

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Reminiscence and oral history: parallel universes or shared endeavour?

Journal Item

How to cite:

Bornat, Joanna (2001). Reminiscence and oral history: parallel universes or shared endeavour? *Ageing and Society*, 21(2) pp. 219–241.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© [\[not recorded\]](#)

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1017/S0144686X01008157>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

Reminiscence and oral history: parallel universes or shared endeavour?¹

JOANNA BORNAT*

ABSTRACT

There is a common methodology to reminiscence and life review with older people and oral history, and yet very little common literature. The distinguishing characteristics of these approaches are described and three areas of work are featured: interrogation, partnership and ownership. The discussion draws on a case study drawn from research on family break-up and reconstitution, and on the performance of a play devised and performed by a group of older amateur actors to an international conference. I conclude by identifying ways in which both approaches might benefit from a closer collaboration.

KEY WORDS – reminiscence, life review, oral history, interviewing..

Introduction

For the last 20 years or more I have occupied a position which, as far as I am aware, has not been shared by anyone else. I am an oral historian who also writes and researches on issues relating to reminiscence and life review. It is paradoxical that many of the debates and discussions developed in oral history and reminiscence and life review research are so similar, while conducted in two quite separate universes, often with a singular lack of awareness of the other's existence and concerns or expertise. Issues such as contexts for remembering, the effect of trauma on remembering, storytelling, the interview relationship, ethics, the nature of memory, the role of remembering in establishing identities and finally, outputs and dissemination are all typical of debates in each domain.

An outsider might find it difficult to distinguish the two areas. Each is concerned with recall of the past and, in the main, this involves communication with older people. However, things feel quite different when viewed from the inside, and it is this difference which I explore here. In part the differences are rooted in differing disciplinary origins

* School of Health and Social Welfare, The Open University.

and in part in the distinctive aims and objectives of the two approaches. In the UK context, this article offers some comments on the key distinguishing characteristics of oral history and reminiscence and life review while pointing out what is shared. In covering two areas, each with rich and active populations of researchers and students, I have made some selections and some necessary omissions. I may also be guilty of misrepresentation in my attempt to portray similarity and difference. For these decisions I apologise in advance. The chapter is structured around three key areas of work:

- method, the interrogative nature of oral history and reminiscence;
- context, partnerships in the interpretation of memories; and
- presentation, the ownership and control of personal memory.

I illustrate each with examples from both universes.

Defining difference

In order to establish similarities and differences, some definitions are required. Beginning with discipline origins, it is clear that there are some quite obvious boundaries to be drawn. Yet, as I will go on to show, these boundaries have shifted over the years, and in some areas have almost disappeared. Defining difference at once becomes complex.

Oral history

Oral history in the UK and elsewhere draws on the disciplines of history and sociology for its origins. However, as Thompson argues, the origins of oral history lie in a particular understanding of what history is. His argument that ‘All history depends ultimately upon its social purpose’ (2000: 1) points to an instrumental role, for history and its making. The social purpose of history may, in some cases, be the maintenance of the status quo or to support divisions within and between societies. History, however, can take a quite alternative stance, challenging and revising what is accepted. It is within this tradition that oral history developed in the late 1960s. History as a critical endeavour, undertaken as an activity with a view to bringing about change, features strongly in the writings of many oral historians though, as Thompson also points out, the extent to which change is invoked ‘... depends upon the spirit in which it is used’ (2000: 3).

Frisch, writing in a US context, offers a way of pinpointing the particular social role of oral history in distinguishing between what he calls the two poles of ‘more history’ and ‘anti-history’ (1990: 187).

What he means by the ‘more history’ approach is the contribution which oral history makes to revealing aspects of the past which are not available through more conventional documentary sources. By means of the interview, oral historians are able to access personal experience, eye witness accounts and the memories of people whose perspectives might otherwise be ignored or neglected. In this way we are able to add information to the historical record. So, for example, histories of major industries are altered by accounts from the workshop floor, from women and migrant workers, in relation to unemployment or struggles over hours and wages (Friedlander 1975; Messenger 1980; Hareven 1982). The history of health and welfare is extended beyond administrative and organisational structures to include accounts from recipients of welfare, experiences of disability, histories of illness and of the development of professional expertise (Bornat *et al.* 2000).

Though oral historians are keen to establish their unique credentials as the champions of memory as a data source, they are only continuing with a well-established tradition. Historians, from earliest times and from all societies, have drawn on oral traditions, myths and accounts, as reliable sources of evidence (Thompson 2000).

The ‘anti-history’ approach, Frisch argues, takes a stronger line, challenging orthodoxy by identifying the unique quality of the oral history process. Talking about the past with those who participated in it, even created it, is a means of by-passing the control of academic scholarship, and being able to ‘... touch the “real” history ... by communicating with it directly’ (Frisch 1990: 187). Portelli (1997), a leading oral historian from Italy, describes how, even within families, the sensation of history becoming alive shifts behaviour:

I remember sitting in Santino Cappanera’s parlor in Terni, Italy, taping an interview about his life as a steel worker and political activist. His teenage daughter was in the next room, doing her homework. After about twenty minutes, she had moved her chair to the hall, outside the parlor; a little while later, she was standing by the door; about one hour into the interview, she came and sat next to us, listening. (1997: 4)

The search for ‘anti-history’ was very much at the heart of oral history’s origins in the UK. As a challenge to orthodoxy, both in terms of sources and methods, it offered a clear social role to those historians who, since the 1960s, have been seeking to give voices to the hidden histories of women, childhood, working people and those stereotyped as different by virtue of their colour, origins or sexual orientation. This radical agenda of oral history has persisted in subsequent decades, continuing to determine both content and method.

