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“Do I Like Them Too Much?”: Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa

by Valerie Yow

Twenty years ago this might have been an unspeakable topic. Oral history textbooks and articles in the *Oral History Review* scarcely mentioned this in the 1970s and early 1980s. My students would talk about their reactions to an interviewing experience, sometimes mention their realization about how an interviewing project had changed them. I remember vividly a student who told me that in interviewing Jewish immigrants in Providence she had touched on their experiences in the Holocaust and that this had forced her to change drastically her views about justice and human society. I also remember remarking to a student after I had listened to a tape, “I wonder why you didn’t pursue the topic the narrator mentioned?” And she said, “I didn’t hear him say that.” And a colleague asked me, “You didn’t want to write about your narrators’ race prejudice?” And I said, “Never even thought about it.” And then I added, “Do I like them too much?”

I was aware of some effects on myself but not nearly as cognizant of the influences of interviewing women mill workers as I should have been. Now I sometimes catch my breath when I read critically a play I’ve written or an essay on oral history I’m working on and see appear something told to me twenty years ago.

But usually we treated such concerns as if they were not an integral and important part of the interview—they didn’t occupy the main stage, they were the side show. They were, as anthropologist Paul Rabinow, has described them, “corridor talk”—the remarks you made about your reactions to your research while you were standing with a colleague in the corridor. You were about to go into the room where you would discuss the really important

Valerie Yow is the author of *Recording Oral History: A Practical Guide for Social Scientists* and a biography, *Bernice Kelly Harris: A Good Life Was Writing* (Forthcoming, Louisiana State University Press). She wishes to thank Linda Shopes and Ronald Grele who critiqued an early version of this essay and as always offered thought-provoking observations.

research matters.¹

In this essay, I'll outline the conceptual shift which makes acknowledgment of the interviewer's reactions to, and intrusions into, research speakable. I'll briefly survey disciplines that use the in-depth interview as a research method because all contributed to the change in the paradigm. Last, I'll suggest questions the interviewer can ask to become more aware of the impact of the process on himself or herself and of the interviewer's influence on the research and analysis.

When I refer to interview effects on the interviewer and to the ways the interviewer interacts with narrator and with content, I include motives for doing the project, feelings about the narrator, interviewer's reaction to the narrator's testimony, and intrusion of the interviewer's assumptions and of the interviewer's self-schema into the interviewing and interpretive processes.

At times subjectivity has been discussed in the literature as cognitive process as opposed to observable behavior; this is not the definition I use here. Rather, I use the traditional definition of objectivity as value-free research which requires the elimination of researcher intrusion.

Most often, in the early years of the Oral History Association, there was not any acknowledgment that the interviewer was affected by the interviewing. There was not even a lot of discussion about the effects on the narrator—sometimes, two or three sentences, and at the most, a paragraph here and there. James Hoopes' oral history manual (1979), for example, advised students to ask themselves this question, "As far as you can tell, what was the interviewee's idea of you, and how might it have affected what he said?"² He suggested students spend a few minutes examining their own preconceptions, especially about the narrator.³

Elliot Wigginton started publishing his writings about the Foxfire projects in the 1970s. Wigginton described the way students interviewing members of their own community began to re-

¹ Paul Rabinow, "Representations Are Social Facts: Modernity and Post-Modernity in Anthropology," in J. Clifford and G. E. Marcus (Eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 253.

² James Hoopes, *Oral History: An Introduction for Students* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 127.

³ *Ibid.*, 84.

spect their own culture and themselves.⁴ Possibly, Wigginton’s statements about students being changed by the interviewing they were doing was acceptable because these were adolescents learning to like history. They could be seen as impressionable.

