of the Centreprise Publishing Project 1972–77*. London, Centreprise, 1977, and *Centreprise Report*, December 1978.
- 14 K. Armstrong and H. Beynon (eds), *Hello, Are you Working? Memories of the Thirties in the North East of England*, Durham, Strong Words, 1977; Strong Words Collective, *But the World Goes on the Same: Changing Times in Durham Pit Villages*, Durham, Strong Words, 1979. We are grateful to Rebecca O'Rourke for introducing us to the work of this collective.
- 15 Strong Words, *But the World Goes on the Same*, p. 7.
- 16 For example, the use of autobiographical material in J. Liddington and J. Norris *One Hand Tied Behind Us*. London, Virago, 1978.
- 17 J. McCrindle and S. Rowbotham (eds), *Dutiful Daughters*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1979.
- 18 J. Seabrook, *What Went Wrong? Working People and the Ideals of the Labour Movement*. London, Gollancz, 1978.
- 19 M. Foucault, 'Interview', in *Edinburgh '77 Magazine* (originally published in French in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 1974). See also *Radical Philosophy*, 1975, no. 16.
- 20 P. Hoyau, 'Heritage year or the society of conservation', *Les Révoltes Logiques* (Paris), 1980, no. 12, pp. 70–77. See also the report on *Cahiers du Forum – Histoire in Les Révoltes Logiques*, 1979–80, no. 11, p. 104, a group with similar interests and aims to our own.
- 21 Hence the debate in Britain on radical filmic practices and historical drama. See, for example, C. MacCabe, 'Memory, phantasy, identity: *Days of Hope* and the politics of the past', *Edinburgh '77 Magazine*; K. Tribe, 'History and the production of memories', *Sercent*, 1977–8, vol. xvii, no. 4; C. McArthur, *Television and History*. London, British Film Institute, 1978.

8 Telling our stories

Feminist debates and the use of oral history

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When people talk about their lives, people lie sometimes, forget a little, exaggerate, become confused, get things wrong. Yet they are revealing truths . . . the guiding principle for [life histories] could be that all autobiographical memory is true: it is up to the interpreter to discover in which sense, where, and for what purpose.¹

For almost two decades, feminist historians have played an important role within the profession stimulating new interest in, and debate surrounding, oral history.² The feminist embrace of oral history emerged from a recognition that traditional sources have often neglected the lives of women, and that oral history offered a means of integrating women into historical scholarship, even contesting the reigning definitions of social, economic and political importance that obscured women's lives. The topics potentially addressed through oral history: the possibilities of putting women's voices at the centre of history and highlighting gender as a category of analysis; and the prospect that women interviewed will shape the research agenda by articulating what is of importance to *them*; all offer challenges to the dominant ethos of the discipline. Moreover, oral history not only redirects our gaze to overlooked topics, but it is also a methodology directly informed by interdisciplinary feminist debates about our research objectives, questions, and use of the interview material.³

Although both popular and scholarly historical works have increasingly embraced oral history as a methodology able to expose ignored topics and present diversified perspectives on the past, there lingers some suspicion that oral sources may be inappropriate for the discipline. As one labour historian recently pointed out, it would be unthinkable for historians to host a conference session asking 'written sources: what is their use?'.⁴ Yet one still finds that question posed for oral history. Consideration of whether oral sources are 'objective', it appears, still worries the profession – even for those using oral history.⁵

While the biases and problems of oral history need to be examined – as do

the limitations of other sources – my intention is not to retrace these older debates, but rather to examine some of the current theoretical dilemmas encountered by feminist historians employing oral history. Rather than seeing the creation of oral sources as biased or problematic, this creative process can become a central focus for our research: we need to explore the construction of women's historical memory. Asking why and how women explain, rationalise and make sense of their past offers insight into the social and material framework within which they operated, the perceived choices and cultural patterns they faced, and the complex relationship between individual consciousness and culture.⁶

For feminist historians, two other questions are pressing: what are the ethical issues involved in interpreting other women's lives through oral history, and what theoretical approaches are most effective in conceptualising this methodology? The latter question is especially timely in the light of recent post-structuralist scepticism that we can locate and describe a concrete and definable women's experience, separate from the cultural discourses constructing that experience.⁷

I wish to explore these three interrelated issues using examples from my own oral history research on the lives of wage-earning women in the large factories of Peterborough, Canada, from 1920 to the end of the Second World War. [...]