In their analyses, Thompson and Frisch demonstrate how oral

history as a research-based activity with a human and social focus, presents evidence of both continuity and challenge in relation to its disciplinary forebears. Oral history, however, has origins which are also interdisciplinary. Plummer, identifying a 'humanistic method' in sociology, shows how letters, diaries, photographs and life histories were typically used as evidence by 19th- and early 20th-century social investigators (Plummer 2000). The shift towards qualitative rather than quantitative methods in sociology was pioneered by Thomas and Znaniecki in their study *The Polish Peasant*, first published in 1918–20, where they distinguished the importance of 'subjective interpretation' in understanding individual and social action, in contrast with observation of 'objective factors' (1958: 41). A focus on the subjective as a category for understanding and analysis has had a particular influence on the way that oral history has developed in the UK. In part this was due to individual and personal histories. The first major oral history survey, carried out in 1968, was led by a historian based in a sociology department (Thompson and Bornat 1994: 44). In part this was also due to a particular point of origin, when history and sociology had grown closer and were seeking common ground.

Bertaux (1982), the French oral historian, made the case when he argued for history as a basic element within the social sciences, pointing out how the past and the present are inextricably linked: 'People are not merely carrying contemporary structures, they are also carrying those parts of earlier structures that have made them what they are.' However, he goes on to emphasise that what people do with the past is also a significant part of the equation: 'People are not mere products... potentially they have their own praxis' (1982: 148).

Subjectivity, seen both as a challenge and as a valued asset in research drawing on memory, has provoked debates within oral history since its earliest days. The meanings which people give to their own and public versions of the past, has proved a rich source for more creative developments. The recognition of ambivalence in the remembering of Italy's fascist period (Passerini 1979), of fabulation and the wishful memories of Italian communists (Portelli 1988) and composure among Anzac veterans (Thomson 1994), have all helped to shift awareness and stretch the oral historian's perspective to a valuing of the personal and reflective in people's responses.

Linked to subjectivity is awareness of the interviewee's own needs and wishes during the interview process. Amongst oral historians there has been a slow realisation, one which is scarcely ever recorded as part of the formal process of data collection. Most will, however, have had their own particular awakening, a moment when it became clear that the experience of being interviewed was as helpful to the interviewee as

to the interviewer. Thompson briefly summarises researchers' records of thanks realising that the interview could be interpreted as a therapeutic 'confessional' (Thompson 2000: 183–2). Here is an area where reminiscence and life review have much to contribute.

Reminiscence and life review

Where oral history tends to focus on the content of memory, what is perhaps more characteristic of reminiscence and life review is attention given to process and outcomes for participants. Groups of older people, with or without leaders, whose main concern is the retrieval of past experience and its recording and preservation can be said to be taking part in oral history. When those same group members share and communicate memories with a view to understanding each other or a shared situation, or with the aim of bringing about change in their current lives, they are involved in reminiscence and life review. In the same way, the interviewer who focuses on a life history with a view to finding out about the past and an individual's life in that past, is working as an oral historian. The interviewer who encourages life review, reflecting on those same experiences but with a view to encouraging greater self-awareness and personal reflection by that older person, is engaging in reminiscence.

What care workers identify as reminiscence comes in a wide variety of forms. In a study of reminiscence-based activities in nursing and residential homes in England, five types have been identified, ranging from the formally planned to the informal impromptu (Bornat and Chamberlayne 1999: 284–6). Each type is likely to have a range of possible outcomes including word-of-mouth accounts, life-story books, discussions, displays, outings, contributions to individual care plans, themed days, intergenerational contacts, inputs to the educational curricula of local schools and colleges and, of course, drama. For all parties, older people and those who facilitate the process, the impact of reminiscence and life review is an issue for evaluation and comment.

It is perhaps significant that the turn to more biographical ways of researching the past and to working with older people, happened at around the same point in time and with, in many respects, similar aims. How a paper published in a journal of psychiatry in 1963 came to be the rallying cry for developments in reminiscence and life review over the following decades on both sides of the Atlantic, will have to be another story. The paper in question, Butler (1963), had both clinical and practical significance and was to lead to what I have described elsewhere as a 'social movement' in relation to work with older people

(Bornat 1989). Butler argued that reminiscence and life review are a normal and essential part of ageing. He was contesting the then more prevalent view, that these activities were symptoms of pathological and progressive cognitive deterioration. What is important about his contribution is that he legitimised an intervention which nurses and care workers had previously felt was natural and appropriate, but which they had been discouraged from promoting. Dobrof (1984), for example, tells the story of her own epiphany, and there are others who had similar experiences once they felt free to encourage older people to talk about what they were expert in, their own life stories. Indeed such moments of realisation still occur as successive generations of care workers make their own discoveries. Rather like the powerful effect of 'anti-history', the voices of older people, talking about their childhoods, work and life experiences, has a way of cutting through professional practice, revealing the person, the individual behind the case notes, the condition or the diagnosis.

In terms of disciplinary base, reminiscence has deep roots within psychology. While this has determined the pattern of research, it has not had such a strong influence on practice, at least outside those clinical settings where reminiscence is used as the basis for therapeutic intervention (Norris 1989; Garland 1993; Burnside 1990; Bender *et al.* 1999; Bruce *et al.* 1999). In work with older people, reminiscence and life review tends to draw on an eclectic mix of nursing and social care practice, gerontology, psychology, counselling, the creative therapies and adult education skills. Such a mix leads to a diversity of approaches and a lack of professionalisation which is an encouragement to inventiveness and a discouragement to routinisation and exclusivity on the part of practitioners. Indeed Bender *et al.* (1999) identify 20 different purposes of reminiscence within what they call the 'three C approach': client/carer/culture.

Reminiscence work is still very much open to experimentation and development, with particular challenges thrown up as the movement has extended to include people who are cognitively impaired through dementia or learning disability (Gibson 1993; Atkinson 1997). Nevertheless, the research base, with few exceptions, remains firmly within approaches delimited by experimental methods. An evidence base for the efficacy of reminiscence and life review in terms of alleviating depression, raising levels of self-worth or changing behaviour, has long been sought. Reviews of the literature show an overwhelming number of studies reporting positive outcomes for participants (Haight 1991; Haight and Hendrix 1995). On some measures, however, the evidence still remains inconclusive and the

tendency to adopt methods based, for example, on one-off cross-over studies of selected samples of older people has left problems when it comes to replication or the measurement of the effects of change over the longer term.