But it is *Envelopes of Sound*, first published in 1975, that articulated an awareness both of the effects of the interview process on the interviewer and of the effects of the interviewer on the process. Alice Kessler Harris wrote in the introduction to the book that oral history researchers began to realize that the interjection “of the historian, first as interviewer and transcriber and later as analyst, posed serious theoretical problems.”⁵ One of the things that worried oral historians, she said, was that they knew the “intrusion of differences between the interviewer and his subjects, distinctions in dress, speech, and manners imposed on the subject a set of classbound attitudes that inevitably distorted the information”⁶

In Ronald Grele’s interview with Studs Terkel which the book presented, the issue of interviewer’s intrusion into the interview came up again when Terkel said, “You try to be objective but sometimes you become involved with the narrator.”⁷ And later, in a roundtable discussion entitled “It’s Not the Song: It’s the Singing,” Saul Benison talked about how he had been changed by oral history interviewing. Grele commented,

There is some kind of dialectical process that occurs in which you are working jointly on something and you come to share the creation itself. In my own mind, there’s always the problem of detachment because, as a historian, I have to stand back.⁸

Alice Kessler Harris answered him,

I’m not so sure that that’s not an asset, in some sense. I think that to become emotionally involved, while it’s true that it violates the first canon of the historian, which is objectivity, nevertheless, puts you intimately into a situation and thus enables you to understand it in a

⁴ Elliot Wigginton, *The Foxfire Book* (New York: Doubleday, 1972).

⁵ Ronald Grele, ed. *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History* (Chicago: Precedent Publishing Company, 1975), 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

way, I think, you can't understand it if you remain outside the situation.⁹

Benison added that there is no such thing as objective history—such a thing would be like reading the telephone book.¹⁰ In the last essay in *Envelopes of Sound*, Grele reminded readers that “the relationship created by the interaction of the interviewer and interviewee” requires analysis of the social and psychological kind.¹¹

Another notable exception in the 1970s is Luisa Passerini's article, published in *History Workshop*, entitled “Work Ideology and Consensus Under Italian Fascism.” She frankly acknowledged that oral history research is subjective and argued that we have to be able to use subjectivity—both for narrator and for interviewer—in understanding social history because both invest events with meaning.¹²

Acknowledgment that the historian is not an objective observer was admitted on other occasions, as well. Oscar Handlin's *The Uprooted*, published in 1952, was a study in which the author frankly declared he had a passionate interest.¹³ Martin Duberman candidly reflected on his reactions to the historical movement he observed and described in *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (published in 1974):

Yet the issue is not, I believe, whether the individual historian should appear in his books, but *how* he should appear—covertly or overtly. Every historian knows that he manipulates the evidence to some extent simply because of who he is (or is not), of what he selects (or omits), of how well (or badly) he empathizes and communicates. Those “fallibilities” have been frequently confessed in the abstract. Yet the *process* by which a particular personality intersects with a particular subject matter has rarely been shown, and the intersection itself almost never regarded as containing materials of potential worth. Because “objectivity” has been the ideal, the personal components that go into historical reconstruction have not been candidly revealed, made accessible to scrutiny.¹⁴

⁹ *Ibid.*, 81-82.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹¹ Grele, “Movement Without Aim: Methodological and Theoretical Problems in Oral History,” *Ibid.*, 127-143, see p. 136.

¹² Luisa Passerini, “Work Ideology and Consensus Under Italian Fascism,” *History Workshop Journal* 8 (Autumn 1979): 82-118.

¹³ Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted* (Boston: Little Brown, 1973).

¹⁴ Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (London: Wildwood House, 1974), 12.

In the preface to *All God's Dangers*, historian Theodore Rosengarten stated frankly that to him Ned Cobb is a hero.¹⁵ In 1979, in an article for the anthology, *Telling Lives: The Biographer's Art*, Rosengarten wrote that he would raise the question of love in social science inquiry. He commented that this was an embarrassing thing to do, but we need an accurate description of the relationship of the interviewer and narrator so we can figure out what is going on. He dared to write,

Perhaps we divest our motivations of love because we fear an attack on our objectivity. Yet, no claim of objectivity survives the generation in which it is made.”¹⁶

Undoubtedly, Rosengarten was influenced by participation in political debate in the 1960s when a new ethos among students was evolving—a conviction that a scholar must do the work that is meaningful to her or him, that detachment edges one towards perfunctory research and dull interpretation.

