BELIEVE IT OR NOT: RETHINKING THE HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION OF MEMORY

Paul Thompson

In this paper Paul Thompson, British social historian and leading scholar in the international oral history movement, examines the relation of human memory to the social and cultural milieu in which it exists. Thompson is a research professor in social history at the University of Essex and director of the National Life Story Collection at the National Sound Archive in London. He is a longtime advocate of interdisciplinary research who uses that approach here to investigate the ways in which memory and oral tradition have been studied. He explains how, as a young historian in the 1960s, he first worked with social scientists using oral history research, confident in the belief that if the questions were carefully framed the answers would reveal historical truth. In his classic study of oral history, The Voice of the Past *(1978 and 1988), Thompson expanded his approach to consider the conceptualization of experience as a factor in the reliability of memory. Here he concludes that the interrelatedness of human memory to its context demands that we study memory in a similarly interrelated way. In* The Myths We Live By *(1990), he joined other scholars in examining truth and myth in individual and collective memory.*

"Believe it or not": The essential tension found in that phrase reflects the controversy within the title of this symposium, Memory and History, because, for many people, there is a tension between those two ideas. On the one hand, we have the idea of History—History with a capital *H*; History, the permanent record; History, the proud, bound volumes on the library shelves, the Statue of Liberty, the state and religious ceremonial. We are all familiar with History in the university, in the style of the buildings, and even in some of the comments in their publications. For instance, in Baylor University's brochure I find the suggestion that a teacher affects eternity: "With our long tradition of fine teaching at Baylor, we keep students and eternity in mind." That is the claim of public History with a capital *H*.

Against that bold claim we have to set what we all know so personally as so much less firm: memory, and with it our feeling that our memory—

personal memory, private memory—isn’t quite adequate. There are things that we are not sure we should tell or could tell, and yet at the same time memory reaches back into our own childhood beginnings and, in spite of being blurred and patchy and a bit confused, is central to our own sense of who we are. There will be some of us who want to hold very strongly to that contrast between concretely documented history and the story of personal experience, who want to emphasize the distinction between history which is firmly constructed, reliable, and permanent, and the imperfections of personal memory, and who will want to see memory more as a door to our own consciousness than as matter for reconstructing the past.

Ronald Fraser’s recent autobiography, *In Search of a Past*,[1] which started from his own explorations into the setting of his childhood, addresses that view of history and memory. Fraser grew up as a wealthy, isolated, rather snooty little boy in the countryside outside London, brought up largely by his nanny and other servants, including a gardener, rather than by his aloof mother and father. In middle age he returned to interview the survivors from that household and tried to reconstruct a picture, through oral history, of the context of his own childhood. In that marvelous and very brave book, Fraser interweaves these recollections between himself and his own psychoanalyst with two other levels of memory. One is the disintegrated memory of his father, whose mind is now mere fragments of past sense. The other comes through a dialogue, and one of the most striking things about that dialogue is how the psychoanalyst is simply not interested in Fraser’s memory as a source of history for a *real* past. He keeps saying, “It doesn't matter what really happened. All that matters is what you feel about it. Let’s have some more of your feelings.” And for a historian, that is a completely different way of looking at memory.

There are others, and I would hope there are many of us, who would not want to pose such a stark dichotomy between memory and history but would rather see in both aspects the same thing, perhaps with a different emphasis. On the one hand, some would recognize personal memory as the thread of every individual’s life history, central to each person’s understanding of themselves and their own sense of both history and self. On the other hand, they would perceive public history, for all its pretensions, to be no more and no less than the accepted modern version of old-fashioned, traditional, collective memory—the functional equivalent to the traditions passed down orally in nonliterate societies but now transmitted in a much more complicated way, through buildings and scholarships and media and ceremonial. Nevertheless, in a larger sense the public history of our own time remains, despite the skeptical efforts of scholarly history, our own collective memory. So you really have two aspects of memory and two aspects of history, personal and collective.