Perhaps more fruitful are those studies which choose longitudinal or observation-based methods. In these cases it is possible to review changes in attitudes to reminiscence and life review as people age (Coleman 1986; Coleman *et al.* 1998). Opportunities to observe in naturalistic settings have enabled some researchers to identify how reminiscence plays a part in building social relationships amongst care users, and in presenting and maintaining identities for individuals faced with loss and change (Boden and Bielby 1983; Wallace 1992; Buchanan and Middleton 1995). Such studies also highlight the significance of context and the contribution which care staff make to interventions, both formally and informally (Bornat and Chamberlayne 1999).

In the above review, I have explored the discipline bases and distinctions between oral history and reminiscence and life review. The contrasting disciplinary starting points continue to influence the direction in which each has developed. As I will demonstrate, however, evidence from recent debates suggests that within their separate universes, similar issues are being raised. This suggests that, between them, the two approaches occupy more common ground than might previously have been considered. In what follows I look in more detail at the parallel universes and shared endeavour of these two approaches to memory in late life, drawing on an example of work from each area in relation to method, contexts and presentation.

Method: the interrogative nature of oral history and reminiscence

Elsewhere, I argue that one of the key distinguishing features of oral history is that it is interrogative (Bornat 1994). A comparison of a tape, its transcription and a written account makes the effect of interrogation quite clear. Where the oral account demonstrates an immediacy and evidence of thought, reflection and individuality, a written version of the same events will be pallid in comparison. Literary conventions iron out the dialect and personal turns of phrase, suppressing its uniqueness. Portelli (1997: 9) talks about the role of the interviewer as giving 'a mandate' to the narrator to embark on their account. The initial question prompts responses which may be taken up in unpredictable ways, unpredictable to both sides. This interrogative quality of oral history is, Portelli suggests, an aspect of oral history as genre.

Both oral history and reminiscence play a key role in legitimating the telling of personal stories. A key motive, as suggested earlier, has been to 'give voice', to empower those whose experience of the past has tended to be ignored or overlooked. In settings where individuality is hard to maintain, reminiscence contributes to the presentation of an identity which is not determined by the immediate environment or circumstances. The interviewer or facilitator sets an initial agenda and the interviewee, the narrator, the subject, the group member, responds with an account.

Put this way, the process sounds quite straightforward but, of course, oral historian or reminiscence worker will be able to give any number of examples of experiences where things did not work out in that way. The issue of who has control in an interview or reminiscence discussion is not as clear cut as some commentators might imagine. My own experience has been that interviewees have their own agendas, sometimes developing these in the process of the interview (Bornat 1993).

Reminiscence in an interview

I have recently been involved in researching family change, using oral history interviews with people of all ages and, in particular, the impact of family break-up and reconstitution – through divorce, death, separation and remarriage/cohabitation – on the lives of older people.² Debates about the family life of older people tend to be dominated by concerns over who will care for frail elders (Bornat *et al.* 1999).

Our aim was to hear how people talk and make sense of family change. The use of an oral history or life history perspective enabled the people interviewed to reflect on their own lives over time and it was clear, as the interviews accumulated, that for many this was a first opportunity to make sense of past experience (Portelli 1981; Denzin 1986; Rosenthal 1993). Ultimately we interviewed 60 people from families in two areas of one medium-sized English town. Looking at the transcripts it soon became clear that people were searching for the right words and language to explain family change and decision-making relating to partnering. The results are narratives which include moral, as much as social and political, explanations for behaviour and which enabled us to see how action recorded in larger data sets is explained and justified at an interpersonal level.

For example, when interviewing Wilma Waldon (a pseudonym), I was keen for her to talk to me about her experience of divorce in three generations of her family, her own, her daughter's and her grand-

daughter's. Her account of changing relationships between men and women in marriage was illuminating but framed within a broader narrative which depicted the children from her two marriages as a united group of caring and supportive people. In reflecting on her life, divorces appeared simply as short-term hiatuses, difficult episodes but without long-lasting effects.

I could consider this account in a number of ways. I might decide that she was concealing more difficult and traumatic experiences. However, there is another possible structuring to her account. Her own divorce was acrimonious and the separation which preceded it meant that she was left with three young children and the need to earn a living for them all during World War II. Her daughter's divorce followed years of physical abuse however, whilst her grand-daughter, 'married too young' and 'they no sooner married than they're divorced sort of thing'. Her account mirrors accurately the social history of family change in the UK. As she explains:

... years ago, where the woman was, she hadn't got money and that, to have a divorce. And they were the underdogs, weren't they? Because, I mean, not a lot of them went out to work in them days, did they? Not the women. There was a time when bringing up big families all the while. And I think that they, you know, well – they used to get good hidings and everything else. Well, they were round this way, they was awful. The men just go drinking and coming home, and they'll beat the women up and that. It just used to be awful. And, I mean, if anyone done that, you'll up and leave them straight away, wouldn't you? Say to the children, 'Come on, put your coat on, we're going', you know. But there you are. That's how things were in them days.

Awareness of the historical and social context validates her account. Attitudes towards divorce and separation have changed dramatically over the past 40 years in the UK and her full account of these experiences matches well with what is known from demography and the sociology of the family. But, as well as that, what we hear from her interview is someone who feels that she can give a good account of herself, her decisions and the actions of her children. Our project was indeed interested in how people explained events in their lives, how they reflected on changing attitudes towards divorce and separation but, if I was expecting to hear graphic accounts of tensions, problems and difficulties, she was not going to provide me with any such stories.

