

ORAL HISTORY AND THE FAMILY: A TOOL FOR THE DOCUMENTATION AND INTERPRETATION OF FAMILY HISTORY

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Family history has become a matter of concern for both academics and policy makers in recent years. During the same period oral history has emerged as a method used in many scholarly studies. For some it is a discipline in its own right, for some it is a technique to be used field by field, while for others it is viewed as a part of the popular culture. After the television adaptation of Alex Haley's somewhat controversial but highly influential book, *Roots*, use of genealogical materials at the Library of Congress increased markedly, giving a real boost to the popular pursuit of the past. This article will discuss the role of oral history in the documentation and interpretation of family history.¹

Oral history, defined simply as a tape-recorded (video or audio) conversation between two people (usually), is clearly a useful tool for the augmentation of the written record and for the specific creation of evidence where no written documentation exists. Thus, it is particularly useful for the study of family history, since only the stories of the famous, and then often selected stories, normally exist.²

Such an approach may encompass specifics of interest to the individuals involved and generalities of experience--games, rearing customs, relationships--that in the aggregate are of concern to the scholar. Both the historian and the psychologist, as well as others, may bring questions to the interview and insights to the interpretation of these materials. An area of particular importance is the study of childhood, and this suggests the interviewing of children--as well as adults--about early experiences.

Much such work--directly or indirectly involving families--is being done. The increasing number of family history courses--of which oral history is often a logical component--in colleges and universities, together with the large number of other offerings, produces a vast store of evidence. Many, perhaps most, of the interviews, unfortunately, are done without proper supervision or resultant archival deposit. When one adds to the list high school, middle school, and elementary school projects, let alone individual ones, the number of tapes mushroom.³

Raising the minimal quality, technical and scholarly, of such efforts should not be too hard (in theory). A number of guides exist, both for oral history generally and for family oral history in particular. Going beyond that minimal level and achieving some kind of archival indexing, deposit, and accessibility is another matter

¹ Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (Garden City, 1976); "People and Papers," *S[ociety of] A[merican] A[rchivists] Newsletter*, May 1979, 12.

² Louis M. Starr, "Oral History," in *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, ed. Allen Kent, Harold Lancour, and Jay E. Daily (New York, 1977), 20, 440.

³ See Ronald J. Grele, "On Using Oral History Collections: An Introduction," *Journal of American History*, 74 (September 1987), 570-78.

entirely. When researchers come to place greater value on these materials, then a demand may arise for their archival deposit and processing.⁴

Obviously family oral history can be viewed on more than one level. On the one hand, it can be the basic taping of an individual family's experiences, largely in terms of the major events that define its chronology: births, deaths, marriages, graduations, divorces, wars, travel, and the like. Beyond this, such interviews can attempt to delve into characteristics of structure and existence that permit multifamily comparison and thus some societal generalizations: games, education, discipline, foods, living arrangements, and generational relations, for example. Thus, while the details remain specific to the people being studied, the aggregation of those details provides data for those interested in collective biography as well as for individual biographies.⁵

Ideally, family oral history should be viewed as an ongoing process. Interviews would begin with young children, then follow them all the way to adulthood and throughout the life course. In addition, when interviewing older people, the emphasis needs to be not just on their past but also on their present. In this regard, some attention must be paid to the stereotyping that occurs for both the young and the elderly and how this will shape the interview process. Automatic assumptions about how age groups view themselves and what they are able to discuss or remember may result in unasked questions or predetermined answers.⁶

The tapes themselves need to be viewed in terms of more than the "pure" historical evidence, whether for a limited group or a broader society. They must also be looked at in terms of other forms of analysis, including content or fantasy analysis.⁷

One way to deal with oral history interviews, both for the purpose of determining question areas and studying existing materials, is through the concept of the life course. Glen H. Elder, Jr., has observed: "First, and most important, is the development of constructs and models that represent processes of family adaptation and change over time; the timing, arrangement, and duration of events in the life course; the ever-changing pattern of interdependence and synchronization among the life histories of family members; and the cycle of generational exchange and succession." He continues, "The life course refers to pathways through the age-differentiated life span; to social patterns in the timing, duration, spacing, and order of events." One needs to study cohorts, groups that share the same birth date even

⁴ William Fletcher, *Recording Your Family History* (New York, 1986); David E. Kyvig and Myron A. Marty, *Your Family History: A Handbook for Research and Writing* (Arlington Heights, IL, 1978); Allan J. Lichtman, *Your Family History* (New York, 1978). And see, Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (2d. ed., New York, 1988), 256-64 in particular.

⁵ Ingrid Winther Scobie, "Family and Community History Through Oral History," *Public Historian*, 1 (Summer 1979), 37-38.