ORAL HISTORY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN'S MEMORIES

If we are to make 'memory itself the subject of study',⁸ our interviews must be carefully contextualised, with attention to who is speaking, what their personal and social agenda is, and what kind of event they are describing. We need to unearth the underlying assumptions or 'problematic' of the interview, and to analyse the subtexts and silences, as well as the explicit descriptions in the interview.⁹ We need to avoid the tendency, still evident in historical works of treating oral history only as a panacea designed to fill in the blanks in women's or traditional history, providing 'more' history, compensating where we have no other sources, or 'better' history, a 'purer' version of the past coming, unadulterated, from the very people who experienced it.¹⁰ The latter approach erroneously presents oral histories as essentially unmediated, ignoring the process by which the researcher and the informant create the source together: it may also obscure the complicated questions of how memory is constructed, to what extent oral sources can ever reveal the objective experience of people, and whether oral histories should be seen as expressions of ideologies – whether dominant, submerged, oppositional – given to us in the form of personal testimony.

It is also crucial that we ask how gender, race and class, as structural and ideological relations, have shaped the construction of historical memory. The exploration of oral history must incorporate gender as a defining category of

analysis, for women often remember the past in different ways in comparison with men. Some studies, Gwen Etter-Lewis points out, have found that 'women's narratives' are more liable to be characterised by 'understatements, avoidance of the first person point of view, rare mention of personal accomplishments and disguised statements of personal power'.¹¹ Similarly, a French oral historian noted that the women she interviewed were less likely than men to place themselves at the centre of public events; they downplayed their own activities, emphasising the role of other family members in their recollections.¹² Furthermore, women's 'embeddedness in familial life' may also shape their view of the world, and even their very consciousness of historical time.¹³ In my study, for instance, many women reconstructed the past using the bench-marks of their family's life-cycle – as does Amelia, described below, whose recollections of a major textile strike are woven around, and indeed are crucially influenced by, her memory of her wedding.

Class, race and ethnicity, other writers have shown, create significant differences in how we remember and tell our lives: in some instances, these influences overshadow gender in the construction of memory. Cultural values shape our very ordering and prioritising of events, indeed our notions of what is myth, history, fact or fiction.¹⁴

In my study, class shaped people's recollections in stark, as well as subtle, ways. Not surprisingly, managers remember history differently than workers: a manager in one factory described the period when the company explored relocation to other cities in search of lower wages as 'an interesting'¹⁵ time of travel and experimentation as he knew his job would be salvaged. But workers in the plant who faced job loss remember that same period as 'stressful'¹⁶ and uncertain. On a more subtle level, in this workplace, many women's reticence to speak forcefully as critics of, or experts on, their workplace contrasted markedly to managers' strong sense of pre-eminence on these issues; these contrasting styles reflected the confidence shaped by both class and gender inequalities.

One's past and current political ideology also shape the construction of memory. Women who were more class conscious, militant trade unionists did not hesitate to criticise managers and they presented workplace conditions in a more critical light than other workers. Interviewees' knowledge of my ideological sympathies, combined with their own, could also shape the interview. A male trade union official I interviewed tended to remember his life story around the theme of himself as a progressive socialist, battling more conservative unionists. Suspecting I was a feminist, his role *vis-à-vis* the defence of women's rights in the union became aggrandised in his interview, beyond my own reading of the written record.

The influences of class, gender, culture or political worldview on memory may reveal themselves through both content and the narrative form of the interview. While recent writing on oral history draws heavily on post-structuralist theory to explore narrative form and the way in which subjectivity is created, similar themes have preoccupied oral history theorists for some

time. Almost twenty years ago, Ronald Grele suggested we uncover the theme which suffuses the life history, the 'script' around which an informant shapes the presentation of their life. Amelia, for instance, though now comfortable, grew up in the 1930s in a poor farming family; at 15 she was forced to leave school to work in a textile mill. Throughout the interview, she criticised current social values, often by contrasting her youth – characterised by hard work and selfless dedication to her family – to the current selfish, affluent youth. Whether or not she was influenced by a conservative philosophy that distrusted modern trends, or whether she wished to understand her relative success as a result of hard work, or whether she was hurt by the seeming neglect by the younger members of her family – or all of the above – the point is that this critical worldview came to colour her description of the working conditions she had seen in the textile factory.

Oral history may also illuminate the collective scripts of a social group, revealing, for instance, how and why people's memories of their workplaces or communities are created.¹⁷ Many workers I interviewed who were employed at a factory which embraced paternalism as a labour relations strategy, emphasised the 'family-like'¹⁸ atmosphere at the plant, and the way in which the patriarchal and charismatic company head saw himself as a father figure. Their descriptions of the rise and decline of the firm were recounted in the form of an epic family drama, with the eventual economic decline of the factory actually compared to a family breakup. Their way of remembering indicates the assimilation, at some level, of the familial metaphors employed by the company to promote its paternalism.

Other ingredients of the narrative form, such as expression, intonation and metaphors also offer clues to the construction of historical memory. When I asked one woman how her family survived during the time she and her father were on strike in 1937, she could not remember. It is possible, first, that the family went on welfare but that she has forgotten because it was a humiliating experience for some people. Later in the interview, however, she made a casual *aside*, noting her mother 'sewed at home for extra money'.¹⁹ Her mother may have supported the family during the strike, but her work in the informal economy (like that of many women) was undervalued, remembered as an afterthought, indeed almost forgotten.