As an oral historian with experience of the parallel universe of reminiscence and life review, I am aware of an alternative possible explanation for her rather relaxed and composed account of family change over the last 60 years. I could note the work of Coleman (1999) in identifying the four characteristics of 'a successful life story':

coherence, assimilation, structure and truth value (1999). Awareness of the psychological tasks facing older people opens the dialogue generated by oral history to an analysis which allows for age-related factors, as well as those which relate to gender and socio-historical structural factors. Indeed, Coleman's analysis fits Wilma Waldon rather well, as he also identifies ways in which older women often report having more control over their lives, as they acquire a sense of greater financial and personal freedom (Coleman 1999: 135).

It might be reasonable to ask in this case, if such an account is less valid given the salience of life stage factors. How accurate was this picture of the experience of divorce, if the main narrative drive is to promote a sense of reconciliation and harmony in late life? There are two possible responses. First, in its own right, an older person's reflection on family change has significance. In relation to policy and practice, the attitudes and expectations of older family members continue to have significance in determining family obligations and responsibilities. Indeed, our research showed that people continued to carry out parenting roles throughout their lives. Second, an account such as Wilma Waldon's demonstrates how, within one interview, a narrator draws on present and past to explain experiences of family change within the private sphere, while referring out to more public, structural, determinants of opportunity for working class women over three generations.

Reminiscence on a stage

The Good Companions are a London-based group of older people, nine women and one man, who devised a play *Our Century and Us* with Pam Schweitzer, a well-known producer of reminiscence projects in the theatre, community and institutional settings. The play dramatises their memories through their words and, in so doing, presents a history of the 20th century which is both personal and public. Some memories are collective, others are quite individual. With songs and stories the play begins at the time of the performers' births in the 1920s and early 1930s, tracks through their growing-up years, their World War II experiences, their working lives and the changing pattern of family life, up to the present day. It is designed for audiences of older people, deliberately making links with audiences through shared experience and reinforcing messages with the help of contemporary songs and music. I was co-organiser of an international conference on 'Biographical Methods and Professional Practice' held in London in October 2000. We invited *The Good Companions* to present this play as part of the programme.

As a member of the audience, I have a first-hand impression of the dynamics of the event. My understanding of the process has been further built up from reports and interviews with those involved. The experience was both moving and enlightening. Although we were confident about the skills of the performers and the relevance of the play to the content of our conference, we were worried that a group of amateur players, older people at that, might not be well received by the delegates. We should have addressed our own prejudices instead. The performance was wildly received by a group of academics, whose emotional responses belied the objectivity and detachment of their own highly professionalised presentations. Clearly something was at work here. The stories narrated by the performers had meanings which communicated across national and international boundaries with people whose backgrounds and ages implied quite different experiences of the 20th century. The performance ended with a standing ovation and lively discussions between the audience and the ten performers.

The Good Companions' play, by chance provides an interesting comparison with Wilma Waldon's account. During the play, one of the women takes the stage on her own to describe her experience of divorce in the 1950s. She describes the stigma, the exclusion and rejection which her erstwhile friends and neighbours visited on her. The other performers then joined in with brief exchanges to illustrate this cold and wounding behaviour.

The background to this scene was complex, as we discovered. In devising the play, the performers had discussed at some length how personal the play should be. In particular, in playing out her own real experience of divorce, was this actor in danger of 're-living' her humiliation and pain? In the end the scene was included and, in my view, the play was the better for it. Divorce in the middle years of the 20th century was difficult for many people, men and women. The performers recognised this and, for a while, the balance of the play shifted away from celebration and humour.

The process of arriving at this particular scene involved interrogation, on an individual and group basis. More than that, the scene inevitably interrogates audiences that include people who themselves are divorced or who have to come to terms with their own actions in relation to divorcing neighbours and relatives. The process of reminiscence is also interrogative and, while the individual account stands out as a performative act (whether in a play, a group or in a one-to-one exchange), the extent of that interrogation is set by the individuals taking part. Indeed, the background to the performance illustrates that people arrive at some kind of reconciliation with past life events by taking different paths. *The Good Companions* actor who played

out her experience of divorce, had not previously found a way to talk about this painful experience. The process of interrogation from her group members and the shaping of the account for wider audiences, provided her with the means. Working in a reminiscence context enabled her to find a method, in this case a public performance.

In summary, this review of the methods of oral historians and reminiscence workers suggests that there are aspects which can usefully be shared. Awareness of the influence of age and life stage on how a story is narrated can help to broaden oral history, giving it relevance in policy and practice terms. Identifying the dialogic and interrogative nature of oral history helps to remind us that participation involves agency and decision-making, and that the interview is essentially an interactive process involving two parties, each with their own agendas and purposes.

Context: partnerships in the interpretation of memories

By focusing on context I now want to shift the discussion towards a comparative positioning of oral history and reminiscence in relation to their relative contributions to supportive strategies in work with older people. Within oral history circles (in the UK and Australia at least, if not elsewhere), a burning issue persists. This is the question of how a method whose purpose is to *give voice* to people out of the mainstream of history, can ensure that its practice matches this ideal? Is it possible to work in partnership so that the narrator is not alienated from their own story by the analytical skills of the researcher. Early on in oral history little attention was paid to this issue. For some researchers, their own purpose and political stance seemed good enough as a guarantee of shared objectives. People's willingness to be interviewed, to make their story available to others, setting records straight, providing a challenge to the status quo, meant that issues of partnership felt irrelevant. And it is still the case that to hand back a transcript so that someone might alter or change their words is more a feature of archive work than of research or publication. Oral history's origins within the discipline of sociology pull it in the direction of academic research, and the norms of academic life tend not to recognise partnership with subjects as a necessary part of the research process.

The result is that examples of partnership tend to be developed in areas of work which are focused more on practice than research. Certainly, our project studying family change, part of a government-funded programme, included no allowance in terms of budgeting or

scheduling for any form of partnership model of research and publication. We soon learned however that, amongst our sample, there were people who had an interest in the outcomes of the project and who were keen that their story might be of use in broadening out debates about family change. One such was a man in his 60s whose wife had left, taking their children with her. She had become a Jehovah's Witness and he was interested to know if others in the sample had had similar experiences of fundamentalist religion coming between couples.