And like many historians, he may reveal the influence of Benedetto Croce's and R.G. Collingwood's writings on the philosophy of history. Both were read routinely in graduate courses, and both stressed the centrality of the observer. Following Croce's lead on this, Collingwood argued that the historian cannot be objective, even in beginning the research. He said that it is only when we have a problem in mind that we can begin to look for evidence.¹⁷ Collingwood reminded historians that history cannot exist outside of human consciousness—a statement that puts the interpreter at the center of the process of understanding the past.

Both Croce and Collingwood were usually shunted aside, however, as historians clung to the idea of objectivity in historical research. The 1970s and early 1980s were the years, after all, when quantification of historical data was uppermost in many historians' minds and nobody admitted having an emotional connection to numbers. Oral historians, on the defensive anyway because we

¹⁵ Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York: Avon, 1974), xix.

¹⁶ Theodore Rosengarten, “Stepping Over Cockleburs: Conversations With Ned Cobb,” *Telling Lives: The Biographer's Art*, ed. Marc Pachter (Washington, D.C.: New Republic Books, 1979), 113.

¹⁷ Robin George Collingwood, “The Philosophy of History,” *Essays in the Philosophy of History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 137.

were using the testimony of *living* witnesses, wanted to show that our method was a rigorous, disinterested pursuit of truth and therefore respectable. As interviewers, we were simply observers of verbal behavior.

By the early 1980s, however, there was a discernible chink in that armor, that soon became a gaping hole. In *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*, Peter Novick traced the notion of objectivity among historians and concluded that although in the eighties many continued to adhere to an "antitheoretical and antiphilosophical objectivist empiricism" and praised historical writings for approaching objectivity, among others a strong current of skepticism was developing.¹⁸ Now historians were more and more prone to pay attention to their "hidden ideological agendas."¹⁹

Much questioning of the ideal of scientific objectivity was going on in other disciplines, as well. Concurrent developments that led to acknowledgment of effects on the researcher and of the researcher on the process of research were taking place in anthropology and sociology (both influenced by hermeneutics and phenomenology), biography (influenced by psychoanalytic writings), and feminist theory. So, while I don't see much "trickle down effect" in the economic sphere, I do see a "trickle over effect" in the cultural sphere as ideas developed in one discipline are taken up and considered by people working in another discipline. Oral historians could hardly escape being vitally interested in, and influenced by, scholars in these disciplines who were using the recorded life review in research. Kristin M. Langellier observed that "the personal narrative as a communication phenomenon crosses disciplinary boundaries everywhere and every which way."²⁰

Novick summed up the influence on historians of the paths other disciplines were taking toward candid acknowledgment of the subjective nature of research:

¹⁸ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 593 and 595-596.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 596.

²⁰ Kristin Langellier, "Personal Narratives: Perspectives on Theory and Research," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 9/4 (Oct. 1989): 243. Clifford Geertz treats this topic and reminds readers of Clyde Kluckhohn's statement that a degree for anthropologists is a license to poach (and for the rest of us as well). "Blurred Genres," *American Scholar* 49 (1980): 167.

The influence of antiobjectivist currents of thought coming from other disciplines is difficult to evaluate exactly and all but impossible to trace in the case of any given individual. But in the aggregate they clearly made many historians aware of how problematic received views of objectivity had become in contemporary thought. . . .²¹

The impact of hermeneutics and phenomenology on social science disciplines shows up occasionally even in the late 1950s and early 1960s.²² For example, Abraham Kaplan in *The Conduct of Inquiry: Methodology for Behavioral Science* published in 1964 argued that no human observation can be “immaculate”:

We always know something already, and this knowledge is intimately involved in what we come to know next, whether by observation or in any other way. We see what we expect to see, what we believe we have every reason for seeing....In sum, in making an observation we are not passive but active; and we are doing something, not only with our eyes and our minds, but also with our lips, hands, feet—and guts.²³

It was the seventies, however, when the examples of the influence of the new paradigm first became numerous in sociology although the stance that objectivity is the proper goal for social ob-

²¹ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 596.

