

DIALOGUE I

The following discussion among Paul Thompson, Elizabeth F. Loftus, Michael H. Frisch, and psychologist Sally Browder is based on the preceding essays.

ELIZABETH F. LOFTUS: I found very intriguing Glenace Edwall's discussion about the cathartic value of telling one's story, and how the value that has for the respondent gives a certain power to the interviewer. I was hoping that Paul could tell us whether he agrees or disagrees, whether it fits in his experiences. I've never thought about it from the point of view of the kind of interviews I do.

PAUL THOMPSON: I'm not sure whether *power* is the word which I would use. I am sure that is right; the power exists. The point that Edwall also suggested, the power of the interview experience, I certainly agree with completely. In fact, in England there has been enormous development of reminiscence therapy, which is based on that particular power of catharsis—very impressively. For instance, oral history is being used to help old people who are confused or mute or whatever by stimulating memory to get them talking and to recover something of their life spirits and their sense of self. This is interesting because it is almost the reverse of what Elizabeth Loftus does in her work in courtrooms with eyewitness testimony. I am sure there is a power which the interviewer can assume, but I have never experienced the feeling that it was a kind of malevolent power that you could abuse.

I always felt that it was marvelous if you realized that somebody had been helped by telling their story. You don't always know that at the time. It is something that comes back to you just occasionally, something that you are told. The first time I heard that was very early on in my oral history work with one of the first people I ever recorded. He didn't say anything to me himself, but when I went back to see him the next year, he had died, and his daughter told me that our interview had just transformed the last months of his life. He had just been waiting for me to come again. It had never occurred to me that this was possible, and that was what started me thinking about it.

MICHAEL H. FRISCH: The point has implications on any number of levels, from the higher intellectual and political ones to the simple guidebook level, but Paul's point is really well taken: it is very important to be aware of the power of oral history. Sometimes it may be just another interview to you, but it is a very major element in the interviewee's life, or it

comes at a point where the interviewee has literally given something important of himself or herself. Either the thank-you note or the telephone call after the interview or the various ways in which an interview relationship is respected is a very important aspect of the work involved in the oral history process. When you are doing fifty interviews for a project, it is often easy to overlook it, but I think those responses are, in a very practical sense, ways in which respect for the oral history situation can be addressed, and they should be cultivated.

It is a complicated relationship on both sides of the microphone. Whether it is a struggle for power or simply a kind of moral power that people on each side have, it is helpful to realize that the power is there *on both sides*. People are not just raw data that we are encountering for a given project.

THOMPSON: It seemed to me that Beth Loftus's very fascinating experiments were dealing with the kind of memory which we regard, as oral historians, as unreliable: the memory of fleeting incidents. Beth, could you recommend to us the sort of experiment that perhaps we oral historians should be carrying out—if we were able to—to discover the role of suggestibility and potential for errors in more reliable memory, such as are found in repeated patterns of everyday life in childhood or early work experience or other memories which seem to be strongly reliable? Can you think of ways in which you could use your method to test that reliability?

LOFTUS: I am not sure whether my methods would work, at least for the specific examples that you gave, because we are interested in episodic memory as distinguished from semantic memory. Semantic memory involves the kind of memory that might be involved in repeated episodes or knowledge, such as when you were in high school or when you worked here for a period of years or whatever. One reason why the memories that I study are so malleable is because they refer to a specific event that occurred on a particular day at the particular time and only one time—not repeatedly. I don't know whether the discoveries about these episodic memories would apply to repeated memories. There are some other distortions that occur, though, that might. For example, other psychologists have found that there is another distortion in memory that occurs regularly, which is a prestige-enhancing shift. For example, people remember that they gave more money to charity than they really did; they took more airplane trips than they really did. Now, these examples are getting close to the repeated events that you are referring to. The finding here is that your own thoughts and inferences as to the way you want to remember yourself—in the absence of any specific external input, such as a suggestive or misleading question—can distort memory. I wouldn't be surprised to find those kinds of distortions in memories of repeated events if the situation included a social desirability component.