Models of partnership in oral history projects range from handing back transcripts for checking to full-blown collaboration. In some cases, collaboration stems from inequality. So, for example, colleagues at the Open University, working with people with learning disability in the production of oral histories, have developed collaborative strategies which enable people without written communication skills to produce narrative accounts (Atkinson 1997; Walmsley and Atkinson 2000). This more 'bottom-up' model of production has also become commonly practised in community projects, where the idea of 'shared authority' (Frisch 1990) has been embodied within oral history practice. How this works in practice is detailed in the account of an oral history of the closure of a poultry processing plant in Maine, USA. Here one woman's story was developed in close collaboration with an interviewer and a photographer. At the end of the process, Alicia Rouverol, the interviewer, wrote up her account of what she had learned from the experience:

If oral history challenges historical generalizations, collaborative oral history ... challenges our generalizations as historians and folklorists. It complicates our analyses when our interviewees disagree with our interpretations; it forces us to re-think our stance, to consider the critiques and suggestions of our narrators whose stories we seek to tell. We may not agree with their interpretations; and that isn't our obligation. It is our obligation, though, to present multiple and contradictory perspectives when and if they arise within the same body of testimony; to offer in our analyses conflicting interpretations, or what may seem to be paradoxical reflections or assessments. (Rouverol 1999: 76)

Rouverol's position challenges the basic conventions of academic writing, in placing the interviewee, the 'subject' on a par with the researcher, and suggesting that the object of research may not necessarily be a tidy categorisation or the derivation of comparative constructs.

Feminist oral historians had earlier faced the dilemma of being both subject and researcher, noting the uncomfortable reality that the interview may be both a positive and a negative force, with subsequent

analysis driving a wedge between those who should have been experiencing solidarity (Gluck and Patai 1991).

Who exercises interpretive powers is at the nub of this ethical dilemma. Borland (1991), whose grandmother challenged the feminist interpretation she drew from her interview, concludes:

... we might open up the exchange of ideas so that we do not simply gather data on others to fit into our own paradigms once we are safely ensconced in our university libraries ready to do interpretation. (1991: 73)

The possibility that interpretation might itself be a dialogic power struggle is suggested by Portelli, when he describes the experience of feeding back his account of a student occupation of 1990 in Rome. Drawing on interviews with students who had taken part, he and his student group presented their interpretation to one of the leaders whom they had interviewed. He rejected their interpretive use of metaphor. As Portelli explains:

... interpretation is always part of a power relationship: to interpret is one thing; to be interpreted is another. (1997: 270)

He suggests that the interviewee's 'counter-interpretation' is itself a contribution to an interpretive process which he describes as being part of the 'endless spiral of the search for a necessary and unattainable meaning' (1997: 272).

What Portelli and Frisch are pointing to is the need to find some way to establish partnership in the interpretive process, a partnership which both includes, and controls, academic powers. Indeed Frisch, in a review of Studs Terkel's *Hard Times*, criticises those who take a 'no-history' approach. By this he means the idea that testimony requires no interpretation, that it speaks for itself with '...self-evident and unequivocal significance'. Against this, he argues for the role of 'the historian' in asking the questions and introducing insights which both challenge and situate the 'documents of oral history' (Frisch 1998: 36).

The search for an interpretive method which is both reliable and recognisable, has led to the development of a method in biographical research which distinguishes the 'lived life' from the 'told story'. This is achieved by undertaking two contrasting analyses drawn from the text of one interview. By this means a 'biographical data analysis' and a 'thematic field analysis' are derived with a view to understanding the interviewee's own theory of action and expressed identity (Rosenthal 1993; Wengraf 2000: 59–91). The biographical interpretive method (BIM) aims to forge conceptual links between the events described in individual life stories and such broader structural issues as class and power. At present such a strategy seems some distance away from

partnership or shared authority, given that those who undertake the analysis of the interview data will not necessarily have taken part in the interview. One option to be explored is the possibility of developing the method as a training tool for social care workers. In this way the practice of interpretation is itself opened up to critical review while the words in the interview transcript help to develop understanding and suggest new insights to particular dilemmas in social welfare.

Ethical issues concerning partnership in the process have also exercised reminiscence workers. Concern over the content of sessions, and the question of the extent to which it is representative and therefore equally facilitative of people from different backgrounds persists (Harris and Hopkins 1993). Partnership is perhaps most easily guaranteed and sustained where older people are able to take part in the shaping of the process with a view to agreed outcomes. A reminiscence theatre production clearly cannot emerge without the collaboration of the players. People are not likely to want to portray themselves or events in ways that they find unacceptable or unrecognisable. For this reason, producing a play could provide a helpful model in other settings and for other interpretive processes.

Concern has developed in recent years, both in oral history and reminiscence and life review, over how to respond when painful emotions are evoked and how to handle interactions when memories of past trauma are evoked (Hunt *et al.* 1997; Rogers *et al.* 1999). Such concerns serve as a reminder of the social purpose of oral history and, coupled with ideas of reconciliation and acceptance drawn from clinical work with older people, it seems that both approaches have much to contribute to each other's understanding and practice. These issues are too broad for detailed discussion here; rather I consider evidence from research into reminiscence as an intervention in care settings. In drawing on this I want to suggest that, in responding to expressions of painful emotion, it is important to consider context and circumstances.