²² Both hermeneutics and phenomenology require us to question our own assumptions and prior understandings. According to the main tenet of hermeneutics, we as researchers must realize that the very questions we ask come from the world we live in, the scientific attitude that we assume is itself something we learned in our culture. The very language we use comes from a culture that we swim in as a fish in water. Phenomenologists also assert that we are in a dialectical relationship with the phenomenon we study: in this interactive process going on, we are influencing even while we are being influenced. See discussion by Lawrence C. Watson, “Understanding a Life History as a Subjective Document: Hermeneutical and Phenomenological Perspectives,” *Ethos* 4/1 (Spring 1976): 98, 103-105. See also David Linge, “Editor’s Introduction,” in Hans Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). Alfred Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, trans. George Walsh and Frederick Lehnert (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967). The parallel movement in the physical sciences at this time in which the possibility of an objective description of the natural world was questioned (after all, even such things as the behavior of amoebae is described from the viewpoint of the observer) was of interest to feminist theorists who were questioning the objectivity of men in a male-dominated society. See, for example, Josephine Donovan, *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions of American Feminism* (New York: Ungar, 1987), 183.

²³ Abraham Kaplan, *The Conduct of Inquiry: Methodology for Behavioral Science* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1964), 133 and 136.

servers was dominant (and still is).²⁴ The decade opened with Rosalie Wax's book *Doing Fieldwork* in which she admitted the effects on her of fieldwork among Japanese Americans, saying that it had made her a different person.²⁵ (It is not clear just how.) At the end of the decade Shulamit Reinharz in her book *On Becoming a Social Scientist* summed up the struggle between the two paradigms: "Social camps are split between those who wish to depersonalize the process of knowing in the hopes of obtaining universal, "pure" knowledge and those who acknowledge that since the self of the observer is always implicated, it should be converted into an invaluable tool."²⁶

And in the seventies, a few manuals on the in-depth interview for sociologists took up the discussion. There was the excellent book by Raymond Gorden, *Interviewing: Strategy, Techniques, and Tactics* published in 1969, which does present a discussion of effects of the interviewing process on the interviewer. Gorden defined a "triadic relationship," that is, "The interrelationships between the nature of the *information* sought, the nature of the *respondent*, and the nature of the *interviewer*. . . ."²⁷ Jack Douglas' text, *Investigative Social Research*, also discussed the interactive process of interviewer and narrator extensively.²⁸ At the end of the decade, two textbooks were published, *Qualitative Sociology: A Method to the Madness* and *New Rules of Sociological Method: A Positive Critique of Interpretative Sociologies*, which dealt with the effects of the interviewer on the interview.²⁹ Also, at the end of the decade sociologists founded the journal *Qualitative Sociology*

²⁴ See Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1967). James Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979).

²⁵ Rosalie H. Wax, *Doing Fieldwork: Warnings and Advice* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 179.

²⁶ Shulamit Reinharz, *On Becoming a Social Scientist: From Survey Research and Participant Observation to Experiential Analysis* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1979), 127, 241-243.

²⁷ Raymond Gorden, *Interviewing: Strategy, Techniques and Tactics* (Chicago: Dorsey Press, 1969, first edition).

²⁸ Jack Douglas, *Investigative Social Research* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1976.)

²⁹ Howard Schwartz and Jerry Jacobs, *Qualitative Sociology: A Method to the Madness* (New York: Free Press, 1979), 123. Anthony Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method: A Positive Critique of Interpretative Sociologies* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 19 and see especially the chapter "Some Schools of Social Theory and Philosophy," 23-70, for a discussion of the impact of phenomenology on sociological theory.

and began to publish articles by interviewers like Arlene Daniels who admitted how much she had invested two of her narrators with glittering personality because *she* needed for them to have a glittering personality.³⁰