FRISCH: This example would be a very crude approximation of some of the very interesting things Elizabeth is talking about. Let's say you had a group of people who had been involved in some controversial events in a labor union twenty or thirty years ago. They all had a similar involvement in the leadership of the union. You had one group of them interviewed by an interviewer who in various ways communicated the sense that, after all, all of that militancy was really childish, an embarrassment, and something which in mature society has been outgrown. Another interviewer communicated to his interviewees a desire to be somehow invigorated by contact with the heroic labor militancy of the past. You might find that the way in which people told their stories to those two interviewers differed—or maybe it would not differ. That might be an interesting way to test some of these questions.

The thing that you would be testing, and it's the thing I was most struck with in Elizabeth's talk, goes back to that question of power. In the interview relationship, there is the imposition of the power of the interrogator, that sense that somehow the interrogator is in touch with the appropriate framework, balanced against the degree to which the subject wants to please or at least be respectable within that framework. For example, if the interrogator uses the definite article with, say, a stop sign, implying that there definitely was a stop sign at the scene of an accident, then the person might say, "Well, I guess there must have been *the* stop sign there because who am I to doubt this person who is sitting there?" whether that person is representing an insurance company or a social-science enterprise or whatever. There are similar aspects in the oral history situation, particularly in interviewing people across a considerable social or class gap, where the nature of the interchange affects the responses. You could conceivably set up an artificial situation where you would send very different cues as to what it was okay to feel positive about in the past and you might find that would affect the results.

SALLY BROWDER: In many cases oral history interviews pertain to specific historic events which evoke episodic memories, not just semantic. The question then arises, can you trust those oral sources to relate accurately what happened, not just in the events of daily life, not just in looking at how a family went about tasks in a daily routine that was repeated numerous times but also in their involvement in a specific situation? When the event is a single event—whether you are a historian interviewing people who participated in that event or a psychologist interested in eyewitness testimony—the reliability of oral sources is still the issue.

THOMPSON: Well, as far as I'm concerned, an individual event is an extreme case where all the sources have to be treated with great skepticism. It has been shown again and again that, for instance, people will give accounts of events that they were not at, and they will displace information from one event to another, and so on. If you want to use oral

sources for events, you have to use the method of triangulation of sources—the written documents, several eyewitness accounts, and all the positive reinforcements of memory you possibly can obtain. Even then, you should be skeptical about it. I would take the view that certain other kinds of memory are so much more central to people's sense of being that they might very well fall into the category of cases in which suggestion could *not* displace the memory. For instance, I don't believe that you can actually suggest to somebody that they did completely different jobs from what they did. I think it would be very interesting if we could work out how much of memory is as secure as that and where the boundaries are.

LOFTUS: That is exactly what I've been trying to do. I've been trying to find out the conditions under which people are resistant to having their memories changed and the conditions under which they are particularly susceptible. I have shown that if you try to do something very blatant, where they can clearly see a conflict between what is immediately available in their memory and what is being presented to them, they are going to resist that information. The whole process of distorting memory has to be done subtly. Many of the questions in my experiments were very clever questions in that I had the respondent's attention focused off of what I was trying to do. "Did another car pass the red Datsun while it was stopped at the stop sign?" You think this is a question about the car passing, and while you are concentrating on that, I am slipping a bit of information into your memory. It is almost as if we are susceptible to these things because we don't detect them at the time they are happening. But if the attempt at distortion is blatant, it is not going to work. If the source of the information is known to be biased and to want to deliberately mislead you for their own purposes, you are going to resist it.

There are few other variables that we have learned about that let us know that we are not completely, blindly affected by these things. In my own work I find it very difficult to discern individual difference variables that reliably predict who will be resistant and who will be susceptible to memory contamination. I can't say, for example, that intelligent people are necessarily more resistant. There just doesn't seem to be very powerful individual-difference variables. I think that given the right conditions, we are all susceptible to these kinds of distortions.

FRISCH: The really interesting things in the research are to explore the *processes* by which the distortions occur, which is rather different than simply saying they do occur. Loftus's more recent work seems to be doing that. I think the possibility of linking that work to oral history may be that memory distortion follows along a kind of spectrum. It may be caused by other things in the interview relationship. It may be the voice; it may be the gender of the interviewer which affects how memories are recalled and related. You could do a controlled experiment. Does having a male interviewer put questions to female respondents produce different levels of

internalized error than having a female interrogator put questions to male respondents? and so forth. It may have to do with questions of authority. Does it matter whether it is somebody with a white coat representing a laboratory or somebody who is in a man-on-the-street situation such as a television reporter? There are a whole lot of questions about relationships in interviews, and I think we have analogies in oral history. I would agree with Elizabeth that it is a complex matter, not a straightforward one.

