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REMEMBERING AND REWORKING EMOTIONS: THE REANALYSIS OF EMOTION IN AN INTERVIEW¹

By Joanna Bornat

Oral historians commonly interview older people, yet tend to neglect what is known about the psychology of old age and the significance of an interview in the life of an older person. Researchers likewise come to the interview with agendas, biographies and life stage issues. In the interview situation, these various components, contributed by both sides in the partnership, emerge in ways which can be difficult to deal with at the time, provoking unpredictable emotional responses. Looking back at data generated from such encounters can be revelatory, not only in relation to research goals but in terms of insights into the interviewer's own self-awareness and understanding of the process of interviewing. This article explores these issues by drawing on an interview carried out almost thirty years previously during which a woman in her eighties recalled, with much emotion, an experience from her childhood.

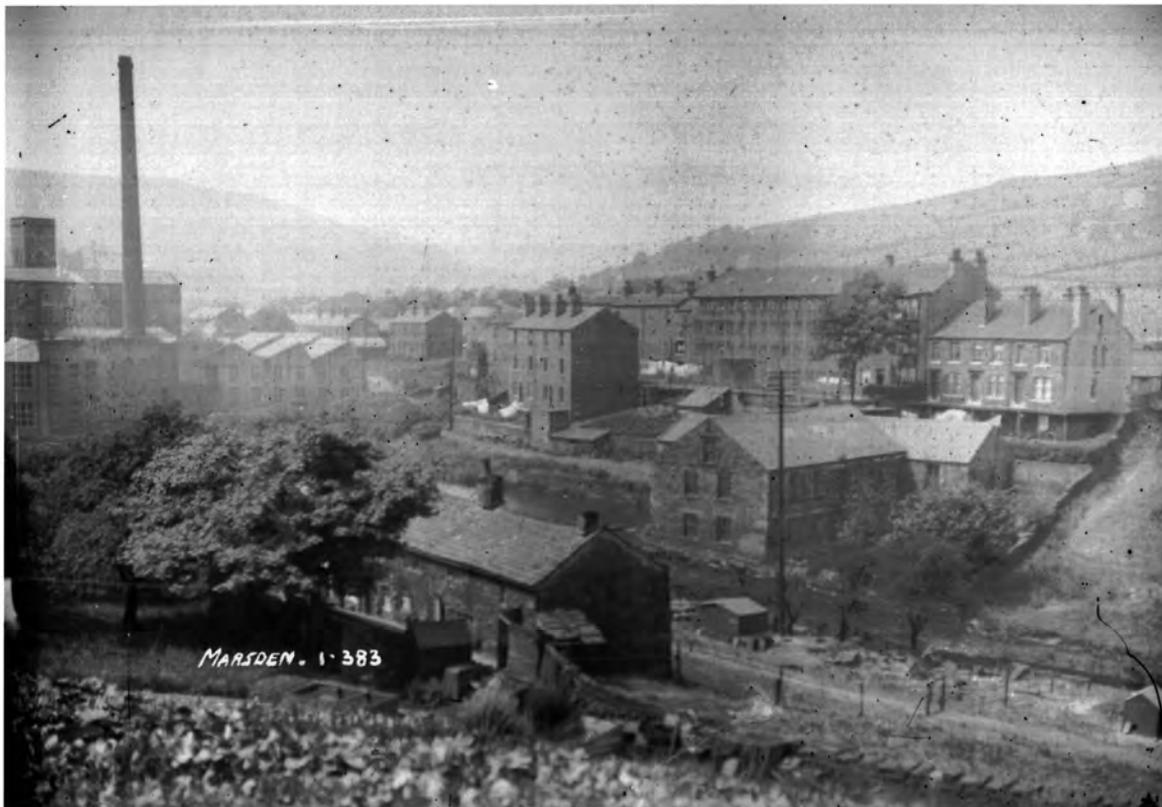
ABSTRACT

KEY WORDS:
oral history,
secondary
analysis,
interviews,
emotion, old
age

In 1974 I interviewed a Mrs Lockwood (not her real name). She was one of twenty-one people I interviewed for my PhD research into trades unionism in the wool textile industry.² After having spent some time amongst documents, newspapers, minute books and other printed ephemera, I was becoming an oral historian. Looking at my frustratingly incomplete field notes I can see that Mrs. Lockwood was amongst the first of my interviewees. She had written to me in response to a letter I had published in a local newspaper asking for people who had worked in the mills during the World War One to contact me.