Anthropologist Victor Turner argued in the foreword to an ethnographic study by a sociologist that one can have “an objective relation to one’s own subjectivity,” and can therefore use self-scrutiny to gain greater understanding of the research one is engaged in.³¹ In anthropology in the sixties, a few researchers were developing ethnographic theory based on this awareness of the intrusion of one’s self into the research and interpretation of data. “Reflexivity” was a term used more and more often. In *Reinventing Anthropology* (1969), a collection of essays scrutinizing the discipline, Bob Scholte described the question anthropologists confronted in his essay, “Toward a Reflexive and Critical Anthropology:”

If our perceptions, descriptions, and analyses are influenced by language, and if our language is in turn related to a given cultural setting, then our efforts are potentially subject to various “ethnocentricities of meaning.” Nor can a scientific language be assumed to be neutral. . . . It follows that all ethnographic descriptions and any ethnological analyses derived from such accounts are, and must be, part hermeneutics, that is, interpretive activities based on contextual information and mediated texts.³²

Many anthropologists who were writing in the 1970s, used reflexivity as a means of critiquing and understanding their own research process. Anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff described her work, the recording of life histories of Jewish elders: “How a tale is heard and how profoundly it affects the one who hears it as well as the one who tells it is an important theme in my work.”³³

Peter Novick commented on the anxiety caused by the debate among anthropologists concerning subjectivity in research: “Of all the social science disciplines, it was in anthropology that the ‘objectivity question’ assumed the greatest centrality in recent decades,

³⁰ Arlene Kaplan Daniels, “Self-Deception and Self-Discovery in Fieldwork,” *Qualitative Sociology* 6/3 (Fall 1983): 210.

³¹ Victor Turner, Foreword to Bennetta Jules-Rosette, *African Apostles: Ritual and Conversion in the Church of John Maranke* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 8.

³² Bob Scholte, “Towards a Reflexive and Critical Anthropology,” in Dell Hymes, ed. *Reinventing Anthropology* (New York: Pantheon, 1969), 440.

³³ Barbara Myerhoff, “Telling One’s Story,” *Center Magazine* (March 1980), 28-29.

and where it was most divisive.”³⁴

Outstanding anthropologists, such as James Clifford³⁵ and Clifford Geertz³⁶, argued persuasively that subjectivity must be acknowledged, indeed that it can be used to enhance understanding of the research process. Dennis Tedlock used as his model intersubjectivity: it is the researcher’s questions as well as the informant’s answers that must be scrutinized, he argued. It is the *dialogue* that is important.³⁷

A remarkable book, *People Studying People: The Human Element in Fieldwork*, published in 1980, presented essays dealing with the role that the researcher’s emotions play. Authors Robert A. Georges and Michael Jones declared frankly: “In this book we have attempted to counter the view, widely held and generally reinforced by conventional fieldwork guides and manuals, that individuals can conduct fieldwork involving people studying people without being human.”³⁸ Just three years later, George Stocking edited a collection of essays on ethnographic fieldwork, *Observers Observed*, which revealed the ways the ethnographer’s desires, fears, and eccentricities impinged on the work of such well-known anthropologists as Bronislaw Malinowski and Franz Boas.³⁹

In the 1980s, Renato Rosaldo became a spokesman for the argument that the ethnographer “occupies a position or structural location and observes with a particular angle of vision.” He reminded readers that age, gender, outsider’s position, identification with a particular political regime, and certain life experiences all influence what an ethnographer learns in fieldwork. “The truth of objectivity has lost its monopoly status,” he stated.⁴⁰

³⁴ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 548-549.

³⁵ James Clifford, “Introduction: Partial Truths,” *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, eds. James Clifford and George Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 14.

³⁶ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), see especially pp. 10 and 23.

³⁷ Dennis Tedlock, “The Analogical Tradition and the Emergence of a Dialogical Anthropology,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 35:4 (Winter 1979): 387-399.

³⁸ Robert A. Georges and Michael O. Jones, *People Studying People: The Human Element in Fieldwork* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 153.

³⁹ George W. Stocking, Jr., Ed., *Observers Observed: Essays on Ethnographic Fieldwork*, (Madison: University Of Wisconsin Press, 1983).

⁴⁰ Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), see especially pp 19-21.