Revelations may also come from silences and omissions in women's stories.²⁰ The realisation that discrimination based on religion is not socially desirable led many women I interviewed initially to deny any religious rivalry in their workplaces; yet one such woman, when describing a different issue – the foreman intervening in a bitter dispute on the line – admitted that severe Catholic and Protestant taunting had initiated the disagreement. One of the most telling examples of silences is the way in which women reacted to the subject of violence. In response to questions about sexual harassment at work (often I did not begin by using that modern term) or about women's freedom on the streets after work, women seldom spoke of women's vulnerability to violence. Others purposely contrasted the absence of violence when they were

younger to contemporary times: in their youth, they claimed, women could walk home alone at night, they were not bothered at work, and violence against women was rare.

Yet, from other sources and research, I knew that violence in the streets, and in women's homes, was very much a part of daily life. I came to understand women's silence in a number of ways: for one thing, a few women's veiled and uncomfortable references to harassment indicated that some working women, especially in the 1930s, saw harassment as an unfortunate but sometimes obligatory part of the workplace that one could not change and did not talk about. Secondly, it is not only that feminism has made us more aware of harassment and thus provided us with a vocabulary to describe it, but also that similar experiences were labelled differently in the past, often with the term 'favouritism'. Third, a denial of violence was sometimes an externalisation of women's ongoing painful fears about violence, and a comforting means of idealising a chivalrous past in contrast to the more visible violence of today.

Finally, in order to contextualise oral histories, we also need to survey the dominant ideologies shaping women's worlds: listening to women's words, in turn, will help us to see how women understood, negotiated and sometimes challenged these dominant ideals. For example, perceptions of what was proper work for young women are revealed as women explain the images, ideas and examples upon which they constructed their ambition and work choices. Ideals of female domesticity and motherhood, reproduced in early home life, the school and the workplace, and notions of innate physical differences, for instance, were both factors moulding young women's sense of their limited occupational choices in both blue and white collar work in the 1930s.²¹ Interviews may also indicate when women questioned these dominant ideals, as a few notable women described how and why they made the unusual decision not to marry, to work after marriage, or to attempt a non-traditional job.

Understanding the ideological context may help to unravel the apparently contradictory effects of ideology and experience. Why, for example, when I interview women who worked during the Second World War, do they assume that the war had a liberating effect on women's role in the workplace, even when they offer few concrete examples to substantiate this? As Ruth Pierson points out, sex segregation and gender hierarchy persisted in the Canadian wartime workforce, despite rhetoric to the contrary. Why this contradiction between women's positive memory of new opportunities during the war, and the reality of persisting discrimination?²² One answer may be the powerful and hegemonic influence of a popular and mystifying ideology of 'the people's war' – the notion that women were breaking down gender roles – on the very construction of women's memory.²³ Secondly, oral history may reveal women's own definitions of liberation, which actually diverge from those utilised by historians. In this small city, women saw the wartime abandonment of the marriage bar in local factories as a small revolution for

working women. Historians, on the other hand, have based their assessments of continuing inequality on the maintenance of a gendered division of labour during and after the war.

In using oral history as a means of exploring memory construction, then, careful attention to the processes of class and gender construction is needed, as is an understanding of ideological context shaping women's actions. In order to understand the formation of women's gendered consciousness and memory, however, we must also acknowledge our *own* influence on the shape of the interview.

ETHICAL DILEMMAS: FOR HISTORIANS TOO

It is important to acknowledge how our own culture, class position and political worldview shapes the oral histories we collect, for the interview is a historical document created by the agency of *both* the interviewer and the interviewee. Many of us originally turned to oral history as a methodology with the radical and democratic potential to reclaim the history of ordinary people and raise working-class and women's consciousness. As feminists, we hoped to use oral history to empower women by creating a revised history 'for women',²⁴ emerging from the actual lived experiences of women. Feminist oral history has often implicitly adopted (though perhaps not critically theorised about) some elements of feminist standpoint theory in its assumption that the distinct material and social position of women produces, in a complex way, a unique epistemological vision which might be slowly unveiled by the narrator and historian.²⁵

'Representing the world from the standpoint of women', while a laudable feminist aim, may still be difficult to accomplish. As well as the thorny theoretical question of our ability to adequately locate women's experience (discussed below) there are two other concerns. Are we exaggerating the radical potential of oral history, especially the likelihood of academic work changing popular attitudes? Even more important, are we ignoring the uncomfortable ethical issues involved in using living people as a source for our research?