Now, to talk that way is to talk very differently from the way in which we oral historians used to talk ten years ago. I should like to indicate some of the implications of this new view by discussing the changes I have been making in revising my book, *The Voice of the Past*, which has just come out in a new edition.[2] It was first published in 1978; I have come back to it after an interval of a decade, and I am struck by how very differently I see things now. Let me go back to the spirit in which it was written. I had been working for about ten years as an historian before I stumbled into oral history at the end of the 1960s. I was then a social historian working alongside social scientists. My first big oral history research project was a representative study of over four hundred old men and women in Britain, focusing on family life and work life in the years before 1918—a study which I published as *The Edwardians*.[3] I began that study very much in the spirit of the sociologists who were then my colleagues, and I saw the problems of oral history as they saw them at that time; that is to say, that people could be asked questions and then somehow speak a kind of truth which could be taken for granted. They did not think too much about it. They were, however, concerned about rather specific sources of bias. They laid great emphasis on who you interviewed—how you chose your sample—and that is something I addressed in *The Voice of the Past*. They were also concerned about the techniques of interviewing, how you framed questions. They had an underlying assumption that if you purged an interview of what was called bias, you would reach an uncontaminated version of the truth which simply had to be tapped from within the informant. They saw the main problem as being whether that information within the informant was distorted or contaminated by the passage of time, by remembering, or by reevaluating earlier memories. They were not, in other words, concerned with what we now see as the essential mental processes of thinking about experience, of conceiving it in order to express it.

I think that oral historians, in general, were working very much in that spirit at the time. That explains why we had such an enthusiasm for the idea that through oral history you could somehow reach immediately to the past: that if you knew how to interview, you could tap a real past which had been hidden from history simply because people had not carried out interviews. It seemed unproblematic; you just had to start work, and the evidence came. Now, I would still maintain that until you have started interviewing, you really have no idea of the richness of what people have to tell you. For me, the fundamental motivational force for doing oral history work is still the wish to hear what people have to say and the belief in the value of their testimony. But there is no doubt at all that we have moved a long way from that early and rather naive enthusiasm.

In that earlier phase, the most serious problem facing us seemed to be to demonstrate that oral evidence did have a real reliability. So that is a central part of the argument in *The Voice of the Past*. In writing it, I examined many of the classic works on memory which had been published up to that time, and through that, I changed my mind to a certain extent. I came to see that the crucial process to understand was the conceptualization of experience, which took place fairly quickly after an event and provided the form in which the experience would be remembered and could be recalled later. I combined that insight, which I think is fundamental and remains, with a good deal of work on the speed at which people forgot things. The model I held then was that there was a memory store, and that various things, including aging, impinged its effectiveness. There might also be factors which release memory, such as lack of inhibition or the life review process among older people, but there was a basic memory store, and it was either depleted or its contents could be released more easily through these external factors. In that belief, and indeed in the whole approach, there was a very positivistic feeling to the argument. Now, that might be seen as the phrase, “believe it,” that the objective of oral historians up to that point was to demonstrate that you could believe it. I think that, to a large extent, we did win that argument. We convinced many skeptical historians that there was sufficient in memory that was reliable; there were dangers and problems and so on, but there was sufficient that was reliable for oral history to be a respectable form of evidence.

But at the point when I was writing, the oral history world was essentially Anglo-Saxon, an American and English one. We had only just begun to make contact with the European oral history movement, which, unknown to me at that time, was already beginning to develop. Over the last decade, there has been a very rapid change in approaches to oral history, partly thanks to the opening up of those influences beyond the classic, positivistic, empirical Anglo-Saxon tradition of scholarship. Those new influences have come to us in different ways. I would want to mention in particular the role which was played by Ronald J. Grele as the first editor of the *International Journal of Oral History*, both in introducing some of the ideas from Europe to a wider audience and also in his special propagation of social scientific insights—particularly from anthropology—into the nature of the interview process, such as the two-way relationship between the interviewer and the informant and the social context of the interview in the field.