Questioning care staff about their experiences of reminiscence work in residential and nursing settings, two separate examples were obtained where, unexpectedly, older people had reacted with extreme emotion (Bornat and Chamberlayne 1999). We were told that a man disliked having cot sides on his bed because of his World War II experiences, and that a woman had difficulties about bathing because of her personal history. While not wanting to deny that these people had endured genuinely traumatic and abusive experiences, evoking uncontrollable emotions in their recall, there is a possibility that, by ascribing these episodes solely to past trauma, present abusive or

insensitive care practices and interpersonal actions are ignored. So, for example, it might be proper to ask if anyone, whether or not they had been a prisoner of war should be placed in a cot bed against their wishes and that, if someone is expressing fears about bathing, then this might be an outcome of insensitive handling of intimate care. Incidents such as these not only point to a need for care workers and those interacting with older people to have an informed understanding of the history of the last eight or so decades, they also suggest a need to locate reminiscence within the present and to enable this process to highlight the quality of such interactions (Adams *et al.* 1998).

What older people do not require is any kind of denial or censorship resulting from a misplaced search for protective practice.³

I have focused on context in order to draw attention to the structures and norms in which oral history and reminiscence and life review operate. Looking at practice in each other's universes, both good and bad, can be instructive and perhaps support the process of learning about issues which are both shared and distinctive.

Presentation: the ownership and control of personal memory

Reminiscence and oral history share a number of different approaches to presenting outcomes, and it is in relation to this stage that the most self-critical debates have taken place, amongst oral historians at least. Phrases such as 'giving back' or 'giving voice' are used to establish the provenance of forms of presentation, and the credentials of promoters. Similarly, where reminiscence and oral history lay claims to contributing to advocacy and empowerment, then who owns the spoken words becomes highly significant.

Debates within oral history centre on separation between subject and the researcher, and on the additional separation where presentation involves the mass media or public settings such as museums and exhibitions. While these boundaries can lead to feelings of loss of control by the person whose story has been told it is worth noting that ownership of the words spoken has a legal basis in some countries. UK law (1988 Copyright Act), for example, now gives separate ownership to the words spoken and to the recording of those words. This means that the owner of the copyright in the words is the speaker, while the copyright in the recording belongs to the person or organisation who arranged the recording.

Legally, any further use made of the words means that permission must be sought from the copyright owner, the speaker, although

alternatively, copyright can be assigned to the interviewer. At one level this may all appear as an administrative obstacle in the process of presentation, but the law does help to clarify and emphasise the point about ownership in words, stories and narratives which are usually given quite freely. 'Giving back' is thus a redundant concept as, under UK law at least, ownership cannot be alienated in the first place.

How people's words are used and the extent to which they are able to determine their further use, is an issue which has been subjected to much debate within oral history circles. I have already outlined the idea of 'shared authority' in relation to community-based projects and publications (Frisch 1990; Rouverol 1999). This type of approach is more likely to be followed where questions of witness and authenticity are highly politicised as, for example, in contests over land rights (Goodall 1994) and refugees (Westerman 1998). Amongst archivists, academics, museum staff, radio and television researchers, community workers and educationalists, different strategies tend to be adopted and much critical attention has been given to ethical practice. Signing off ownership or imposing restrictions as to who may have access to tapes and transcripts and when; adopting a protocol for sharing the production process; abiding by such basic rules as naming interviewees as authors or editors; all these are approaches which have been taken up. Practice is variable, however, and standards can often leave much to be desired. Moreover, as I have already suggested, some contexts are less open to ideals of partnership than others. Academic practice in the UK is only recently, under pressure from recipients of services, changing to include the notion of partnership in areas such as research into health and social care provision.

In other disciplines, the traditional role of the researcher, presenting the product of a research process which may involve a mass of interviewees, is one which is difficult to conceive as developing on a partnership basis. Issues such as confidentiality and sensitivities around categorisation and comparability of evidence, might rule out a collective approach to involving interviewees in all stages of writing and presentation. It may be that in these circumstances the safeguarding of subjects' interests is better protected by researcher training in ethical principles and, in particular, in the legal rights of the interviewee.

Oral history practice has produced some useful pointers to how such training might be focused. One possibility (as some feminist oral historians have argued) is to identify topics which have immediate relevance to the wider public. This could be the public which makes up communities local to academics, or the public in the wider world. So, for example, the history of a local industry may have relevance not just

for those who work in it, but also as an example of industrial change generally. Another strategy is to create alternative formats so that the published academic article is accompanied by an informal talk, a publication written in a more popular form or a museum display (Olson and Shopes 1991). Of course, such developments are more likely within institutions where there is a commitment to outreach and to developing learning opportunities for members of local communities. Even so, as Olson and Shopes suggest, the role of the interpreter in presenting the experiences of interviewees will still involve intervention and decision-making and the possibility that quotations may be taken out of context.

Within reminiscence and life review, appropriation and control are equally possible, despite the fact that the role of the facilitator is likely to be more personal, ongoing and immediate. Indeed the very informality of some reminiscence exchanges opens up possibilities of misrepresentation, mishandling or inaccurate reporting of personal accounts and the details of private disclosures. Here again, existing protocols relating to client and service user privacy, disclosure and confidentiality, should guard against bad practice. However, given the vulnerability and high dependency of many of those involved in reminiscence activities, there is a certain element of risk involved, particularly where facilitators or group leaders have not had access to basic training in communication skills.

There is an additional problem. Such training is unlikely to include reference to history as a discipline or to the varied social contexts in which people have lived out their lives. Care staff are often forced to rely on popular histories, local experts or whatever resources they have access to in the contexts in which they live and work. The result is that the way reminiscences are communicated and presented may depend on the energy, resources and enthusiasms of those engaged as facilitators. Inevitably this means that the curriculum is likely to be highly idiosyncratic.⁴

To what extent this particular approach is socially, politically and culturally inclusive is debatable and, indeed, awareness of diversity amongst groups of older reminiscers is an issue which reminiscence research has tended to neglect up to now. In this respect it is interesting to reflect on the comments of an older African Caribbean man:

People cannot reminisce here in Britain which is very important ... by the time I reach 60 I will revert back to talk about family history and importance of childhood in the Caribbean, you cannot have those reminiscences in old people's home in this country. The people in these homes never talk to you. People are not going to listen to you. (Plaza 1996: 16)

In considering the range of possible forms for presenting reminiscence, then it seems likely that drama is the best guarantee of control by participants over any presentation. The members of *The Good Companions* were acting their own words and the process of presentation involved them in discussing and devising both form and content. They are very much a privileged group of reminiscers, and their form of presentation is not one which can easily become universal practice. Even so, the apparent purity of the process is compromised to an extent by the role of the director. Arguably, without the skills of Pam Schweitzer, an experienced theatre director, there would have been no *Our Century and Us*.