Some years ago, feminist social scientists mounted a critique of interview relationships based on supposed 'detachment' and objectivity, but in reality on unequal power and control over outcome. As a solution, sociologists like Ann Oakley proposed the laudable aim of equalising the interview, making it a more cooperative venture.²⁶ Yet, in attempting this, we may be simply masking our own privilege. While a detached objectivity may be impossible, a false claim to sisterhood is also unrealistic. As Janet Finch has argued, a romanticisation of oral history research that ignores the fact that we are often 'traditioning our identity – as a woman, a professional' – to obtain information is unacceptable. Judith Stacey also points out that feminist research is inevitably enmeshed in unequal, intrusive and potentially exploitative relationships simply by virtue of our position as researchers and that of other women, with less control over the finished product, as 'subjects' of study.²⁷ I agree. Nor will

renaming these relationships with terms implying a sharing of power completely erase our privilege.²⁹ After all, we are using this material for the purpose of writing books which are often directed, at least in part, to academic or career ends. I gained access to women's memories not as a friend, but as a *professional historian*.

These ethical issues are visibly highlighted through the conflicting interpretations which may be embraced by my informants and myself. By necessity, historians analyse and judge, and in the process, we may presume to understand the consciousness of our interviewees. Yet our analysis may contradict women's self-image, and our feminist perspective may be rejected by our interviewees. Would women who worked in the paternalist factory I studied agree to the very word paternalist as a description of their relationship to management? Would workers in low paid textile work accept language like subordination or exploitation to describe their status in the family or workplace? The answer to the latter two questions may be no.

While I had every intention of allowing women to speak about their *own* perceptions, if my interpretation and theirs diverged, mine would assume precedence in my writing. We can honour feminist ethical obligations to make our material accessible to the women interviewed, never to reveal confidences spoken out of the interview, never to purposely distort or ridicule their lives, but in the last resort, it is our privilege that allows us to interpret, and it is our responsibility as historians to convey their insights using our *own* – as the opening quotation to this article indicated. Even feminists like Judith Stacey and Daphne Patai, who offer trenchant critiques of the unequal interview relationship, do not recommend abandoning this methodology; in the last resort, they see the potential for feminist awareness and understanding outweighing the humbling recognition that it is currently impossible to create an ideal feminist methodology which negates power differences.

These debates have usually taken place between sociologists and anthropologists, less often with historians' participation. Why? Is it related to the fact that, as Ruth Pierson argues, until recently, we have undertheorised our work?³⁰ Is it possible that our traditional disciplinary training – especially an emphasis on empirical methods and a tendency to objectify our sources, but also the preference of the discipline *not* to work with living subjects – has obscured these questions from our view? We might be less concerned about imposing our interpretations on women's voices if we were dealing with a written source; we are particularly sensitive about judging women because of the personal relationship – however brief – established between ourselves and our interviewees. But this is not necessarily positive for it may lead us to shy away from critical conclusions about their lives.

Other limitations in our historical training may also obscure these ethical questions. Is the study of people of different time periods, cultures and classes so taken for granted that we have not questioned the power inherent in writing across these boundaries? As Pierson notes on the current, troubling question of who has the 'right' to write whose history, if historians cannot

study women of different backgrounds who have less power, we may be reduced to writing autobiography.³¹ Perhaps the mere fact of historical time – again, inherent in the discipline – helps to distance us, if only in an illusory way, from the issue of unequal relationships. When I interview wage-earning women about their experience in the 1930s, the age gulf allows both of us detachment from the subject we are discussing, which then sanctions the license to interpret and judge.

In the last resort, I wonder how much soul searching is useful: is endless debate self-indulgent, sometimes an *ex post facto* justification of our work, and does our concern with interviewing women from other backgrounds sometimes take on a condescending tone?³² Perhaps it is important not to definitely answer, but rather to be ever aware of these questions: we need to continually analyse the interview as an interactive process, examine the context of the interview, especially inherent power imbalances, and always evaluate our own ethical obligations as feminists to the women we interview.

THEORETICAL DILEMMAS

While it is important to explore the interview as a mediated source, moulded by the political and social worldview of the author and subject, I think we should beware of recent trends to see oral history embodying innumerable contingencies and interpretations. When more traditional historians questioned the reliability of oral sources, suggesting that interviews are more fiction than fact, they may not have realised that they were echoing the tenets of some post-structuralist analyses which explore the relationship between language, subjectivity, and the construction of cultural meanings and social organisation.