A second major source has been the group of sociologists working with life stories. In particular, I would mention Daniel Bertaux, a French sociologist. His special interest has been in using life-story evidence to understand social mobility—to understand how people move through the social system, why they make their choices—and therefore, on the one hand to use that evidence again in a positivistic way. But right from the beginning he and his group have been extremely interested in the way in which that life experience was differently remembered by different social groups. One of his first works with Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame[4] was about French bakers, both master bakers and employees, all of whom had started as bakers' apprentices. The Bertauxes found in their interviews with the bakers that the facts they told about their youth were broadly the same, but the way in which they presented the story was quite different. For those who remained workers throughout their lives, their stories of apprenticeship were of hardship, long hours, working right through the night, often very rough treatment by the master, small wages, and so on. For those who remained workers, that was a story of exploitation which continued right through their lives. But for those who became masters, those years of apprenticeship were seen as a very useful, very valuable educative experience, a kind of gateway, a hardening process through which they had beneficially passed, so that their whole interpretation was presented in a different way. This insight from the bakers' interviews is characteristic of the more subtle way in which Bertaux and the life-story sociologists approached their evidence right from the beginning.

More broadly, there were also two notable interests among both French and Italian historians which influenced the oral history movement. The first was in collective memory, the processes by which European communities developed their own historical traditions, shaped them, and used them. The second was in what they called "subjectivity," a word which does not really have a proper equivalent in English, because *subjectivity* combines the sense of consciousness with the sense of self, self-identity; it brings together those ideas. It always creates a difficulty when it is used in English, because to us it suggests a direct contrast with objectivity, something which is by its nature somehow distorted—biased. In French or Italian it has a broader, more positive meaning, and in this sense has been a major theme of the thinking of oral historians from these countries. Closely connected with subjectivity has been an interest in not just the conscious self but also the unconscious self.

Now, to my mind these new influences have created great new opportunities for oral historians everywhere. But I think that they have also created dangers. I want to highlight three of the most important areas in which those influences are now operating on us.

The first concerns the processes of what may be variously called oral tradition or collective memory or collective myth—how you name these things depends on where you are. If you are in a nonliterate society, you are more likely to be talking about oral tradition. If you are in a literate society, you are more likely to be talking about collective memory. But the processes are very similar.

There has been here, first of all, a longstanding debate about whether oral tradition has any intrinsic value for historians at all in the sense of conveying messages about the reality of the past. You can see this very well in the changes which have occurred between the first and the last editions (1961 and 1985) of Jan Vansina's book, *Oral Tradition*.[5] Vansina was a Belgian historian who started working in the Congo and there discovered the value of oral tradition for political history in a society bereft of written record. He set out in his book to show that oral evidence could be collected, tested, and evaluated. He saw oral traditions as documents from the past which had been handed down orally rather than in written form over time. Vansina's objective was closely parallel to our own aims in oral history. Both of us were looking for the purest version which memory could offer us of the past.

Since then Vansina has been conducting a running battle, particularly with anthropologists of the functionalist school, who have argued, like their founder Malinowski, that what people say about the past simply reflects their needs at the present. According to this purely functionalist view of the transmission of history, if people continue to hand down a tradition, they claim it as their own because they need it now. Thus the genealogy of a royal dynasty exists to prove that the present incumbent has the right to the throne, while family traditions are handed down less publicly to maintain that the family has a right to the land on which they are settled. And if the rights that they need to claim are changed, then the oral tradition will change.

Now, Vansina has resolutely continued to reject that absolutely defeatist functionalist position. And in the recent second edition of his book, retitled *Oral Tradition as History*, he argues very strongly to the contrary, concluding,

> Yes, oral traditions are documents *of the present*, because they are told in the present. Yet they also embody a message from the past, so they are expressions *of the past* at the same time. They are the representation of the past in the present. One cannot deny either the present or the past in them. To attribute their whole content to the evanescent present as some sociologists do, is to mutilate tradition; it is reductionistic. To ignore the impact of the present as some historians have done, is equally reductionistic. Traditions must always be understood as reflecting both past and present in a single breath.[6]

If you took the extreme view, it would be quite impossible to explain how anyone could have invented all the rich material in tradition just to be useful in the present. It simply is beyond social imagination to create all that tradition on the spot as needed. At the very least, either from reality or imaginatively it must incorporate a part of the past. And again, if you took a purely functionalist view, you could not explain the many major cultural continuities which, as we all know, often last long beyond their apparent functional need and basis.