⁶ Jay Mechling, "Oral Evidence and the History of American Children's Lives," *Journal of American History*, 74 (September 1987), 579-86; Nikolas Coupland, Justine Coupland, Howard Giles, and Karen Henwood, "Accommodating the Elderly: Invoking and Extending a Theory," *Language in Society*, 17 (March 1988), 1-41.

⁷ Carl Ryant, "Oral History and Psychohistory," *Journal of Psychohistory*, 8 (Winter 1981), 307-18.

though they experience identical historical events at different stages of their own life course development.⁸

As Elder points out, marriage poses an interesting twist through the joining of two life courses. Oral history is well suited as one data base for individual life course studies because it can pose questions relating to the main events such as birth, education, marriage, divorce, children, grandchildren, and death and relate them to the historical context. It can also adapt to the joining of marriage through the dual interview. For example, Barbara Perry, as part of a student project at the University of Louisville, questioned her mother and father separately about their lives until the point of marriage, then conducted a joint interview.⁹

Oral history allows one to consider life course and the family, including such areas as those identified by Ingrid Winther Scobie: "The daily schedules of family members, the organization of the household, the position of furniture, the expenditure of money, seating at the dining room table, who was present at which meals, what type of food was served--all of these reveal significant information about the value of time, family communications, control of the family."¹⁰

Oral history can direct particular attention to the role of children and childhood in these contexts, not just by interviewing adults about their youth but by interviewing children as children. Even the issue of accuracy of early or other memories may be viewed in a different sense, for while one obviously at times wants "fact," what people misremember, the patterns and contexts, can also be revealing.¹¹

The imagery of the interview itself can be of particular importance. Taking the Perry family tapes as an example, a "fantasy analysis" can be conducted. Lloyd deMause has termed this process to be the examination of a document in terms of "metaphors, similes, body terms, strong feeling words, repetitive phrases and symbolic terms." Then the materials are analyzed for themes. The process may be described:

1. Record all metaphors and similes. . . .
2. Record all body language, strong feeling tones, and strong emotional states. . . .
3. Record all repetitive, unusual or gratuitous word usages. . . .
4. Record any obviously symbolic terms. . . .
5. Eliminate all negatives. . . .
6. Eliminate all subjects and objects. . . .

⁸ Glen H. Elder, Jr., "Family History and the Life Course," in *Transitions: The Family and the Life Course in Historical Perspective*, ed. Tamara K. Hareven (New York, 1978), 17-18, 21.

⁹ Carl Ryant, "Oral History & Family History," *Family Heritage*, 2 (April 1979), 50-53; Interview with Louis R. Perry by Barbara Perry, March 17, 1977, Oral History Collection, University of Louisville.

¹⁰ Scobie, "Family and Community History," 38-39.

¹¹ See, for example, Alessandro Portelli, "The Time of My Life: Functions of Time in Oral History," *International Journal of Oral History*, 2 (November 1981), 162-80; Luisa Passerini, "Work Ideology and Working Class Attitudes to Fascism," in *Our Common History: The Transformation of Europe*, ed. Paul Thompson (Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1982), 54-78.

7. Record all overt group responses. . . .
8. Note any long periods of no imagery. . . .¹²

In the case of the Perry family, Barbara Perry asked her father about how the Great Depression affected his childhood. This is a common subject in family oral history interviews. He responded, in part:

. . . about our many moves when the Depression hit. It again was a means of survival. It wasn't a means of being dishonest. It was just simply a means of survival of the fittest. If you ran up a bill at the local grocery store, you just simply did not have the money to pay for it. If you moved on, you just had to move. And Mother would always caution the children, "Now don't tell anyone where we're moving, because if bill collectors show up after we move, we just don't want them to know where we are. We want just simply to disappear." . . .

The Depression made quite an impact on me, a very serious impact at that time. I was old enough to be completely aware of it, but, fortunately, I wasn't old enough to worry actively about it. I left that up to my parents. I knew what was going on. I knew that money was a scarce item. I knew that food was hard to come by, clothing, and so on. I knew that there were many things that I couldn't have that cost money, and money just wasn't available. However, as I say about Dayton, Ohio, there were so many people in the same position, out of work and so on, that there wasn't quite the contrast that you might have found in other cities--of people having goods that you couldn't have and, therefore, of being in an enviable position. . . .

It was a rather abstract thing. Many, many people, and most people in Dayton, Ohio, were affected by it. It was the constant talk about a neighbor losing a job this particular day, or a friend going back to work, or finding jobs, or another friend going on relief, or a certain person having a mortgage foreclosed. That type of thing. And, of course, the newspapers were full of it constantly; the radio was full of chatter about the Depression in the way of news items, and so on. So there was no way of escaping the fact that we were in a depression. And because it was so close to home, and right in the home, there was just no doubt about the Depression being present. . . .