I was knocked over by doing oral history. After having spent months and years reading in libraries and archives, to hear people talk about working life in the mills was immediately exciting. I felt I was talking to history itself, like

Studs Terkel who, when interviewing Bertrand Russell realised he was 'about to shake the hand of the man who shook the hand of the man who shook the hand of Napoleon'³. (Russell's uncle was Lord Russell, a Liberal MP from 1813 and later Prime Minister). The idea that there might have been anything more going on apart from the collection of data had not occurred to me. I was strictly a positivist but working with the conviction that in interviewing witnesses to mill work I was enabling women, mainly, to talk about their early working lives. I was generating accounts from women which, I argued, were not included in labour history. Sheila Rowbotham's challenge, *Hidden from History*⁴, had only been published a year previously and was just beginning to have an impact on traditionally gendered understandings of



View of the village of Marsden, Colne Valley, West Yorkshire, 1910. Photo: Kirklees Local History Library.

who made history. At that time too what existed of local history was more interested in the distant past than the remembered past. This was thirty years ago, before the doing of history became a national pastime..

My interview with Mrs Lockwood took a turn which was unexpected, so much so that I've used one particular excerpt from it many times in teaching over the last decade or so. I have used it to illustrate what happens when emotion spills out in an interview: as an example of my bad practice. When I play the extract what tends to follow in discussion is not only an evaluation of my approach but also much speculation as to what was going on in the interview, apart from my eliciting accounts of mill work and the interviewee's responses.

I want to continue with that speculation by looking at the data from the perspective of two different points in time. In 1974 I wanted to hear about work in the mill, about the young Mrs. Lockwood. However, more recently I have become interested in the secondary analysis of archived recordings.⁵ A reading of the literature suggests that secondary analysis of qualitative data is a relatively new arena for sociologists in which to debate (not so new for anthropologists, who have long been revisiting their own and each other's notebooks) and

which is taking sociologists back into their and others' pasts, but with approaches which are fed by more recent discussions of context, ethics and interpretive freedoms.⁶

However there have been warnings, such as those from Martin Hammersley who argues about the dangers of assuming that anything so simplistic as a 'databank' with empirically neutral material can be available to secondary analysis, and that lack of knowledge of the field-workers' original starting point will prevent any 'common currency' between primary and secondary analysis. He is concerned that the background of the original researcher will not be known to anyone who tried to use the data they generate and he finally argues that secondary analysis, '...runs against the ethnographic principles of seeking to understand settings or people in their own terms and building analyses that are grounded in the data collected'.⁷

Natasha Mauthner, Odette Parry and Kathryn Backett-Milburn go further, drawing on experiences of returning to their own old data sets and reflecting on the changes in their lives since the data were generated. They conclude:

'...if researchers generate new substantive findings and theories from old qualitative

data, without attending to the epistemological issues, they are being “naively realist” thus unwittingly serving to reify the data by hoodwinking us into believing they are entities without concomitant relations’.

Their argument is that data are ‘socially constructed’ and, quoting Hammersley, ‘not simply “facts that are free of theoretical presuppositions”’⁸.