However, Vansina has shifted very considerably in taking that new and more balanced view. He has increasingly looked at reasons for forgetting, as well as the mechanics of handing down traditions. This has brought him closer to the work which has been carried out particularly by French and Italian oral historians on collective memory, collective myth, and tradition in Western societies. The sense of self-protectiveness in the maintenance of traditions is undoubtedly valid and needs to be understood. Vansina found it in East Africa and it can be found equally in Europe. There are very telling examples, such as Jerome Mintz's *The Anarchists of Casa Viejas* (1982),[7] from Spain in the civil war period, of how the anarchists totally concealed the story of their own history right through the ensuing Franco years. They did not forget it, but they simply would not tell it. It was only much more recently that those stories could be told. That is an extreme instance of a form of pressure that will always help shape what is recalled.

By contrast with Vansina and other Africanists, Western oral historians have only recently begun to look at a process which needs much more attention, the process of historical transmission: of how we learn history, teach it, hand it down. There are very interesting examples of how this is done among French Protestants, a minority group who over the centuries has suffered considerable persecution and whose history is, therefore, very special to their identity as a community. Not only do families take their children to the cemeteries—as they do in much of France—but they also take them up into the mountains and show them the rocks where their ancestors hid from the French army, the circles of beech trees where groups of Protestants would gather together for outdoor ceremonies and hold their religious services. Their way of remembering their own past has not only affected their view of the history of Protestantism but also of more recent history. When they tell their own story in interviews, these French Protestants speak of the history of World War II and their own help for the Jews threatened by Nazi persecution, many of whom they hid and rescued, very much in terms of their own earlier history, and they tell it in the same way. They have a very distinctive way of talking about the war years, quite different from what is typical in France.

We could do very much more worthwhile work of this kind, for not nearly enough is known about how history is handed down in Anglo-Saxon societies. The taking of children to the cemetery is something that happened certainly in the past in England but is now abandoned. Telling family history undoubtedly goes on, but we have scarcely studied how it happens. And to my knowledge, the only area where we have much evidence of that in print is with upper-class English families, among whom the handing down of family history is not only through telling about traditions of the past but also through its physical monuments, through the family house which plays such a very central part in their family culture. In English upper-class autobiography the importance of the house has a unique place, quite different from autobiography in other classes. I have found autobiographies which open not typically with descriptions of parents and grandparents but with descriptions of a series of houses; Chapter 1 is this house, and Chapter 2 is that house. The people in the family come in as almost incidental occupants, because for them the family tradition is literally embodied in brick or stone. We need to know much more about how both family history and wider historical concepts, facts, and traditions are transmitted at different social levels.

An example of how fruitful this can be comes in the work of Alessandro Portelli on the Italian steel town of Terni,[8] where through interviewing many older steelworkers, he has been able to show the ways in which they have created a coherent collective myth out of the past. When talking about their lives, these steelworkers constantly move incidents from one context to another. The story of the killing of a worker, for instance, is moved from an anti-NATO demonstration to mass protests against redundancies among the steelworkers, because one provides a more meaningful context than the other. And more than that, Portelli shows that people actually invent history. They tell stories about things that they did on particular occasions which never happened at all, and they also tell stories about what they might have done—how history might have been different if they had done something else. Portelli makes a very persuasive argument for a totally different way of looking at memory: memory as a form of consciousness, that is in itself historical fact. Portelli points out that "the death of Luigi Trastulli [the worker who was shot] would not mean so much to the historian if it were remembered 'right.' . . . What makes it meaningful . . . is the way it operates in people's memories." Thirty, forty years later, in the *longue durée* of memory, Trastulli's death still echoes in popular imagination. "The fact that people remember, the way they remember (and forget) are themselves the stuff of which history is made." Furthermore, he claims, "Subjectivity is as much the business of history as are the more visible 'facts.' What informants believe is indeed a historical *fact* (that is, the fact that they believe it), as much as what really happened."[9]