Once again, there is evidence of shared endeavour in presenting the outcomes of these two areas of work. The roles of the director, editor, designer, facilitator, academic are basically the same. Across these groups, however, the quality of individual collaborative practice and the commitment to shared ownership in the product is what makes for differences.

Conclusion

I began this article by pointing out the differences between oral history and reminiscence and life review. These were, I argued, mainly in relation to disciplinary origins and attachments and to the urge to legitimate the communication of stories, accounts, memories which challenge historical convention, and which also challenge assumptions about identity in old age. In the subsequent argument, I have touched on a number of areas and have had to leave out many more. In reviewing their parallel universes I have suggested that there is much that is similar. There is the focus on interrogation which is implicit in the methods adopted. There is the influence of context on how accounts are developed and responded to. Finally, when it comes to presentation, the issue of ownership of the product is equally an issue of concern for oral historians and for reminiscence workers.

There may be shared endeavour; there are also differences within the two universes. Oral historians have deliberated issues of ownership and control in relation to their own and participants' contributions to the process, coming up with models of partnership and experimenting with equality in the production and presentation of memories. Reminiscence work has focused more on group processes and the influence of present situation and life stage on remembering. For oral

history, the older person has been viewed *as* the source of evidence; for reminiscence and life review the older person, who they were and who they are now, *is* the evidence. This more holistic approach to remembering in the life of older people is one which might benefit oral history, introducing more interpretive layers once ‘the person who is’ comes to be valued as much as ‘the person who was’. For reminiscence, the bonus to be gained from oral history is recognition of the significance of the told story and its place in the history of a particular life, community and society.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Al Thomson, University of Sussex, and Pam Schweitzer of Age Exchange, London for their helpful and supportive criticisms of this chapter in its first draft.

NOTES

- 1 This paper is based on a chapter in Webster, J. D. and Haight, B. K. (eds), *Critical Advances in Reminiscence Work*. Springer, New York, forthcoming 2002.
- 2 Project funded by a grant from the Economic and Social Science Research Council (reference number L315253003).
- 3 An example of this is the website ‘Oldfarts’, targeted at older people. This includes a discussion list whose moderator describes the ‘purpose’ in the following way:
We want you to enjoy this list ... (their parenthesis) tell as many friends as you would like about it. Bear in mind, we are trying to reach only the ‘OVER 50’ crowd. Do not introduce religion (in any form) or politics to the discussions. (<http://www.topica.com/lists/oldfarts/>).
- 4 A reminiscence worker described a session which included hand-clapping, singing, classical music, a video of the 1953 coronation, the music of Elgar and Wagner, Handel’s water music and the Messiah, all with a view to evoking memories of classical music and royalty (personal communication, 19.10.00).

References

- Adams, J., Bornat, J. and Prickett, M. 1998. Discussing the present in stories about the past. In Brechin, A., Katz, J., Peace, S. and Walmsley, J. (eds), *Care Matters: Concepts, Practice and Research*. Sage, London.
- Atkinson, D. 1997. *An Auto/Biographical Approach to Learning Disability Research*. Ashgate, Aldershot.
- Bender, M., Bauckham, P. and Norris, A. 1999. *The Therapeutic Purposes of Reminiscence*. Sage, London.

- Bertaux, D. 1982. The life course approach as a challenge to the social sciences. In Hareven, T. K. and Adams, K. J. (eds), *Ageing and Life Course Transitions: an Interdisciplinary Perspective*. Tavistock, London, 127–50.
- Boden, D. and Bielby, D. D. V. 1983. The past as resource: a conversational analysis of elderly talk. *Human Development*, **26**, 308–19.
- Borland, K. 1991. ‘That’s not what I said’: interpretive conflict in oral narrative research. In Gluck, S. B. and Patai, D. (eds), *Women’s Words: the Feminist Practice of Oral History*. Routledge, New York and London, 63–75.
- Bornat, J. 1989. Oral history as a social movement: reminiscence and older people. *Oral History*, **17**, 2, 16–24.
- Bornat, J. 1993. Presenting. In Shakespeare, P., Atkinson, D. and French, S. (eds), *Reflecting on Research Practice: Issues in Health and Social Welfare*. Open University Press, Buckingham, 83–94.
- Bornat, J. 1994. Is oral history auto/biography? *Auto/Biography*, **3**, 1/3, 2, 17–30.
- Bornat, J. and Chamberlayne, P. 1999. Reminiscence in care settings: implications for training. *Adult Education*, **14**, 3, 277–95.
- Bornat, J., Dimmock, B., Jones, D. and Peace, S. 1999. The impact of family change on older people: the case of stepfamilies. In McRae, S. (ed), *Changing Britain: Families and Households in the 1990s*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 248–62.
- Bornat, J., Perks, R., Thompson, P. and Walmsley, J. 2000. *Oral History: Health and Welfare*. Routledge, London.
- Bruce, E., Hodgson, S. and Schweizer, P. 1999. *Reminiscence with People with Dementia: A Handbook for Carers*. Age Exchange, London.
- Buchanan, K. and Middleton, D. 1995. Voices of experience: talk, identity and membership in reminiscence groups. *Ageing and Society*, **15**, 4, 457–91.
- Burnside, I. 1990. Reminiscence: an Independent Nursing Intervention for the Elderly. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, **11**, 33–48.
- Butler, R. 1963. The life review: an interpretation of reminiscence in the aged. *Psychiatry*, **26**, 65–76.
- Coleman, P. G. 1986. *Ageing and Reminiscence Processes: Social and Clinical implications*. Wiley, Chichester.
- Coleman, P. G. 1999. Creating a life story: the task of reconciliation. *The Gerontologist*, **39**, 2, 133–9.
- Coleman, P. G., Ivani-Chalian, C. and Robinson, M. 1998. The story continues: persistence of life themes in old age. *Ageing and Society*, **18**, 4, 389–419.
- Denzin, N. K. 1986. Interpretive interactionism and the use of life stories. *Revista Internacional de Sociologia*, **44**, 3, 321–37.
- Dobrof, M. 1984. Introduction: a time for reclaiming the past. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, **7**, 1/2, xvii–xviii.
- Friedlander, P. 1975. *The Emergence of a UAW Local, 1936–1939: a Study in Class and Culture*. University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh.
- Frisch, M. 1990. *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*. State University of New York Press, Albany, New York.
- Frisch, M. 1998. Oral history and *Hard Times*: a review essay. In Perks, R. and Thomson, A. S. (eds), *The Oral History Reader*. Routledge, London, 29–37.
- Garland, J. 1993. What splendour, it all coheres: life review therapy with older people. In Bornat, J. (ed), *Reminiscence Reviewed: Perspectives, Evaluations, Achievements*. Open University Press, Buckingham, 21–31.
- Gibson, F. 1993. What can reminiscence contribute to people with dementia? In Bornat, J. (ed), *Reminiscence Reviewed: Perspectives, Evaluations, Achievements*. Open University Press, Buckingham, 46–60.
- Gluck, S. B. and Patai, D. 1991. *Women’s Words: the Feminist Practice of Oral History*. Routledge, New York and London.