Going back to my interview with Mrs Lockwood I want to consider the strength of these arguments and the value of returning to one’s own data at a later life stage by focusing on one aspect, the generation of emotion in the interview. This means considering the data in light of the debate between a realist approach, which would identify the data as having an objective existence of their own, and a post-structuralist approach which, Denzin argues, holds that, ‘things do not exist independently of their representations in social texts’. My problem is that in going back to the extract I’ve found not just how much I have changed but also how much more can be learned from it because of the changes I have lived through. While Denzin criticises the realist approach for its ‘hegemonic vision’⁹ it could be that the post-structuralist approach is equally controlling. To look and listen for silences, experiences or relationships which are unspoken or unexpressed, is acknowledged as appropriate and rewarding,¹⁰ but to go beyond this and to seek out subconscious motivations, or ways of thinking, is perhaps to risk over interpretation and a distancing of the interviewee from their own words.¹¹

Of course it’s true that the data emerged under specific conditions and are a product of a particular moment generated by Mrs Lockwood and myself. What is known about memory and about the social relations of the interview tells us that these data have no pre-existence in that form.¹² They originated on a particular afternoon when she began to answer my questions. She might have told her story differently half an hour later to someone else. However, there’s no denying that what is available is there, on tape, in a transcript, and indeed available to a wider public than just myself as they’re deposited in Kirklees Local History library. There are of course ethical dilemmas facing the secondary analyst. For example, there is the issue of consent. Mrs Lockwood agreed to be interviewed about her life as a young worker in the wool textile industry. Whether or not she would have given permission for alternative uses of her data cannot be known. However, it is also the case

that no consent procedure, however well drawn up, could ever guarantee a fully informed understanding of how data will be used once it has been deposited in an archive and concern about this may in fact inhibit research design and interpretation.¹³

When researchers analyse data together they are re-using it to create new knowledge both about it, and any wider issues it illuminates.¹⁴ If we restrict this process then we are restricting critical appraisal and the development of knowledge. Is it really the case that what we can say about these data must be determined by what can be known about the original theorising and conditions of their inception? In contrast I would agree with Moore that if meanings can only be drawn from what can be known about the origins of the data, in context, this would seem to me to place limits on what can be known and shared about that data.¹⁵

Mrs Lockwood was seventy-seven when I interviewed her at her home in Marsden (Colne Valley, West Yorkshire) where she lived on her own. I learned from her that her mother had been married with four children and left a widow before she married Mrs Lockwood’s father. There were then three more children, Mrs Lockwood being the second youngest in the family. She’d lived in Marsden, in Colne Valley, since she was nine and had worked in the mill from the age of thirteen, joining one of her sisters as a mender (rated a better job for a woman) after only eight months as a winder which was the starting job for girls at that time. She’d become a Quaker after she joined what was the Adult School movement¹⁶ in her teens.

What was, as Hammersley calls it, my ‘cultural habitus’ as a researcher at that time? By this he means what the researcher brings to a study in terms of ‘an informal and intuitive element...acquired over time in fieldwork’.¹⁷ I have to say that in 1974 mine was fairly limited. I was thirty, married with two small children and living in a village next to the University of Essex, a ‘university wife’ as we were called then. I knew West Yorkshire only from living in nearby Leeds as a sociology student in the 1960s but Colne Valley was new to me apart from what I had read of its radical history and wool textile work.¹⁸ My thesis topic was the main wool textile trade union. I wanted to find out what happened during World War One to a relatively quiescent union led by men in an industry which employed mainly women. Work, women’s lives and trades unionism were my interests, topics inspired by my socialist feminist politics at the time. As far as my training as a sociologist was



View of Bank Bottom Mills, Marsden, where Mrs Lockwood worked, 1910. Photo: Kirklees Local History Library.

concerned I had survived exposure to structural functionalists and was seeking some kind of integration of Marxist and interpretive understandings of society. Oral history seemed to be offering interesting possibilities.¹⁹

In the extract that follows Mrs Lockwood is answering a question I had put to her about the pattern of the working week.

And it was a regular thing on a Saturday morning to go down to the village to a chip shop and fetch fish and chips for three or four families for the Saturday dinner and the fish and chips were three halfpence. The fish and the chips were three halfpence then.

For each meal?