At the same time (the 1970s) that the philosophical writings in hermeneutics and phenomenology were becoming more widely known in the social sciences, a few biographers were bravely admitting that they were anything but detached, objective observers. Often they described explicitly the influence on their work of psychoanalytic theory, especially Erik Erikson's model of stages of development and the Freudian concept of transference. Therapists are used to asking themselves, “Why am I reacting to this client the way I am? Am I attributing to this client personality characteristics of someone in my past or feelings I have had in my past?” But biographers also began to use the concept of transference to analyze their writing. And Erikson's model of stages of development led them to ask, “What are the issues I'm confronting in my own life now? How does this research relate to these questions I have now about how to live a life?”

A collection of articles on writing biography, *Introspection in Biography: The Biographer's Quest for Self-Awareness*, edited by Samuel Baron and Carl Pletsch and published in 1985, offered reflections by biographers who were writing in the seventies. In one of the articles, Richard Lebeaux said he chose his subject Henry David Thoreau during the period of the anti-war movement because he saw Thoreau as one of the founding fathers of the counterculture. He wrote, “Thoreau, with his stress on individual action, nonviolence, and the preeminence of the natural, was highly compatible with my ideological and emotional needs.”⁴¹ Later Lebeaux used this awareness of affinity to examine the process of his research and interpretation, to take a step back and look at what he had done. Trained in English and sociology, he said that he had used Eriksonian and other psychoanalytical concepts to critique his writing.⁴²

Carl Pletsch ended the book *Introspection in Biography* by stating, “Biographers have felt obliged to subscribe to the ideal of objectivity. But biography is the perfect enterprise in which to transcend that ideal and show the value of assimilating subjectivity in a larger conception of knowledge.”⁴³

⁴¹ Richard Lebeaux, “Thoreau's Lives, Lebeaux's Lives,” in *Introspection in Biography: The Biographer's Quest for Self-Awareness*, eds. Samuel Baron and Carl Pletsch (Hilldale, New Jersey: Analytic Press, 1985), 232.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 238.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 360.

Among psychologists who were using the life review method in their research, there was a growing awareness of the ways the researcher interacts with the informant and the process. Psychologist Thomas Cottle, carrying out life studies, noted in 1973 that we interviewers watch ourselves as much as we watch our narrators. He wrote,

As best we can, therefore, we play out political roles, the politics, that is, of our own experiences together, hoping to combat the asymmetries produced by the culture, the society, our age, sex, and race and social standing, and by the rights and privileges that put me at an advantage. . . . There is little, then, about this form of research that allows for so-called objective inquiry.⁴⁴

By 1983, Ken Plummer in his chapters “The Doing of Life Histories” and “Theorizing Lives” in *Documents of Life* offered specific questions the researcher/writer must ask about how he or she has influenced the research and interpretation, such as, how have my attitudes, demeanor, personality, and expectancies shaped the outcome?⁴⁵

In the 1970s, almost at the same time as the developments in the writing of biography and the conceptual changes among some sociologists and anthropologists (and even a few psychologists who were using the life review as a research method), feminist theorists were raising questions about relationships of power in society. Working separately in the fields of English, education, anthropology, psychology, sociology, and history, but also talking together, they discussed the ways class position and sexual asymmetry operated in interpersonal relations. Their ideas were inevitably applied to the interview situation.

Sociologist Dorothy Smith made an early commentary on research methodology from the feminist point of view by arguing that “objective” sociology has depended upon class and sex bases. Now it is impossible, she wrote, for “sociology to evade the problem that our kind of society is known and experienced rather differently from different positions within it.”⁴⁶ In 1975, *Another*

⁴⁴ Thomas Cottle, “The Life Study: On Mutual Recognition and the Subjective Inquiry,” *Urban Life and Culture* 2/3 (October 1973): 349-350.

⁴⁵ Ken Plummer, “The Doing of Life Histories” and “Theorizing Lives” in *Documents of Life* (no. 7 in the Contemporary Social Research Series, general editor M. Bulmer. London: Allen and Unwin, 1983), 84 and 103.