While linguistic theories are far from new in the interdisciplinary field of oral history, the more recent turn to post-structuralism suggests a more intensive concern with both linguistic structure and cultural discourses determining oral narratives, as well as a scepticism about any direct relationship between experience and representation. This theorising has enriched our understanding of oral history, but it may also pose the danger of overstating the ultimate contingency, variability and 'fictionality' of oral histories and the impossibility of using them to locate a women's past which is 'real and knowable'.³³

Since the mid-1980s, oral historians have increasingly examined language 'as the invisible force that shapes oral texts and gives meaning to historical events'.³⁴ This approach is evident in the recent *Women's Words*, whose editors urge us to consider 'the interview as a linguistic, as well as a social and psychological event'.³⁵ While the book's contributions range widely in their perspective, substantial attention is paid to narrative form and language; one author urges the embrace of 'deconstruction' rather than mere 'interpretation' of the text.³⁶ In other works, the emphasis on language has been taken to more extreme conclusions, resulting in the denigration of historical

agency: one such writer claims that the 'narrative discourses available in our culture ... structure perceptual experience, organize memory ... and purpose-build the very events of a life'. Our life stories then come to 'reflect the cultural models available to us', so much so that we become mere 'variants on the culture's canonical forms'.³⁷

Practitioners of oral history have been more visibly influenced by the post-structuralist turn in anthropology and by some literary theory than by similar historical debates. In anthropology, life histories are being re-evaluated as post-structuralist voices emphasise the power-laden, complex process of *constructing* the oral narratives; one author suggests that life histories 'provide us with a conventionalized gloss on a social reality that ... we cannot know ... We may be discussing the dynamics of narration rather than the dynamics of society'.³⁸ Similarly, works like *Writing Culture* have stressed the creation of an indeterminate reality by the observed and the observer, well summed up by the conclusion that we can only hope for 'a constructed understanding of the constructed native's constructed point of view'.³⁹

Of course, post-structuralism has also stimulated debate in historical circles, with feminists apparently sympathetic or at least divided, and some working-class historians more critical.⁴⁰ Feminist historians have been understandably attracted to the challenge to androcentric epistemologies, critiques of essentialism, concerns with language and representation, and the analysis of power suggested by some post-structuralist writing.⁴¹ Nonetheless, critics have cautioned against the inherent idealism in some post-structuralist theory and the abandonment of the search for historical causality and agency, not to mention a sense of political despair when the very notions of exploitation and oppression are deconstructed so completely as to be abandoned.⁴²

These debates – which cannot be explored in detail here – have important implications for the way in which we interpret our interviews, confront the ethical questions of the power-laden interview and consider the concept of experience. New attention to language and the way in which gender is itself shaped through the discourses available to us can offer insight as we analyse the underlying form and structure of our interviews. Reading our interviews on many levels will encourage us to look for more than one discursive theme and for multiple relations of power based on age, class, race and culture as well as gender.

On the ethical question of the inherent inequality of this methodology, however, post-structuralist writing is less useful. As Judith Stacey persuasively argues, the post-modern strategy of dealing with ethical questions in ethnography is inadequate because it highlights power imbalances we knew to exist, but does not suggest any way of acting to ameliorate them. Post-structuralist anthropologists, for instance, suggest the process of 'evoking' rather than describing narratives through 'cooperative' dialogue, fragmentary or polyphonic discourse⁴³ as an alternative to their own power of authorship. As critics point out, however, these tactics can also veil and deny power: they can involve 'self reflection, perhaps self preoccupation, but not self

criticism'.⁴⁴ Privilege is not negated simply by inclusion of other voices, or by denial of our ultimate authorship and control. Solutions that disguise power are not helpful to the historical profession in particular, which still needs to face and debate the question of power inherent in historical writing.

Finally, there is also the troubling and seemingly unsolvable problem of 'experience'. Exploring and revaluing women's experience has been a cornerstone of feminist oral history, but the current emphasis on differences between women – in part encouraged by post-structuralist writing – has posed the dilemma of whether we can write across the divides of race, class and gender about other women's experiences, past or present. In the case of oral history, Ruth Pierson implies that we should be 'as close as possible' to the oppressed group being studied, preferably a member of that group. If we are not, we should concentrate on the exterior context of women but avoid with 'epistimal humility' a presumption to know women's interiority.⁴⁵ This raises troubling questions for me: just how close should we be to the subjects we are interviewing? Across the boundaries of sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, disability, class and age, can we score two out of six and still explore subjectivity? Where are the boundaries and under what circumstances can they shift? Secondly, separating exterior context from inner lives is extremely difficult. Does my assertion that women's ambition was socially constructed not emerge from precisely that presumptuous supposition about the relationship between context and interior life. Will we not impoverish our historical writing if we shy away from attempts to empathetically link women's inner and outer lives?

Also, is experience itself a construction of the narratives available to us in our culture? The concept of experience is not without its problems in history and feminist theory: it has been used to justify essentialism and to create a homogeneous 'woman' whose existence is enigmatic.⁴⁶ But what are the consequences of ignoring a concept which allows women to 'name their own lives'⁴⁷ and struggles, and thus validates a notion of real, lived oppression which was understood and felt by women in the past?