And they all used to be wrapped up separate. And I used to have two great big shopping bags full. But I used to regulate it so that as I was going home the people were coming home from work and they used to help me to carry them home. The neighbours' children as well they knew and they used to help me to carry them home. Now they usually gave me a penny. But you know I never spent those pennies, I used to

take them every one home to me mother. Towards you know, as they said, towards me keep. I never, and I hardly knew what I – in fact I never had above a halfpenny or a jam jar on a Saturday. But another thing – I'm not boring you am I?

No

Well, and it's come to my knowledge, very forcibly, since I wrote to you about this. As I say mother never went to school a day in her life, we attended Church of England. But there was another lady that lived not far away, but not in the same road. She was a very nice lady and sometimes I used to shop for her. And she said to me one day, she said, Nellie, I have a ticket for the Messiah and I can't go, would you like to go with it? And I don't know that I'd ever heard the word Messiah then although I knew the Church of England story about Jesus being crucified and all that. I don't think I'd heard the word Messiah before then. And I went alone that night and – we'd a very good choral society in the village at that time – and I heard the Messiah that night, the first time I'd ever heard it.



And how old would you be then?

Well I shouldn't be above eleven or twelve.

You went on your own or

I went on my own absolutely. And I shall never forget it. And I could cry now when I think how I was touched with 'He was despised and rejected'.

Very beautiful isn't it?

Because many a time I felt that I was despised especially with me mother and father not living together, you know. I never hear it now but what I think about that.

It's a big experience for a child of 11 isn't it?

It was a wonderful experience to me.

And it was just in the town here in Marsden?

Yes, yes, it was in the Mechanics' Hall in Marsden.

And they do it every year?

They did in those days. Yes, they don't now but they did in those days.

And it would just be ordinary people from the town?

They used to have principals came from away you see. It was the ordinary village people who were in the chorus.

And what about the orchestra, that would be

Well we had quite a good few people – you see there weren't any wireless, there wasn't any television in those days.²⁰

Looking at the interview again, I can see that from the start Mrs. Lockwood was taking a rather different tack to what I had expected. The story of her parents' separation shortly after she was nine, following rows between her father and her older stepsiblings, came with responses to my first questions about her their employment, sources of family income and her first job in the mill. However, as is evident from this excerpt, I was unprepared for her emotion

The mending section at a Huddersfield worsted mill. Note the women menders wear shoes and not clogs, a mark of superiority, 1910. Photo: Kirklees Local History Library.

in recalling this time in her life. I was unprepared and also unable to cope with her feelings. It wasn't just that she had veered away from the topics I wanted to hear her talk about; I simply didn't know what to do with the emotion she expressed in the interview situation. Until I knocked on her door that afternoon we'd only corresponded by letter. Though I now knew a few things about her personal and family life we were still strangers and I didn't know how to cope with the feelings she was expressing. My action, as is obvious from the interview recording and transcript, was to try to move her back to where I wanted to be: talking in safety about her memories of mill life.

In using this extract when I teach about oral history interviewing, I am usually satisfied if the discussion turns towards what to do when faced with such a situation, or to what extent her emotions were as unexpected to her as to me, or whether she was taking advantage of the interview to go back to past hurts with the benefit of an audience. I hope that students aren't reluctant to be critical of my then emergent technique though I am always relieved when someone exonerates me from being completely insensitive by pointing out that in distracting her I might have been helping her through the emotion rather than reinforcing her grief. A general point we reach is that there are limits to the oral historian's therapeutic role in the context of someone's recall, though we need to be aware of potential hazards for either side and be clear that we should aim to do no harm.

Briefly to sketch in my current 'cultural habitus' I need hardly point out that I'm now thirty six years older, retired and a member of the 'sandwich generation', that is I have a living parent as well as grandchildren. I'm now a fully employed academic and I'm still a socialist, though not the same kind of socialist as I used to be. And I am still married to the same person and it is many years since I was last in Colne Valley.

I could go on but what it seems to me is more important are the theoretical and methodological influences which now help me as I go back to listen to the emotion in the extract I've just played. These also are now part of my 'cultural habitus'. And they're part of a shared 'habitus' of a repertoire of interpretive discourses which I didn't have access to earlier, discourses which others are also engaged in.