Portelli goes on even more strongly to say, "Oral sources are credible but with a *different* credibility. The importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagi-nation, symbolism, and desire emerge. Therefore, there are no 'false' oral sources."[10] Now, that is the extreme "don't believe it" position: don't believe it, but make use of it. Malinowski's functionalism is accepted and then turned on its head. I think we must question that position very strongly. It is very intriguing and very persuasive, but I would not want to go the whole way with it. It is a rewarding but also a very dangerous position.

The second major new approach has been to draw on literary forms of analysis. These are again promising but at the same time dangerous—and in different ways. Interesting literary work about storytelling and the structural, grammatical, and stylistic forms in which stories are told, has been conducted by, for instance, William Labov in America. Parallel with this has been the hermeneutic school, with its focus on the interaction between the interviewer and the informant. Both perspectives can tell us a lot about the kinds of material we are dealing with. But I want to warn against the risk in their leading to a merely self-stimulating circular process, through which we become more and more involved with the linguistic or interactional structure of the memory we are examining, and less and less concerned about the message which is actually there in the memory. That is, I believe, a serious danger.

With this in mind I would want to point towards another area of literary evidence, which is again very promising, but still less developed. That is the genre approach: the method of looking at the literary motifs and forms which have been used in spoken testimony to try to sort out what is conventional in the telling of a particular life story, what those conventions imply, and also what is personal and particular. Many of the recollections we record include stories which are partly or wholly old fables, old traditions, incorporated into the individual life story, motifs which are taken from outside. Also, the whole form may be shaped by one genre or another. Luisa Passerini has suggested that many Turinese Communist militants use a form of life story which is very close to earlier stories of the saints, almost a form of hagiography: They speak of “my confession,” and they often have a conversion experience as saints used to have. Because they tell their story in that particular form, what they have to say is in part shaped by its expectations.

There is no doubt that we could learn much more through understanding those forms. We also need to compare the forms of oral testimony with those of other forms of autobiography. There has been some work of this kind by Philippe Lejeune in France, but it has been too rarely followed. One example is in work by Stefan Bohman, who has looked at a set of Swedish autobiographies by the same authors who had also recorded oral testimonies and demonstrated how people did write and speak about their pasts in very different ways. His findings were encouraging for us in oral history, for they showed that the written autobiographies tended to be much more formalized and much less immediate, while in the spoken testimony there was a much higher proportion of direct feeling and real particular evidence which could have only come from direct experience. Much more work is needed in this direction.

Then the third and major new approach is to focus on subjectivity and the unconscious. This has been developed particularly by French and Italian scholars. I would draw your attention here to two aspects of it. One is the influence of Jacques Lacan in France—the idea that language is embedded in people's early consciousness, that in fact it shapes their early consciousness, so that, for instance, being a man and being a woman is a part of one's sense of self developed through the presence of gender in language. This influence lies behind Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame's observation that in her interviews men and women told their stories in very different ways. The men tended to speak with the active "I," to put themselves always at the center of the story, not just in content but grammatically as well; while the women tended to talk about "we" or "one" and to see themselves as more passive, as part of a group. A sensitivity of this kind to our material is very important. And you can carry the observation of the words that people use much farther than that. You can use them to distinguish many subtly different levels of ideology—religious or political beliefs, attitudes to the material world, and so on. Such a sensitivity is promising and needs to be developed.

A rather different path towards the subconscious is offered through psychoanalysis, which has been particularly pursued by Luisa Passerini from Italy. First of all, her interest in psychoanalysis led her to a concern, then rare among oral historians, with the meaning of forgetting, with the significance of what was not said. She found that in memories of the interwar years in Turin there were often long blanks, stretches of memory missing, which she suggested reflected the suffering that people had undergone during the fascist era, past wounds evidenced in present repression. In drawing attention to how trauma can affect memory, she offered a very valuable insight and one which can quickly be applied to many other situations. But she has pushed beyond that to an interest in the unconscious and how it can be positively revealed in memory.