I always have to tell my students not to be too self-conscious. Most people go into their first interviews thinking, My god, if I ask the slightest question wrong, it's going to destroy the source. They'll never say another word; they won't want to talk to me; the interview will collapse into silence, and so forth. Yet what you often find when you look at a long transcript is that it may be that the question that you insert completely throws the person off or onto a track where they are accommodating you out of politeness, but it is not really their chosen subject matter. You ask them about something, they will respond, but then they will bring it back to what they want to talk about.

In one interview I was working with recently, if you did the equivalent of stepping back ten feet, you could see the track of that interview. There may have been a lot of little zigs and zags, but when you looked at it from a distance, it was like an arrow. The interview as a whole was clearly what that person wanted to talk about in terms of their experience. And I had no effect on that. I'd pull them this way, I'd pull them that way, by kind of foolishly asking a question that may or may not pertain, and they would deal with it. But then they would come back more or less to what they wanted to talk about. The conclusion I came to is reassuring in a way, which is that it is a more alive relationship on both sides, that people have their ways of resisting our contamination to a certain extent. There is probably a vast area in the center where it is up for grabs, who is in control of the memory and what is happening to it.

A lot of contemporary history is a kind of feverish cultural war to fix the story of the sixties or the seventies. *Newsweek* can hardly keep up with it; they are always labeling decades and trends and so forth. And if you ask what a lot of that is about, it is about putting a frame around the story. I think it has a lot to do with controlling the shape we give to a very complicated experience before it recedes too far into the past. You could argue that, on that level, that shaping needs to happen while it is still fresh in peoples' minds. The same thing is happening with the recent Vietnam movies, where that experience is still problematic enough, really subversive enough, that the issue of how to frame it, how to get it within a story frame, how to encapsulate it in memory becomes a very real and pressing concern for many people.

BROWDER: Would you say that the need to frame experience is the catalyst then for that sort of collective memory?

FRISCH: I don't know. Certainly it seems to me that in this society there are broader cultural politics, which perhaps are media driven but not necessarily, that really have become quite accelerated in modern times. These cultural politics seem to involve struggles over the basic form the complex experience has, almost wanting to preside over a story's passage into history. I mean, the sixties were no sooner cold in their calendar grave than the battle began over what form they would take.

LOFTUS: In an actual courtroom situation, where all eyes are upon you, there are certain rules which guide the interview, what kinds of questions you can ask. For example, on direct examination, except under certain circumstances, you are not allowed to ask leading questions. Well, I'm not sure it would matter anyhow because by the time the witness has gotten to the courtroom, usually they are very well rehearsed on the critical facts. So it is not the prosecutors and the defense attorneys that you need to worry about asking the leading questions that might somehow distort the witness's memories. It is the police who are doing the initial interviews at the police station, where no tape recorders or videotape machines are recording it, and where the police have some sort of hypothesis about who did it or what happened or who pulled the knife first. They can communicate that hypothesis quite readily to the witnesses that they are interviewing just as, I suppose, an oral historian who has a hypothesis about whether something happened from the newspapers can communicate that hypothesis to a witness. So I'm not sure we have to worry about the courtroom situation so much, where we have reporters and judges and everybody watching for leading questions.

Now, you can still worry about the courtroom, not so much for distorting the witness's memory but for influencing the creation of the event in the mind of these jurors who, by definition, did not witness that event. So whether the lawyer refers to the event as a *smash* or *hit* or whether the lawyer refers to it as a *fight* or *struggle* or an *incident* could affect the way a juror mentally constructs the event. In that way, these references possibly could have a significant effect on the outcome of the trial.

FRISCH: The comment about the police station confessions is interesting because one of the frequent complexities arising from that situation are confessions whose validity is dubious. In a number of instances that I have studied in a different context, examples of what Elizabeth was talking about show up in the kind of confession extracted by force, and then there is another kind, where the confession is the result of psychological pressure, exhaustion, or guilt. There is a confession given, and yet it is not true. People internalize; they literally confess to things they did not do.