- Goodall, H. 1994. Colonialism and catastrophe: contested memories of nuclear testing and measles epidemics at Ernabella. In Darian-Smith, K. and Hamilton, P. (eds), *Memory and History in Twentieth Century Australia*. Oxford University Press, Melbourne.
- Haight, B. K. 1991. Reminiscing: the state of the art as a basis for practice. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, **33**, 1, 1–32.
- Haight, B. K. and Hendrix, S. 1995. An integrated review of reminiscence. In Haight, B. K. and Webster, J. D. (eds), *The Art and Science of Reminiscing: Research and Applications*. Taylor and Francis, Washington, 3–21.
- Hareven, T. 1982. *Family Time and Industrial Time: the Relationship between the Family and Work in a New England Industrial Community*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Harris, J. and Hopkins, T. 1993. Beyond anti-ageism: reminiscence groups and the development of anti-discriminatory social work education. In Bornat, J. (ed), *Reminiscence Reviewed: Perspectives, Evaluations, Achievements*. Open University Press, Buckingham, 75–83.
- Hunt, L., Marshall, M. and Rowlings, C. 1997. *Past Trauma in Late Life: European Perspectives on Therapeutic Work with Older People*. Jessica Kingsley, London.
- Messenger, B. 1980. *Picking up the Linen Threads: a Study in Industrial Folklore*. Blackstaffe, Belfast.
- Norris, A. 1989. Clinic or client? A psychologist's case for reminiscence. *Oral History*, **17**, 2, 26–30.
- Olsen, K. and Shopes, L. 1991. Crossing boundaries, building bridges: doing oral history among working-class women and men. In Gluck, S. B. and Patai, D. (eds), *Women's Words: the Feminist Practice of Oral History*. Routledge, New York and London, 63–75.
- Passerini, L. 1979. Work ideology and consensus under Italian fascism. *History Workshop*, **8**, 84–92.
- Plaza, D. (1996) Family structure and social change of Caribbeans in Britain: an exploratory study of elderly Caribbean males. Paper prepared for the Caribbean Studies Association XXI Annual Conference.
- Plummer, K. 2000. *Documents of Life*, 2nd Edition. Sage, London.
- Portelli, A. 1981. The peculiarities of oral history. *History workshop*, **12**, 96–107.
- Portelli, A. 1988. Uchronic Dreams: working class memory and possible worlds. *Oral History*, **16**, 2, 46–56.
- Portelli, A. 1997. *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue*. The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison.
- Rogers, K. L., Leydersdorff, S. and Dawson, G. 1999. (eds) *Trauma and Life Stories: International Perspectives*. Routledge, London.
- Rosenthal, G. 1993. Reconstruction of life stories. In Josselson, R. and Lieblich, A. (eds), *The Narrative Study of Lives*. Sage, London.
- Rouverol, A. J. 1999. 'I was content and not content': oral history and the collaborative process. *Oral History*, **28**, 2, 66–78.
- Thomas, W. I. and Znaniecki, F. 1958. *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. Dover, New York.
- Thompson, P. 2000. *The Voice of the Past*. 3rd Edition. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Thompson, P. and Bornat, J. 1994. Myths and memories of an English rising: 1968 at Essex. *Oral History*, **22**, 2, 44–54.
- Thomson, A. 1994. *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Wallace, J. B. 1992. Reconsidering the life review: the social construction of talk about the past. *The Gerontologist*, **32**, 120–5.
- Walmsley, J. and Atkinson, D. 2000. Oral history and the history of learning disability. In Bornat, J., Perks, R., Thompson, P. and Walmsley, J. (eds), *Oral History, Health and Welfare*. Routledge, London, 180–202.

- Wengraf, T. 2000. Uncovering the general from within the particular: from contingencies to typologies in the understanding of cases. In Chamberlayne, P., Bornat, J. and Wengraf, T. (eds), *The Turn to Biographical Method in Social Science: Comparative Issues and Examples*. Routledge, London, 140–64.
- Westerman, W. 1998. Central American refugee testimonies and performed life histories in the Sanctuary movement. In Perks, R. and Thomson, A. S. (eds), *The Oral History Reader*. Routledge, London, 224–34.

Accepted 19 March 2001

Address for correspondence:

Joanna Bornat, School of Health and Social Welfare, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA
e-mail: j.bornat@open.ac.uk