The times themselves were very sad. The times were miserable. But as far as living, I was a youngster and my young days were happy. I came from a happy family. My family got along well together. We were very happy. We loved each other, and I can truthfully say that those days were happy as far as family grouping was concerned. But the times were hard.¹³

¹² Lloyd deMause, "Historical Group-Fantasies," *Journal of Psychohistory*, 7 (Summer 1979), 1, 11.

¹³ Perry Interview, 22-23.

The material gives historical insight into human experience in the depression, of course, but in fantasy analysis the following is accented:

moves . . . depression hit . . . survival . . . dishonest . . . survival . . .
 moved . . . move . . . Mother . . . caution . . . moving . . . bill collectors
 . . . move . . . disappear . . . depression . . . serious . . . worry . . .
 parents . . . money . . . scarce . . . hard . . . money . . . money . . .
 people . . . work . . . people . . . abstract . . . people . . . people . . .
 working . . . working . . . losing . . . people . . . people . . . working . . .
 . . . working . . . losing . . . friend . . . finding . . . friend . . . Depression
 . . . happy . . . sad . . . sad . . . miserable . . . loving . . . happy . . .
 happy . . . family . . . family . . . happy . . . loved . . . happy . . . family
 . . . hard.

There is an apparent counterplay of insecurity and fear. The ideas of moving, losing, not having are seen in the context of being happy and finding security in the family setting. Thus, oral history interviews provide a body of data that permits analysis of individual and collective materials for historical accuracy and in terms of shared conceptions, misconceptions, and omissions.¹⁴

Although there is an admitted subjectivity in this process, imposed both by the interviewer and the interviewee, this is in one sense a virtue as well since it provides a corrective to a totally empirical basis of analysis. And human experience is at its heart emotional. Still, there are means of tempering the danger of subjective bias. Jane Syngé has written on the use of demographic analysis in both the structuring and interpreting of life history interviews. Emphasizing the importance of cohort analysis, she remarks that "because the last century has seen such dramatic shifts in the timing of life-cycle stages and in the extent to which people experienced marriage, childlessness, and early deaths of children, spouses, and parents, one must be careful to collect and interpret life-history data obtained from the aged in the context of the demographic features of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century." (And obviously one must remain cognizant of equivalent changes for other age groups.) But even with careful planning of interview schedules, she finds that life histories will provide better information on some aspects of the family than others, due to the relative importance that any particular issue held for the person being questioned at the time he or she experienced the event. At the same time, Syngé concludes that "life histories may contribute insights to family systems and relationships that were not anticipated at the planning stage."¹⁵

Paul Thompson, perhaps the leading oral historian of the United Kingdom, has written on life histories in the analysis of social change. As he comments: "The evidence in each life story can only be fully understood as part of the whole life; but to make generalizations on any particular social issue, we must wrench the evidence on this question from a whole series of interviews, viewing it and reassembling it

¹⁴ See Ryant, "Oral History and Psychohistory," 313.

¹⁵ Jane Syngé, "Cohort Analysis in the Planning and Interpretation of Research Using Life Histories" in *Biography and Society: The Life History Approach in the Social Sciences*, ed. Daniel Berteaux (Beverly Hills, CA, 1981), 235, 245.

from a new angle, as if horizontally rather than vertically, and in so doing, placing a new meaning on it." To carry forward these new meanings, he continues:

... It remains astonishingly rare to find any research examining the impact of the family on economic development, or the mutual interaction between the two.

Yet it is clear that an interaction of this kind must be of fundamental importance to social change. For the family is the primary social institution within which human energy is produced and socialized. At the simplest level, it supplies the economy with its labor force. It therefore follows that unless demographic changes can be reduced to absolute dependency on the economy--and they certainly cannot--changes in family ideology and structure need to be analyzed as critical to overall economic and social development.

Thompson himself has studied such materials in terms of fishing communities in the United Kingdom.¹⁶

It is apparent that oral history is both a necessary and valuable tool in creating a data base for the study of family history. It is useful for its individual information on any one family and for its susceptibility to aggregate analysis for the study of social history. Use of cohort analysis, fantasy analysis, and statistical sampling techniques (for example, Paul Thompson's use of census data in constructing an interview sample for his study of Edwardian England) can add dimensions to the creation of new evidence and study of existing evidence, no matter how obtained. From classroom projects or personal efforts to large research projects, the possibilities are endless. What is required is a greater sensitivity to the importance of oral history and family history. This should result not only in more extensive scholarly analysis of existing data but also better quality data being generated for future analysis.¹⁷

¹⁶ Paul Thompson, "Life Histories and the Analysis of Social Change," in *Biography and Society*, 292, 300, 302-03. Paul Thompson (with Tony Wailey and Trevor Lummis), *Living the Fishing* (London, 1983).

¹⁷ Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society* (London, 1975).