

DIALOGUE II

The following discussion among Donald A. Ritchie, Marigold Linton, Karen E. Fields, Alice M. Hoffman, Howard S. Hoffman, and Paul Thompson is based on the preceding essays.

DONALD A. RITCHIE: From time to time the Oral History Association has invited psychiatrists and psychologists to attend meetings to discuss memory and history issues, and somehow the dialogue hasn't always worked. I had a personal experience in that area at the second meeting I attended. I was interested in the phenomenon of exceptional memory and was working on two very lengthy interviews that were done by other people. When I interviewed mutual friends of the subjects, everyone seemed to mention that these people had photographic memories. I attended an Oral History Association meeting and went to a session in which a psychiatrist spoke on memory. During the coffee break, I stopped him and asked him what he thought about the concept of a photographic memory. He gave me an exasperated look and said, "There's no such thing," and rather abruptly turned and walked away and left me. Now, this might be one of those negative feelings that you would suppress in your memory except that the newsletter editor happened to snap a picture of this event. When I got my next issue of the Oral History Association newsletter, lo and behold, there was a photograph of the psychiatrist and me engaging in what seemed to be a very close and interesting discussion. This discussion lasted about three seconds, as I recall, and I would probably have forgotten the incident completely except for that photograph, which I see from time to time as I go back through old issues of the newsletter. In terms of documentation, that snapshot might be taken as an event that actually took place, something that I should remember and something that documented a major instance. In fact, the snapshot is much more misleading than the collage of my memory of that particular event. By contrast, the dialogue between historians and psychiatrists has really worked here.

MARIGOLD LINTON: Psychologists and oral historians both have special researcher-subject relationships, but we also represent a number of different kinds of relationships between researchers and their subjects. In my research, for example, I am *it*, that is, both subject and researcher—and you would think that this would make life simpler. I think that is not necessarily the case; it often makes it enormously difficult. You always wish

you had somebody else who could go back and look for the evidence or give an impartial point of view or do other sorts of things. The subject usually arrives when you tell her to arrive, but not always even that!

ALICE M. HOFFMAN: As far as the relationship, in Marigold Linton's case it is her relationship with herself. In Karen Fields's case, it's her relationship with her grandmother, and Howard and I are a married couple. It certainly complicated it. The thing that blew me away about Karen Fields's talk was that she made her relationship with her subject a positive advantage, in that she took the dialogue between herself and her grandmother and used it as an opportunity to instruct herself about the meaning of the experience, so that her grandmother was certainly much more than simply an anthropological informant. That intrigued me because I have also often felt that I learned a great deal from the interaction between myself and the steelworkers that I was interviewing. What problems Howard and I had, in terms of putting this together, happened when we tried to write it down. Then we had some really very serious altercations about how it should be said.

As far as further research is concerned, one of the things that interested me was that Howard, it seems to me, is unusually singly directed in terms of being a visual rememberer. Most people—I suspect but have no evidence for this, but I would like to see some more research on it—employ both visual and verbal strategies more usually. I think that it would be interesting to see, in terms of interviewing in some depth about their own memory, someone who employs verbal strategies or a heavier mix of strategies. It would be interesting to see how that might affect the recognition of items, because one of the things that is upsetting to me, as an oral historian, about our results is that all our hard work really did not produce much more out of memory. The question then is, Is that because of the nature of archival memory, or is it more likely to be a part of the particular strategy that this rememberer utilized? I think we have to do more research before we have any hints as to which that might be.

HOWARD S. HOFFMAN: Among the researchers who were interviewing either themselves, a grandmother, or a husband, there seemed to be a more positive approach or at least a feeling about the information that was gathered from it. Among the researchers who did not know their subjects so well, a little more professional and scholarly skepticism was applied to the value of much of the interview material. Paul, since you raised in your initial remarks some skeptical approaches to the value of interviewing, I wondered about your observations on that.

PAUL THOMPSON: I would not say that what I was trying to put forward was a skeptical view of the value of interviewing. It was, on the contrary, meant to suggest that even if you are skeptical of the absolute truth or not of what you hear, that there is a great deal that you can make of it, and that what people say when it is in sort of absolute terms “not

true” is as interesting as what they say when it is true. I think there is a great deal more work to be done if we are to get any really valuable junction between the kind of psychology we have been hearing and the kind of work that we do in oral history. I think that there are some reasons which are fairly easy to tackle. One is simply that what psychologists call long-term memory turns out to be usually a matter of a year at the very most, a couple of years perhaps, and oral historians are dealing in much longer memory. So very few of these experiments really have much direct relevance to what we are doing.