Related concerns were voiced over a decade ago by Louise Tillye, in her critique of oral history shaped by literary theory and used to study subjectivity, and her counter-endorsement of a materialist oral history, used to study social relations.⁴⁸ But can these two aims be so easily separated? Can the interview not be interpreted with a keen materialist and feminist eye to contextual, and also informed by post-structuralist insights into language? The cultural construction of memory would still be a focus of inquiry, posed within a framework of social and economic relations and imperatives. While it is important to analyse *how* someone constructs an explanation for their life, ultimately there are patterns, structures, systemic reasons for those constructions which must be identified to understand historical causality.⁴⁹ Polarities between subjectivity and social relations, or between a dated 'older' generation of women doing oral history who supposedly naively accepted the 'transparency' of their interviewees' accounts and the new 'complex' approach

influenced by theory⁵⁰ may not be justified – and ironically creates precisely the kind of 'conceptual hierarchy which post-structuralism is supposed to decentre'.⁵¹ [...]

CONCLUSION

My conclusions are shaped by both the moral stance of Denise Riley's assertion that, in the interests of a feminist praxis, we must lay political claim to women's experience of oppression,⁵² and secondly, by a belief that post-structuralist insights must be situated in a feminist materialist context. While an emphasis on language and narrative form has enhanced our understanding of oral history, I worry about the dangers of emphasising form over context, of stressing deconstruction of individual narratives over analysis of social patterns, of disclaiming our duty as historians to analyse and interpret women's stories. Nor do we want to totally abandon the concept of experience, moving towards a notion of a de-politicised and 'unknowable' past. We do not want to return to a history which either obscures power relationships or marginalises women's voices. Without a firm grounding of oral narratives in their material and social context, and a probing analysis of the relation between the two, insights on narrative form and on representation may remain unconnected to any useful critique of oppression and inequality. [...]

NOTES

- 1 Personal Narratives Group, 'Truths', and L. Passerini, 'Women's personal narratives: myths, experiences, and emotions', in Personal Narratives Group (eds), *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1989, pp. 261, 197.
- 2 For example: Women's History Issue, *Oral History: the Journal of the Oral History Society*, 1977, vol. 5, no. 2; special issues of *Frontiers* in 1977 and 1983; M. Chamberlain and P. Thompson, 'International Conference on Oral History and Women's History', *Oral History Review*, 1984, vol. 12, no. 1, S. Gluck, 'Introduction', in *Rosie the Riveter Revisited*, Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1987; S. Diamond, 'Women in the B.C. labour movement', *Canadian Oral History Association Journal*, 1983, vol. 6. On women's studies see J. Humez and L. Crimpacker, 'Using oral history to teach women's studies', *Oral History Review*, 1977, (summer); K. Anderson, K. Armitage, S. Jack and D. Wittner, 'Beginning where we are: feminist methodology in oral history', in J. Nielsen (ed.), *Feminist Research Methods*, 1990, Boulder, Westview Press.
- 3 S. Geiger, 'What's so feminist about women's oral history?', *Journal of Women's History*, 1990, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 169–170.
- 4 W. Roberts, 'Using oral history to study working class history', Paper presented at the Canadian Oral History Association Conference, Toronto, 1991.
- 5 H. Hodysk and G. McIntosh, 'Problems of objectivity in oral history', *Historical Studies in Education*, 1989, vol. 1, no. 1.
- 6 My argument here is indebted to R. Grele, *Envelopes of Sound*, Chicago, Precedent Publishing, 1975.
- 7 The term post-structuralist is an umbrella expression, actually referring to a number of theoretical positions. In this article I deal primarily with theories