Nevertheless, in dialogue between oral history and psychoanalysis, it is not so much what has been done so far which has been fascinating people, as what might be done. Here I want to sound another warning note. Psychoanalysis is very beguiling because it interests us all: It suggests to us that there is something deep within us which somebody could reveal. There is a temptation for oral historians to try to take on some of the power which psychoanalysts wield, the power to listen and, through listening and drawing out these deep inner secrets, to heal people, to ease intense suffering. There is something very attractive in that great power. And because nobody quite understands how they do it, there is a feeling that they have a certain kind of magical potency to interpret the past which we also ought to have. If only we had it, we would be discovering quite different things.

I believe that is a false way of looking at things. It is undoubtedly true that we can learn a lot from psychoanalysis, and also from many other forms of therapy which help to release memory, for the forms of therapy used by groups or in family therapy can be just as powerful as psychoanalysis in releasing memory. We need to know a lot more about them and whether we can usefully borrow from them. But the idea that we will reach a quite different kind of past is not, I think, true. We can learn about what Freud called *dream work*: how the unconscious turns memory around, reverses it, substitutes one thing for another, puts unlikely things together, turns it upside down. We can connect that with the kind of symbolism that we find in collective memory, in public memory, and in ritual, where you also find strange connections made, reversals, things presented upside down. But the elements in all this are always the same kind of things which we find in daily life. They may be in different places, but they are not different in kind. Historical work has shown that even the dreams of schizophrenics reflect the social reality of their times. In the nineteenth century schizophrenics dreamt typically about religion—the obsession of the nineteenth century. And now, today, they dream about sex. If there is an eternal unconscious hidden in the human mind, it can hardly have changed in that particular way. So don't get carried away. Don't think that if you could get your informant to lie back on the couch and to free-associate, you would find a door into a past completely different from anything you ever heard before.

Through all these new approaches we need to keep always in mind our ultimate objective, which is to use personal memory—the unique power of personal memory—to interpret change over time. Over the last ten years we have been coming a long way in doing just that. We need to keep at the forefront the *connecting* value of oral history and oral testimony. That to me seems to be its unique quality; oral history is a connecting value which moves in all sorts of different directions. It connects the old and the young, the academic world and the world outside, but more specifically it allows us to make connections in the interpretation of history; for example, between different places, or different spheres, or different phases of life. That is a unique power of oral history. We can look at migration, for instance, in the work like that of Peter Friedlander or Tamara Hareven or Jerry White—fascinating books which follow migrants from one social context to another, from one continent to another, and also between the different spheres of life, work, family, leisure, and so on. It is this last point, the breaking down between spheres of life, with which I want to conclude, because I think there we can bring together in particularly interesting ways the nature of memory, and how it is handed down, with the nature of social and family change. I see a tremendous new opportunity opening up for us which I would want to be part of our ambitions for the next ten years.

I have come to see this myself through my own recent work on the change in the family in Britain. We have interviewed a sample of a hundred families, and our aim has been to interview three generations in each family. Through this we have come to see the significance not only in patterns of change in family ways of behaving—which can be looked at in a positivist, objective way—but also in the importance of family myths, indeed in the power of family traditions and memory. I know of one family, for example, in which a member of the family was shot for cowardice in the eighteenth century. He is quite a famous figure in British history, Admiral Byng, who was shot for the loss of the isle of Minorca in the Mediterranean in the mid-eighteenth century. Two hundred years later cowardice remains an obsessive issue for men in that family, even to the point of breakdown. It has haunted their dreams, and it has driven some of them to almost foolhardy courage on the frontiers of the Empire. That is perhaps a negative instance of the tradition. But we found how family myth, family memories can have a positive dynamic too. Through looking at those myths and realities, both remembered, together with the dynamic effect they have on the changing life of a family, we have begun to combine the more conventional oral history approach, with which I started, with the approach of family therapy, with its different ways of interpreting people's accounts of their lives. There are problems in transferring techniques from one objective to another which we still have to solve. Put simply, we cannot expect families to spill out their memories to us as they do to a therapist, because we cannot offer them the same help. Nevertheless, this bringing together of new insights and new techniques from those concerned above all with coming to terms with memory subjectively, with making people whole, and those who want to use memory as a portal to history, to know what really happened, to my mind offers our best hope for the next ten years and for this gathering of papers. Returning to my original question, "Believe it or not?," my answer is that we need *both* to believe and to doubt, to make use of what we can believe and also of what we must doubt, and to bring the two together in a new interpretation which fuses both memory and history.