There is a more fundamental problem, and that is the sort of conceptual assumptions, the unspoken assumptions, in all the psychology papers which are still positivistic, where oral history was twenty years ago, even ten years ago. In oral history we have moved very rapidly from that position, and I don't see that kind of movement going on in what we have heard from psychology. I think it would be possible to introduce more of the understanding that we have gained into psychological work. I noticed, for instance, this idea that the archival memory is somehow a fixed one. Now, that is so like what Jan Vansina was saying in the 1960s, but that is a view that has now really been rejected as quite untenable. I find it disturbing, that kind of concept as the way of working with the material. I think we need something actually different.

I have been thinking about Marigold Linton's point that a person's memory was going to be less when it referred to negative experiences than to positive ones. It seems to me that, there again, behind that is the assumption there is something rather fixed called memory and that that is all that we are dealing with. Actually, I think that there are other, quite different factors involved which explain that. From my experience in interviewing—and it is quite true that there is a tendency to put a positive interpretation on experience—but that is not the whole of what is going on. Very often you find strange and fascinating discordances between the overall interpretation and the actual information that people give you. I think that that is, in a way, more what we should be trying to look at. I mean, not being absolute, quantified, balanced between positive and negative memory, but actually looking for reasons why there are those differences and what explains them.

If I could just give you an example of the way I am thinking: Just over the last few weeks I have been looking at a set of about fifty interviews in which people are talking about their married lives. One of the things that really struck me very powerfully was that the interviews describe rather a similar sort of balance of patterns, such as the way people evaluate their marriages in terms of, say, role division, so that if I came in with my subjective judgment and started saying, Well, I think this is a rather close marriage, and that is a very role-divided one, and so on, the proportions would balance out. Yet, when you turn to the interviewees' own evalua-

tions in the actual language they use to describe their marriages, there is an extraordinary difference between people who are still married and people who are widowed. So it is the *interpretation* that has changed. And that is, of course, not because something has happened to their memories, but because they are at different points in their life experiences, and so the interpretation is changed. Again, I would want to suggest on this point that *forgiveness* is a very important factor. As people get older, they may not change their absolute memories of unpleasant things from the past, but sometimes they are able to reach forgiveness, which changes the whole quality of memory. So what I am saying is that I am not satisfied by a very positivistic, scientific approach in the narrow sense. I would like to see a movement from the psychologists, a recognition of the broader and more humanistic qualities in oral history work.

H. HOFFMAN: You have thrown down the gauntlet. I wonder what evidence you have to discount the idea of archival memory. I thought we were presenting scientific data that was open to whatever interpretation you want. In the documents that we presented, there is no evidence of a loss of memory there. There was no evidence of loss of memory with the passage of time. You said that there was evidence against the idea and that it had been discounted. What was the evidence?

THOMPSON: I did not say that there was evidence against the notion of archival memory. What I said was that that notion had very close parallels with the approach that Jan Vansina had to oral tradition in the 1960s, the idea that there was a collective memory which could be passed down in unchanged nuggets. I think that what is now understood much more clearly is the way that collective memory is continually molded and remolded by a whole series of different influences. I would argue that the exact same thing happens with individual memory.

A. HOFFMAN: I think that one of the contributions that psychologists have to make to oral historians is their very strong grounding in data. Now, there can be lots of different efforts to interpret data in terms of what it means. But if you do a study like Marigold Linton has done, or if you do a study like Elizabeth Loftus has done—providing the study is not flawed methodologically—it presents you with what then becomes certain facts. You can disagree about what these facts mean, but what you cannot disagree about is the fact that there is something there. When Marigold talks about, for instance, the Pollyanna Principle, she is describing an effect that has been demonstrated over and over again by psychologists; that is, people simply remember more good stuff than they do bad stuff at whatever period in their lives that you interview them. It is a very robust effect. Now, we can argue about why that is. For instance, if you wanted to have the most optimistic view of the world possible, you could say people have more good experiences than bad experiences. Or you could say, No, there is a higher degree of forgetting of bad experiences. Or you

could say, as Paul is saying, that there is a life-course effect here, and it depends upon when you dip into it where you see this effect most profoundly. But what you can't argue about is that there is such an effect. Folks simply do remember more good things than they do bad things.

THOMPSON: I think you've made your argument very strongly, but I just think that you cannot make absolute assertions. I mean, it really depends on what you are talking about. The idea that people have quantifiably more good memories than bad ones is one which—I mean, I wouldn't want to start thinking about memory as if it were a series of pennies, and you could say, We'll put a pile of bad pennies there and a pile of good pennies there. Anybody, for instance, who worked as a psychoanalyst would find it rather difficult to recognize the idea that people's memories on the whole were very good.