⁴⁶ Dorothy Smith, “Women’s Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology,” *Sociological Inquiry* 44/1 (1974): 12.

Voice: Feminist Perspectives on Social Life and Social Science, a collection of original articles by sociologists, edited by Marcia Millman and Rosabeth Kanter, presented work on the influence of gender on every aspect of society, even interpersonal relationships in research.⁴⁷ The 1977 edition of *Frontiers* was devoted entirely to oral history as a way of recovering the history of women. Sherna Gluck and other contributors speculated on how the difference in culture between interviewer and narrator—“including gender, race, class, ethnicity and regional identification”—affects the interview.⁴⁸ In an article “Feminist Criticism of the Social Sciences” for the *Harvard Educational Review* in 1979, Marcia Weskott declared that the ideal of objectivity, by trying to eliminate subjectivity, prevented the searcher from realizing that meanings are arrived at through the intersubjectivity of subject and object.⁴⁹

And feminist researchers using the in-depth interview were concerned with how the dominant position of the researcher—who knows all the questions to ask and by implication all the answers—can subdue the narrator. By the late 1970s, they began to publish assertions that the cult of scientific objectivity was a means of maintaining the researcher in a “one-up” position.⁵⁰ Liz Stanley and Sue Wise in “Back Into the Personal or: Our Attempt to Construct Feminist Research” argued,

We reject the idea that scientists, or feminists, can become experts in other people’s lives. And we reject the belief that there is one true reality to become experts about. We feel that feminism’s present renaissance has come about precisely because many women have rejected other people’s (men’s) interpretations of our lives.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Marcia Millman and Rosabeth Moss Kanter, eds., *Another Voice: Feminist Perspectives on Social Life and Social Science* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1975).

⁴⁸ Sherna Gluck, “What’s So Special About Women: Women’s Oral History,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies* 2/2(Summer 1977): 7.

⁴⁹ Marcia Weskott, “Feminist Criticism of the Social Sciences,” *Harvard Educational Review* 49:4 (1979): 425.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* See also Ann Oakley, “Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms,” in *Doing Feminist Research*, ed. Helen Roberts (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 30-61; and Judith Stacey, “Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?” in *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, ed. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1991), 111-119.

⁵¹ Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, “‘Back Into the Personal’ or: Our Attempt to Construct Feminist Research,” *Theories of Women’s Studies*, eds. Gloria Bowles and Renate Duelli Klein (London: Routledge, 1983), 194-195.

Feminists pointed out that the notion of scientific objectivity is androcentric.⁵² They talked about how the questions men asked and what they chose to define as important, using their objective scientific methods, had led them to leave out a lot of information about women.⁵³ They decided they would have to use subjectivity. In the spring issue of the *Oral History Review* in 1987, historian Kathryn Anderson summed up a realization many shared: “Reviewing my interviews, I have found that my training in the history of facts and action triumphed over my awareness of a decade of historical research pointing to the importance of relationships and consciousness in women’s lives”⁵⁴

That same spring, Daphne Patai’s article in the *International Journal of Oral History*, “Ethical Problems of Personal Narratives, or Who Should Eat the Last Piece of Cake?” emphasized that the possibility of the interviewer’s exploitation of the narrator is built into every research project.⁵⁵ The implication of her work is that we cannot go about research without questioning ourselves, our biases, our purposes, our reactions to the narrator and the process, and the effects our research have on the narrator.

In the eighties, a flood of articles by women in specific social science disciplines critiqued positivism. In *Analyzing Gender: A Handbook of Social Science Research*, published in 1987, editors Myra Marx Ferree and Beth Hess, summed up feminists’ critiques of positivism developed over nearly 20 years:

Feminist methodology rejects the positivist division between theory and practice, between the researcher and the “object” of research. The image of science as establishing mastery over subjects, as demanding the absence of feeling, and as enforcing separateness of the knower from the known, all under the guise of “objectivity,” has been carefully critiqued even in reference to the physical sciences. Elements that are present in scientific knowing but devalued because they are associated with femaleness—intuition, empathy, and

⁵² Susan Geiger, “Women’s Life Histories: Method and Content,” *Signs* 11 (1986): 338.