What I'm now aware of, which I wasn't then, is theorising about meaning in later life and how oral history making is likely to be affected by the mental processes and tasks, to use an Eriksonian term,²¹ faced by an older

person. However sensitive and aware feminist oral historians and ethnographers have been to the perspectives and likely worldviews of other women, they rarely if ever considered the late life perspective.²² Likewise, identity theorists such as Giddens, with their post-modern analyses of identity maintenance and construction, fail to include the view from old age.²³ What we are offered, thanks to Erikson and others, are approaches which emphasise ideas of resolution, integration and acceptance. We also now know that in late life, as well as in earlier life, there are many different ways in which people attach meaning to their lives.²⁴ And we now also have theories of the role of narrative in late life, with McAdams's idea of the construction of the self through the telling of a coherent and acceptable story.²⁵ This is a theme also taken up by Coleman and colleagues who, in reminding us of the salience of family as a focus for meaning in very late life, argue that '...ageing is characterised by a search to find a personally meaningful way of life which connects the past with the present'.²⁶

What might I draw from these ideas which could add to an understanding of Mrs Lockwood's interview? While I am attracted to ideas of narrative and the search for a coherent identity in late life, I think I would agree with Gubrium and Wallace,²⁷ and emphasise the active theorising which Mrs Lockwood was engaged in during her interview. At the time of the interview I was more likely to consider her as being some kind of resource which would switch on in response to my questions. The idea that she might be an active agent in the interview, not simply an 'empty vessel' without ideas and perspectives of her own,²⁸ had not occurred to me.

Drawing on Plummer, we can see that she was using the common narrative form of epiphany (ironically, in connection with a performance of 'Messiah') which, as he explains in a quite different context, is '...a crucial turning point marked by radical consciousness raising'.²⁹ She was doing this to explain how, as a young person, she came to see herself in the music and words: 'He was despised and rejected' and so was able to put herself into a bigger picture of suffering rather than internalising and privatising that experience.³⁰ In today's language she might have called herself a victim; then there was no such identity available.

I might also learn from recent studies of emotion and memory and accept that emotion may determine what is available in memory narratives. Misztal in her *Theories of Social Remembering* suggests that emotions lead directly to the past and bring the past somati-

'Messiah' was, and still is, one of the most popular and often performed pieces in the repertoire of the local choral society. From Dave Russell's *History of Popular Music, 1840-1914*,³⁵ we can get an idea of what kind of a choir Mrs Lockwood might have heard, its social class composition and general standing. My clumsy diversionary questioning did lead her to describe the make-up of the choir, from which we might gather that it was more likely that she heard a smaller cantata choir rather than an oratorio choir for which the more expensive tickets were sold on subscription. As Russell explains: 'Admission rates of 2d, 3d or 6d were very frequent, enabling them to draw sizeable audiences for such key social and musical events as the Christmas *Messiah*...In countless village halls, schoolrooms, mission halls and chapels, choral music reached those for whom the concerts of a Leeds Philharmonic were at best a luxury, at worst, an impossibility'. *Messiah* was 'never superseded',³⁶ Russell says, by other works from mid nineteenth century and, '...most northern choirs performed the work virtually every Christmas',³⁷ knowing that without it their profits would be hit.

Reference to *Messiah* in the interview did not engage me at the time. My generation was escaping from such cloying passion. I recognised the powerful mix of early socialism and Christianity that fuelled the left politics of areas such as Huddersfield and Colne Valley but more in the spirit of resignation in the face of what I judged as false consciousness than from any sense of shared understanding. Now social history has changed to encompass many more aspects of working class lives than I had previously allowed. We can now situate attending *Messiah* alongside other activities and, thanks to historians of popular music like Dave Russell, can see that Mrs Lockwood was taking part in a wave of activity which reached its peak in the 1890s. He gives the example of Bradford, where, in 1900, there were 'almost thirty choral societies, some twenty brass bands, an amateur orchestra, six concertina bands, a team of handbell-ringers, two music-halls and a number of venues offering Saturday evening "popular" concerts'. Russell points to the 'nationalisation' of popular culture which was also a feature of this period though identifies differences in taste and sub-cultures at each end of the social class spectrum. This was a development, however, in which there was, he argues, 'a sharing of common taste across a broad social range' and that 'Most contemporaries, even those sympathetic to the working classes, were unaware of this', citing William Morris as a prime expo-

nent of the idea of the working class as deprived cultural philistines. Russell points out that this musical movement meant that 'ordinary people' were familiar with the works of Handel, Wagner and Donizetti, some indeed being close to expert.³⁸