LINTON: It wouldn't take twenty-five years to complete analysis if it were easier to get at the negative memories! But let me just say in response to Alice's summary, where she said it could be because you have more positive events to remember, those of you who are interested in that subject really should read Matlin and Stang, who say something like this: You probably have more positive experiences. If you don't, you are probably leading your life wrong, because you determine what situations you expose yourself to. If it looks like it is going to be an ugly experience to come to Baylor, for example, you stay home. You tend to expose yourself to more positive experiences. You will avert your gaze from that statue in Charleston, or go poke holes in it, or whatever. But every step along the way, people tend to do that.

Was it Henry Higgins who said, "And why can't a woman be more like a man?" I think that at least part of the problem here is that I would like all of the oral historians to become psychologists. But just exactly what is exciting about people from different disciplines meeting is that we are all looking at the thing differently. I had said to a number of people privately after Paul's talk, "Oh, if only I could give a talk that was that elegant! If only I had that sweep." Psychologists are always dealing with grumpy little picky stuff. And then I said, "But of course! If I were an historian, would I be saying, Why am I wasting my time with history? Why aren't I a theologian so I could really get the broad sweep of where we are and where we're going?" I mean, we know that twenty years from now our disciplines are not going to look like they do now, and we are all fooling ourselves about how important our data are. There are always going to be other ways that are going to inform us more. I'm always embarrassed that psychology informs us as little as it does, and I do my best to inform as much as I can. But it only informs within a narrow framework, as history does.

H. HOFFMAN: I was thinking as we have discussed positives and negatives that it also depends on who is doing the interpreting of what is a pos-

itive and what is a negative. In Karen Fields's remarks about her grandmother's trip on the boat to New York, what to her grandmother was a positive trip, Karen was looking for a negative: segregation. But that was not how her grandmother valued that trip in any way. What I got out of Karen's remarks was that you have to sometimes turn your scholarly impressions upside down, to listen to what the informant has to say, and to take their memories on their own terms. There is sort of a sensitivity to the varieties of memory, I suppose, that we are addressing.

KAREN E. FIELDS: I am hesitant to say that I could identify, except in the most extreme cases, what a good or bad memory is for somebody else. I don't know how I would go about identifying from a stream of talk what was good or bad. I know that I am very good at concealing such in my own talk. It is part of negotiating reality, social reality in many instances, to retain as private what doesn't have to be the business of the interlocutor. If I had myself as a research subject, I would know better. But if I were working with another subject, I don't know how I would discover, with any certainty, when the Pollyanna Principle was at work. And if I hadn't been dealing with a subject like my grandmother, but had been dealing with the generally much more supine subjects you encounter when you sally forth from academe or when you sally from your professorial podium down to your students, I am not sure how much resistance comes to the interpretations or the coding that you do as a researcher to the sorting of events. "I went and bought a huge bag of groceries" is for me a negative experience because I hate shopping. But if I had arrived from a place where groceries were a luxury, I think the valuation would be different. That is a trivial example. I think we would all agree, when it came to life and death, sickness and health, that most of life isn't that simple. Then the rest of memory involves coloring and shading. I pick up on Paul's language of the good pennies and bad pennies; I would have a lot of trouble knowing how to sort for someone else.

A. HOFFMAN: To get at the issue about sorting the pennies into good pennies and bad pennies—and I would certainly like to be corrected by Marigold on this if I'm wrong, because I am not a psychologist—but the studies that I am familiar with indicate that sorting is a self-assessment. The person who is the subject is asked to say for themselves whether the experience was a good one or a bad one.

LINTON: Let me just describe one of these studies. A typical way a study would be run is this: Remember that psychologists usually deal with very short time spans. A kid comes back from summer vacation, and the teacher asks, "What did you do during the summer?" The kid writes down what she did during the summer. The teacher says, "How much fun did you have?" And the kid ranks the experiences. Then, six weeks later, six months later, a year later you say, "What did you do last summer?" And

you find very simply that the recounting of the items includes mostly the positive; the kid won't include the items she ranked as negative.

This, incidentally, is typical enough that you find some very interesting behaviors that are based on it. For example, if you have people who are just getting a divorce and you say, Why are you doing this?, the answer starts with the negatives and they have a list of reasons. But as time goes by, the negative items fall out. You know how often people end up with reconciliations? You find people who are getting ready to get married again, and you can watch this incredible pull toward the positive memories. But often the negative information is reinstated very, very rapidly; they are right up there again at the top of the list, and then he/she leaves him/her at the altar. But as they move away from the experience, the negative cues drop out—Howard knows this from his work on animals—their aversion decreases. Psychologists can look at those things and you see them very nicely occurring again and again. Those memories are self-rated; they are self-imposed. The memory is very dependent on how close you are to the cues, and the further you are away in time, the lower the negative effect. You are left with the positive memories and you engage in some stupid behavior.