- shaped by linguistic and deconstructive approaches, which explore the construction of subjectivity and cultural meaning through language. As Chris Weedon argues, these positions generally argue that 'experience has no inherent essential meaning'. See C. Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Post-structuralist Theory*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1987, p. 34.
- 8 M. Frisch, 'The memory of history', *Radical History Review*, 1981, no. 25, p. 16. See also M. Frisch and D. Watts, 'Oral history and the presentation of class consciousness', *International Journal of Oral History*, 1980, vol. 1, no. 20. These warnings come from Grele, *Envelopes of Sound*.
- 10 M. Frisch, 'Report on the International Conference on Oral History', *Oral History Journal*, 1983, p. 8. See also his 'The memory of history'. Both older and some newer articles reflect these tendencies. See, for example, E. Sillerman, *The Last Best West: Women on the Alberta Frontier, 1880-1930*. Montreal, Eden Press, 1984; and M. Culppepper, 'Views from fourscore and more: youth and maturation in the oral histories of elderly women', *International Journal of Oral History*, 1989, vol. 10, no. 3.
- 11 G. Etter-Lewis, 'Black women's life stories: reclaiming self in narrative texts', in S. Berger Gluck and D. Patai (eds), *Women's Words: the Feminist Practice of Oral History*. New York, Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1991, p. 48. This does not appear to be the case in J. Cruikshank's analysis of Northern Canadian native women's histories in *Life Lived Like a Story*. Vancouver, UBC Press, 1992. The importance of culture in shaping women's narratives is thus also crucial.
- 12 This is reflected overtly in language: women tended to use 'on', 'men', 'je', 'I', Bertaux-Wiame, 'The life history approach to internal migration: how men and women came to Paris between the wars', in P. Thompson (ed.), *Our Common History: the Transformation of Europe*. New Jersey, Humanities Press, 1982.
- 13 S. Geiger, 'Life histories', *Signs*, 1986, p. 348.
- 14 See C. Salazar, 'A third world woman's text: between the politics of criticism and cultural politics', in *Women's Words*, 1991; D. Sommer, 'Not just a personal story', in B. Brodski and C. Schenk (eds), *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, n.d.; J. Cruikshank, 'Myth and tradition as narrative framework', *International Journal of Oral History*, 1988, vol. 9, no. 3. I have chosen to emphasise class and gender in this article because the city I am studying was overwhelmingly homogeneous in ethnic composition.
- 15 Interview with M.H., 18 July 1989.
- 16 Interview with M.A., 27 June 1989.
- 17 On collective scripts see J. Bodnar, 'Power and memory in oral history: workers and managers at Studebaker', *Journal of American History*, 1989, vol. 75, no. 4.
- 18 Interview with C.E., 27 June 1989. This issue is dealt with in more detail in my 'The softball solution: male managers, female workers and the operation of paternalism at Westclox', *Labour/Le Travail*, 1993, no. 32.
- 19 Interview with R.M., 27 August 1989.
- 20 For discussion of silences and jokes see L. Passerini 'Work ideology and working-class attitudes to Fascism', in Thompson (ed.), *Our Common History*, 1982.
- 21 This conclusion, which is detailed elsewhere, is supported in an article on women teachers of this period which also uses oral histories. See C. Reynolds, 'Hegemony and hierarchy: becoming a teacher in Toronto, 1930-80', *Historical Studies in Education*, 1990, vol. 2, no. 1.
- 22 R. Roach Pierson, *They're Still Women After All: the Second World War and Canadian Womanhood*. Toronto, McClelland & Steward, 1986. For a popular Canadian book which stresses women's positive memories see J. Bruce, *Back the Attack: Canadian Women during the Second World War, at Home and Abroad*. Toronto, Macmillan, 1985. For a scholarly discussion of women's memories and how women were changed by war work in subtle and private ways', S. Gluck, *Rosie the Riveter Revisited: Women, the War and Social Change*. Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1987, p. 269.
- 23 See Grele, *Envelopes of Sound*, for discussion of how notions of hegemony and ideology may be useful in analysing oral histories. On the use of hegemony see also J. Leary, *American Historical Review*, 1985, vol. 90, no. 3.
- 24 My conscious re-shaping of D. Smith's words from *The Everyday World as Problematic*. Boston, Northeastern Press, 1987.
- 25 Here, I am not only referring to Smith, noted above, but also N. Hartstock, 'The feminist standpoint: developing the ground for a specifically feminist historical materialism', in S. Harding (ed.), *Feminist Methodology*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1987. See also A. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*. Totowa, Rowman & Allanheld, 1983, pp. 369-371; and S. Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1986, chs 6 and 7.
- 26 A. Oakley, 'Interviewing women: a contradiction in terms', in H. Roberts (ed.), *Doing Feminist Research*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.
- 27 J. Finch, 'It's great to have someone to talk to: the ethics and politics of interviewing women', in C. Bell and H. Roberts (eds), *Social Researching: Politics, Problems, Practice*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, p. 78.
- 28 J. Stacey, 'Can there be a feminist ethnography?', in Gluck and Patai, *Women's Words*. See also D. Patai, 'US academics and Third World women: is ethical research possible?', in *Women's Words*.
- 29 See Personal Narrative Group, *Interpreting Women's Lives*, p. 201, for the recommendation we replace 'researcher-subject' with 'life historian-producer'.
- 30 R. Roach Pierson, 'Experience, difference, dominance and voice in the writing of Canadian women's history', in K. Offen, R. Roach Pierson and J. Rendall (eds), *Writing Women's History: International Perspectives*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1991.
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 For example in K. Olsen and L. Shopes, 'Crossing boundaries, building bridges: doing oral history with working-class women and men', in Gluck and Patai, *Women's Words*, one author notes that she puts her working-class interviewees 'at ease' with a measure of self-disclosure; yet, the example she selects leaves me somewhat unsettled: 'Informants are more willing to reveal their own experience when they learn that I have shared many of the family problems that plague them - a father who was chronically unemployed, a son whose adolescent acting-out included run-ins with juvenile services, a troubled marriage that ended in divorce' (p. 194). Are there certain 'assumptions' about working-class life inherent in this statement? For a critique of proceeding from such assumptions about 'representativeness' see Geiger, 'What's so feminist about women's oral history?'
- 33 L. Tilly, 'Gender, women's history, social history and deconstruction', *Social Science History*, 1989, vol. 13, no. 4, p. 443.
- 34 G. Etter-Lewis, 'Reclaiming', in Gluck and Patai, *Women's Words*, p. 44.
- 35 S. Gluck and D. Patai, 'Introduction', in their edited book *Women's Words*, p. 9.
- 36 G. Etter-Lewis, 'Black women's life stories', in Gluck and Patai, *Women's Words*, p. 44.
- 37 J. Bruner, 'Life as narrative', *Social Research*, 1987, p. 54.
- 38 V. Crapanzano, 'Life histories', *American Anthropologist*, 1984, vol. 86, no. 4, p. 955.
- 39 V. Crapanzano, 'Hermes' dilemma: the masking of subversion in ethnographic description', in J. Clifford and S. Marcus (eds), *Writing Culture: the Politics and Poetics of Ethnography*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986, p. 74. For a feminist critique of this book see F. Mascia-Lees, P. Sharpe and C. Ballerino