By following the lead she presents in her interview Mrs Lockwood was taking me into quite a different world, to share her experience of a popular and passionate form of expression which was socially shared and, also socially solidaristic in ways which, if I had had only her account of mill life to go on, I would have had no sense of whatsoever.

Something has changed in the repertoire of interpretations available now. Though I am older, that doesn't bring me any closer to Mrs Lockwood. I'm not convinced that there's likely to be any kind of ready solidarity or empathy to be drawn out of my added years. I can't read myself back into that interview as an older woman any more than I could assume any womanly solidarity at the time. Jean Dunscombe's and Julie Jessop's welcoming of a 'much more sceptical debate concerning the limits and ethical problems of "feminist" qualitative research methods'³⁹ has relevance for gerontologists I would argue. We may know more about remembering in late life from personal experience but that shouldn't privilege a personal interpretation.

To conclude I want to return to the suppositions about 'naïve realism' and the allegations about a fact-laden data bank with which I began my discussion of secondary analysis. I've looked back at an extract from one of my first interviews and invited speculation as to what was going on at that time. This has involved me in a certain amount of reflexivity. I've considered who I was then and what particular theoretical and methodological constraints contributed to the context in which that interview developed. What I couldn't do, of course, was include Mrs Lockwood in that process. Whatever I have to say is without benefit of *her* reflexivity. I've looked at what has happened since that interview in terms of new ideas about old age remembering, emotions in the interview and an exploration of what I had earlier tried to reject. I've added my years into the discussion but discounted the idea that they have any essential value.

What I am now going on to argue finally is that secondary analysis can add to our knowledge of what might have been going on in that original interview. Going back to earlier interviews, with reflection and new theorising, and in my case accepting the value of expressed emotions even when these run against my own responses, I have been able to draw out new

ideas. I've considered the contribution of my own 'cultural habitus' at two different points but concluded with the introduction of more recent theorising that the emotional qualities of the interview now become more, not less, significant in helping us to understand not only its internal dynamics but what it contributes to wider understanding of the social history of the period in which it took place and of the remembering of an older woman, Mrs Lockwood. I can now see more going on in that interview not only in relation to her active role but also in terms of the emotions which she remembered and re-lived. These point to the interview as existing in a time trajectory rather than as a finished archived object which I created at a particular moment and which only I can decode.

As I, or anyone else, reads the text or hears the words, we're automatically drawn into a process of secondary analysis. What I've tried to show here is that our shared 'cultural habitus' as well as any individual experience and perspective we bring to data analysis needs to be an ongoing and open process and one which is accepting of a range of emotions which may let the hearer into unexpected worlds of experience and meaning. Rather like the OpenSource initiative in computer programming I welcome analysis by others as a means to freeing data which I once generated from any real or supposed epistemological confinement located in its origins so that others can draw their own interpretations.

NOTES

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 15. Moore, 2006.
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30. This part of *Messiah*, 'He was despised and rejected' is an air traditionally sung by a mezzo-soprano, and begins: 'He was despised, despised and rejected, rejected of men
A man of sorrows, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief

A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.
He was despised, rejected, he was despised and
rejected of men
A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief'
A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief'
He was despised, rejected
A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and
acquainted with grief
A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief
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Remembering*, Maidenhead, The Open University
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36. Russell, 1987, p 209.

37. Russell, 1987, p 214.

38. Russell, 1987, p 2-7.

39. Jean Dunscombe and Julia Jessop, 'Doing
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