In Buffalo we are involved with a prison program, and there is a man there who is serving a life sentence for arson, an arson in which his wife and children were killed. In fact, the evidence seems fairly clear that no arson was committed, that it was just a fire. At the time of the fire, however,

the man had the misfortune to be on bad terms with his wife, and he was with another woman. The police came to him, announced that his wife and children were dead in the fire and that he was under arrest. In his collapse of grief, his own guilt at feeling that he had betrayed his wife, that he was on some level responsible, he confessed during a forty-eight-hour interrogation. He was convicted on the basis of that confession despite any evidence that an arson was even committed. There is now excellent evidence that it was an electrical fire very similar to any other electrical fire. The trial was a catastrophe on many levels, but the root fact was that in that “oral history” exchange, through a variety of suggestions, he literally internalized the other version of events. And, as he now would say, he really did believe at the time he signed that confession that he had caused that fire. Then “caused that fire” became “set the fire,” and for at least that week or two that he was in custody, he believed that he had set a fire, believed everything they told him, signed the confession and believed it.

LOFTUS: That is a very interesting story. I have a related confession story. I once appeared on television with a man who had been on death row in Florida for three years for a murder that he did not commit. He was asked, “What did you think about those years you were sitting on death row knowing you didn’t commit this murder?” And he said, “I started to think maybe I did it. The police said I did it. The jury said I did it. The newspapers said I did it. The judge said I did it. And I thought to myself, maybe I actually did it.” To me, this was the ultimate success of postevent information to contaminate somebody’s memory.

THOMPSON: We have been talking about the influence on a person’s memory of extremely traumatic events, including being put in prison, but there is just no way that you can compare the humble oral historian with the power of the police and the judiciary. The trouble is that, through courtroom trials and psychological experiments, people have demonstrated very convincingly the ways in which memory is unstable. It is then assumed that almost nothing that we have in memory is in the least bit reliable. The fact is that memory is quite varied, and one of the first things you have to do as an oral historian is try to distinguish between different kinds of memory, different contexts for remembering, different subjects, and so on. What we need to learn to do is to realize that some kinds of memory are less reliable and that other kinds of memory are more reliable, and to start using some of the more positive supports for memory, the ways in which we can make it easier for somebody to remember reliably.

There are often factors, too, which make a difference. For example, we have learned that long-term memory does not necessarily sharpen as people get older. It is more that there comes a stage in life when people want to tell their story. In fact, that doesn’t necessarily occur just when they are old. You get the same phenomenon, called “life review,” with traumatic events. When people get divorced or widowed or retired, they

very often want to talk and talk and talk about their lives. There comes a point in life when people just really feel that they've not much to lose by telling about their story, and they're less worried about what they say. The memory may have, in fact, become less focused, but it's easier to get them to talk about it.

As people get older there are often problems of communication—hearing loss, health problems, illness, and so on. On the other hand, with people in middle life there are other kinds of problems, such as being so busy that it is very difficult to get them to find the time to reflect on their lives, and that makes a tremendous difference. We found in our most recent work, for instance, that it is almost impossible to get interviews with people who have a whole series of burdens, such as, for instance, the woman who is working full time and looking after her own household plus some aging parents. Not being able to get that kind of person to give an interview unbalances the kind of representation that you have in oral history, and that has to do with the age cycle, definitely.

FRISCH: We need to watch out for the assumption that there is a kind of normal interview relationship, which is unproblematic, which needs no reflection. What does it matter that somebody is a child or somebody is elderly? In fact, every interview relationship is just that, a *relationship*, a relationship which is worth some attention in terms of whether the people are comfortable with each other. Are they the same class position or ethnicity? Should whites interview blacks? Should blacks interview blacks? It is not an “either-or” situation, but there will be slightly different interviews and slightly different effects with each combination, and the oral historian needs to be aware of that, and in some way try to control for it or adjust to it in a variety of ways.

In my experience at least, almost every interview situation is worth some inquiry in terms of what is really going on, in terms of how these two people are relating to each other across the microphone and what does that have to do with the kind of questions I ask them? I'm doing a project now on steelworkers, and I have had to learn a reasonable amount about the steel-making process, but if I come in with a lot of very detailed questions to demonstrate my knowledge, it really undercuts the interview almost from the start. If I start by saying, “Explain to me,” and allow them to instruct me on what goes on and sometimes even ask a not-very-well-informed question, the interview goes a lot better. I get much more of their own authority over the work situation that they've performed for twenty years. But again, you have to look at each situation and try to develop strategies accordingly.