- Cohen. 'The post-modernist turn in anthropology: cautions from a feminist perspective', *Signs*, 1989, vol. 15, no. 1.
- 40 For a taste of this discussion see J. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1988; D. Riley, *Am I That Name: Feminism and the Category of 'Woman' in History*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988; J. Newman, 'History as usual?': feminism and the new historicism', in H. Veeger (ed.), *The New Historicism*, London, 1989, and *Radical History Review*, 1989, no. 43. See the replies to Scott in *The International Journal of Labour and Working Class History*, 1987, no. 31, and critical reviews of her book, *Women's Working Class History*, 6 January 1989, and *Signs*, 1989, vol. 15, no. 4. For a critique by a working-class historian see B. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1990, or for a Marxist critique, E. Wood, *The Retreat from Class*, London, Verso, 1986.
- 41 Indeed, some of these insights have been inspired by feminist writing. See J. Flax, 'Post modernism and gender relations in feminist theory', *Signs*, 1987; L. Alcoff, 'Cultural feminism versus post-structuralism', *Signs*, 1988, vol. 13, no. 3, 1. Gordon also points to ways in which some 'new' insights of post-structuralism are not really very new in her review of Scott in *Signs*, 1990, vol. 15, no. 4. Her conclusion applies to the field of oral history.
- 42 D. Tress, 'Comment on Flax's postmodernism and gender relations in feminist theory', *Signs*, 1988, vol. 14, no. 1, p. 197. For other semi-critical assessments see also M. Valverde, 'Poststructuralist gender historians: are we those names', *Labour/Le Travail*, 1990, vol. 25; M. Walzer, 'The politics of Foucault', in D. Hoy (ed.), *Foucault: a Critical Reader*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986; M. Jehlen, 'Patroling the borders', *Radical History Review*, 1989, vol. 43, and a far more severe critique, N. Hartstock, 'Foucault on power: a theory for women?', in L. Nicholson (ed.), *Feminism and Postmodernism*, New York, Routledge, 1990.
- 43 S. Tyler, 'Post-modern ethnography: from document of the occult to occult document', in Clifford and Marcus, *Writing Culture*.
- 44 Mascia-Lees *et al.*, 'The post-modernist turn in anthropology'. These authors are understandably sceptical of some post-modern theories implying that 'verbal constructs (voices) do not relate to reality, that truth and knowledge are contingent, that no one subject position is possible' (p. 15) developed by Western, white academic men at precisely the moment these men are being challenged by women's and Third World voices.
- 45 Pierson, 'Experience', pp. 91-94.
- 46 M. Barrett, 'The concept of difference', *Feminist Review*, 1987.
- 47 L. Stanley, 'Recovering women in history from feminist deconstruction', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 1990, vol. 13, nos. 1-2.
- 48 L. Tilly, 'People's history and social science history'. See the responses in *International Journal of Oral History*, 1985, vol. 6, no. 1. This was also well characterised as a debate between hermeneutic and ethnographic methods in oral history by D. Bertaux and M. Kohli, 'The life story approach: a continental view', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 1984, vol. 10. Again analyses of linguistic structure and narrative form, and explorations of how the writer 'creates' the historical document are both long-standing concerns in oral history.
- 49 See Cruikshank's (1988) examination of myth, narrative form and social and economic structures in 'Myth and tradition as narrative framework'.
- 50 Gluck and Patai, *Women's Words*, Introduction.
- 51 P. Stevens Sangren, 'Rhetoric and authority of ethnography: post-modernism and the social reproduction of texts', *Current Anthropology*, 1988, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 405-424.
- 52 Riley, *Am I That Name?*