Notes

1. Ronald Fraser, *In Search of a Past: The Manor House, Amnersfield, 1933-1945* (London: Verso, 1984).

2. Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

3. Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975).

4. Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame, "The Life History Approach to the Study of Internal Migration: How Women and Men Came to Paris Between the Wars," in *Our Common History: The Transformation of Europe*, ed. Paul Thompson (London: Pluto Press, 1982), 194.

5. Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, trans. H. M. Wright (London: Routledge & Paul, 1961).

6. Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), xii.

7. Jerome Mintz, *The Anarchists of Casa Viejas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

8. Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

9. Alessandro Portelli, "'The Time of My Life': Functions of Time in Oral History," *International Journal of Oral History* 2, no. 3 (November 1981): 175; Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli,* 50.

10. Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli,* 51.

11. Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class*, trans. Robert Lumley and Jude Bloomfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

12. Bertaux-Wiame, "The Life History Approach to the Study of Internal Migration," 193.

COMMENT

Glenace E. Edwall *is a psychological clinician and a professor of psychology at the University of Minnesota. Long concerned with the processes of memory, here she explores Thompson's ideas about the reliability of memory and the process of oral history in light of her experience as a clinical psychologist.*

The oral historian (humanities researcher) and the psychological clinician face several common dilemmas, and Paul Thompson has given us much useful guidance. I especially appreciate his portrayal of individual memory embedded in social context, which both helps to shape it and is also served by it; his sensitivity to both the cognitive-structural components of memory and also the emotional; and his delineation of consistent forms of difference in life experience which many of us as psychologists are only beginning to recognize as our ethical and epistemological responsibility to understand, viz., gender, class, and race. He has raised a number of issues which concern and inform a variety of disciplines.

Five issues raised by Thompson arise in the meeting, speaking, and interpretation of encounters between clinicians and their clients, paralleled to those of oral historians and informants. I had first intended to call these paradoxes, but that seems a bit too grandiose. Perhaps more properly, they are simply tensions with which we live, hopefully more easily for having articulated them.

First is the issue of the nature of the question posed and the type of memory it is likely—and intended—to elicit. As Thompson quite rightly notes, general questioning will encourage the recitation of collective myths and impressions (or lead only to silence), while detailed questions can draw out particular facts and accounts of everyday life. We know this in a number of areas; in my clinical training with Lenore Walker, for example, I saw graphically the different responses likely produced to the question “What is your married life like?” versus “What happened in the battering?” versus “What was the first experience of being beaten like?” Detailed questions are not only tags for memory retrieval, but also normalize experiences and make for a safe environment to retrieve emotionally painful material. But certainly we have also been educated by a number of researchers, from Loftus to Kintsch, Bransford, and others, that the form of the question can elicit both more veridical material and also more material which corresponds to the implications and connotations of the question. We thus often walk the very delicate line of attempting to provide through questions enough structure to aid retrieval without unduly biasing it, a mean feat indeed.