FIELDS: May I change the subject? I would like to ask how psychologists define memory. I am responding to what I hear, and I think that I must operate in a realm that is different somehow. I hear *memory* being used as something that can be assigned an "a," to "a memory." I am wondering to what extent, for purposes of research, memory becomes an object, something that is remembered. If it does, then what is the relationship of that object, some *thing* that is remembered, to something larger which one could call processes or faculties? We have a piece of vocabulary that doesn't have the same meaning to everybody. I tend to think of memory as a set of faculties, but I think I hear it understood in the operations of researchers—you all do it—as objects that are related in some way to faculties, meaning the capacity to do X number of operations of X kind that have to do with retrieval and positioning of information.

A. HOFFMAN: I think you make a very, very good point, Karen, because the new studies of memory—the cognitive studies of memory, of which Marigold's work is an example—have come along and said memory is not a unitary process. The earlier studies of memory looked at memory as though it were a thing, but the cognitive psychologists have come along and said no, there are *kinds* of memory. There are a variety of processes here. There is episodic memory, there is autobiographical memory, there is semantic memory, there is procedural memory—memory for how you go about the process of retrieving information. And there are all these different kinds of things, and they may actually have different rules and different locations in the brain. They may be quite different, one from the other. That new perspective of looking at memory is something that is

generating a lot of research just now that is quite different from the old nonsense, the laboratory study in which you try to suck all the meaning away from the memory. The new memory theorists came along and said, Well, you are not studying memory. You are studying something that takes place in the laboratory, but you are not studying it in a naturalistic environment where it has any meaning at all. That is a new, exciting thing that is just starting to happen.

H. HOFFMAN: I would address it a little differently. Oral historians interview informants about events they have witnessed, and generally they witnessed or experienced them some distance in the past. One of the questions that one has to ask about the descriptions that the informant provides is, To what extent are those descriptions likely to be reliable? That was the question that we were asked. We did not know what we were going to find when we did the study. It could have turned out that I told one set of stories in 1978 and an entirely different set of stories in 1982, and that when I told the same story about the same thing, it wasn't the same. That was always a possibility. But there is some question about how reliable these memories are that we carry with us.

Life is really based on memory. There is an interesting little experiment you can do: We blink our eyes maybe fifteen or twenty times a minute. Every time we blink our eyes, the room goes dark. We don't notice this. The reason we don't notice this is because it has been shown that the brain preserves the image that you are looking at at the moment that the blink occurs, and that is what you are looking at during the blink. I can describe the experiments that will prove that to you, but an even simpler one that you can try for yourself is to take a mirror, hold it about six inches in front of your eyes, and look from one eye to the other. You will not be able to see your eyes move, although if you look at somebody else doing that or have somebody look at you doing it, it is very easy to see the eyes move. The reason that you don't see the eyes move is because when we make a movement of the eyes of this sort, the brain suppresses input and retains what you were looking at just before you moved your eyes. Now, what it means is that what we *perceive* in the world is what we *remember* of the world. We do not ever perceive the world as it is existing at a particular moment. It takes an insignificant amount of time for the light to stimulate the retina, but it does not take an insignificant amount of time for those biochemical reactions to cause the neurons in the optic nerve to fire and to pass through six or seven different sequences of neurons before they get back to the occipital part of the brain where we then perceive some visual experience. We do not have direct contact with the world about us and, in a very real sense, I think that the study of memory is really the study of how we are able to have continuity in a world that is constantly changing.

One of the commentators suggested that maybe I have a special kind of memory, and perhaps I do, although I don't think of myself this way. I would very much hope that this kind of study could be repeated so that we could have more than one in the study. Each of us carries with us some kinds of memories that we use to define ourselves, the corpus of our experience that we carry with us from day to day. We have not tested it; most of us don't test ourselves on it, and most of us probably never will. But for most people, if you think back to some memory that you have now, that you have carried for an extended period of time—ten to twenty years—it is very unlikely, from the data that we have, that four years from now it is going to change. When you find a phenomenon in even a single subject, what you are showing is what the possibilities are. You are showing something of the character of the phenomenon that you are studying. In our case what we have shown is that, at least for the present, it is a better bet that certain memories are relatively permanent than it is that they are going to change very much in the near future.

RITCHIE: Certainly the one thing that we all have in common is that in our professions we do interviewing, and in our interviewing we all encounter memories, and every memory, it appears, is somehow different.