Secondly, Paul Thompson reminds us that silence and even “lies” are interpretable data, surely an important part of the armamentarium of the clinical psychologist. He also reminds us, however, that it requires a knowledge on the part of the hearer which can generate expectations, usually in the form of some sort of theory, in order to notice even these silences and lies, let alone interpret them. The problem here is immediately obvious: That which allows us to hear also allows us to distort, often in the provision of default values derived from theory to cover the silence and explain the lies. It was interesting to me that Thompson spoke of missing referents to sexuality and sexual behavior in several cases. One could ask, however, to what extent the understanding of such data as missing and certainly the interpretation of its absence as due to repressive shame is itself a Freudian-inspired construction which may not fit—at least in exact detail—what the informants in fact experienced. The publication of the Freud-Fliess correspondence[1] has shown us even more dramatically the extent to which the most brilliant of clinicians may begin to see theoretical constructions so clearly that even obvious aspects of reality must yield to them. My point is not to rail against either Freudian theory in particular nor formal/informal theories in general, since they are necessary to seeing, but to remember the two-edged nature of their contribution.

This leads to a third and related point: the more general contribution of the knower, in this case the interviewer/clinician, to the material being remembered and interpreted. This was implicit in Thompson's discussion of the various uses and interpretations of oral data, but I would like to be more explicit for psychological data: we may hear best—in some sense, even most objectively—when we share a frame of reference with a client which allows us to enter her subjectively. I choose to say "her" purposefully, because I know that I understand my female clients differently and better than male, more for this reason (intersubjectivity) than because of explicit politics. In this shared form, however, I also immediately run more risk of overwhelming the particular and unique voice which it is my task to hear, because of my greater ease of appropriating it into or as my own. Quite paradoxically, I may have to work hardest to create distance in those relationships of greatest commonality so that the unique can be differentiated from the common, the individual from the social.

Fourth, Thompson reminded me of the enormous power of telling and the emotion it often releases. Further increasing this power, social psychology has shown us that if you would like to buy someone's loyalty, don't do him a favor; have him do you one. We are either explicitly (oral historians) or perhaps more subtly (clinicians) in the business of asking people to do us the favor of telling us their stories to serve our ends; when they do so and in the process also experience the catharsis associated with telling, they have given us great power. Again, though, this is only one side: the power to give is also the power to take away or to withhold. The other side of the power of telling which Thompson describes is the power not to tell, to keep one's secrets. Just as the interviewer needs to be aware of the emotional energy which may accompany telling, she must also be respectful of the emotion invested in not telling. Perhaps this is simply a long way of saying that interviewers in both disciplines may also need sensitivity to the resistance and even hostility their questions may engender, and to see this as a springing from the same root as the powerful relief and ego enhancement Thompson describes.

Last, Thompson reminds us that memory contains both facts and myths, and that both are meaning structures of consequence to the individual and to the listener. I would heartily agree, but I again think there is an implicit point in Thompson's discussion which also informs much clinical work:

both fact and myth have meaning, but they may not be equivalent meanings. In the wake of Jeffrey Masson's book, which I alluded to above, a rather standard response from the "normal science" viewpoint was that it really didn't matter whether a given adult woman's report of an incestuous relationship as a child was "really" a memory or "really" a fantasy, since what was of actual consequence was the meaning given to the memorial structure by the woman herself. Perhaps this is a moot distinction for some memorial material, but psychiatrists Denise Gelinas[2] and Elaine Carmen[3] and others agree that for many incest victims, it is not. The accuracy or fallibility of one's perceptions, and thus one's status as a knower and as a self are very much at stake in the distinction, as witnessed by the power in uncovering long-hidden (buried) truths of one's experience. I have no particular wisdom on ascertaining the distinction in problematic cases, but I would encourage us not to abandon the potential meaning in the distinction because of our epistemological or theoretical difficulties. I love the "Saturday Night Live" line, "Hear me now and believe me later." Sometimes, that may be all we can do.

Notes

1. Jeffrey M. Masson, ed., *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, 1887-1904* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).
2. Denise Gelinas, "The Persisting Negative Effects of Incest," *Psychiatry* 46 (1983): 312-32.
3. Elaine Carmen et al., "Victims of Violence and Psychiatric Illness," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 141, no. 3 (1984): 378-83.