⁵³ Ilene Alexander, Suzanne Bunkers, and Cherry Muhanji, “A Conversation on Studying and Writing about Women’s Lives Using Nontraditional Methodologies,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 3 & 4 (1989): 99.

⁵⁴ Kathryn Anderson et al, “Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History,” *Oral History Review* (Spring 1987): 109.

⁵⁵ Daphne Patai, “Ethical Problems of Personal Narratives, or Who Should Eat the Last Piece of Cake?” *International Journal of Oral History* 8 (February 1987): 5-27.

passion—are ignored in the positivist account and eventually distort the actual process of doing science.⁵⁶

Critiques like these notwithstanding, mainstream sociology, psychology, economics, and political science continue to champion the ideal of scientific objectivity in research. Historians, according to Novick, have not arrived at a consensus.⁵⁷ However, qualitative sociology, ethnography, biography, and feminist theory have embraced this conceptual shift to insist on awareness of the interactive process involving interviewer and narrator, interviewer and content.⁵⁸

Has the paradigm shifted for oral history? Reading articles in the *Oral History Review*, I notice that a rejection of old notions of objectivity was very much influencing how some oral historians thought about what they were doing in the late seventies and early eighties. Beginning in 1987, however, in nearly every article in the first volume in that year, writers discussed their motivation and feelings about the interviewing project they were engaged in. From that time, contributors have often explored the ways their class, gender, age, or ethnicity affected their interaction with the narrator. And they have briefly mentioned the ways their reactions to the narrator affected the research and interpretive processes.⁵⁹ They have talked about the interview as a collaborative effort, not between authority and subject but between two searchers of the past

⁵⁶ Myra Marx Ferree and Beth Hess, *Analyzing Gender: A Handbook of Social Science Research* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1987); see also Marilyn Strathern, “An Awkward Relationship: The Case of Feminism and Anthropology,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 12:2 (1987): 276-292.

⁵⁷ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 592.

⁵⁸ See especially recent work such as the sociological text by Sherryl Kleinman and Martha Copp, *Emotions and Fieldwork* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1993); the work of anthropologists like Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989); in collections of writers’ observations of their process in writing biography, such as *The Challenge of Feminist Biography*, eds. Sara Alpern, Joyce Antler, Elisabeth Perry, and Ingrid Scobie (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

⁵⁹ See especially articles in *The Oral History Review*, such as Blanca Erazo, “The Stories Our Mothers Tell” *Oral History Review* 16/2 (Fall 1988): 23-28; Micaela di Leonardo, “Oral History As Ethnographic Encounter” *Oral History Review* 15 (Spring 1987): 1-20; John Forrest and Elisabeth Jackson, “Get Real: Empowering the Student Through Oral History” *Oral History Review* 18/1 (Spring 1990): 29-44; Robert S. Newman, “Objectivity and Subjectivities: Oral Narratives from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam” *Oral History Review* 21/2 (Winter 1993): 89-95; Richard Candida Smith, “Review Essay: Ronald Grele on the Role of Theory in Oral History” *Oral History Review* 21/2 (Winter 1993): 99-103. See also the volume *International Annual of Oral History, 1990: Subjectivity and Multiculturalism in Oral History*, edited by Ronald Grele (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992).

and present. In the recently published collection of essays, *Interactive Oral History Interviewing*, Allan Futrell and Charles Willard declared, "We want to emphasize the emerging relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee as the key component in understanding the meaning created during the interview."⁶⁰ Certainly, the paradigm has shifted in oral history.

As practitioners and instructors we have to be more than just aware of this shift in the paradigm for oral historians, we have to begin incorporating the concept of reflexivity into our writing and teaching. In the past, it was always easier to talk about effects on the narrator than to take a hard look at ourselves, at how we affect the process of research and analysis, how we are affected. And we historians have concentrated on providing full citations for the location of the document rather than on the search itself or on our process during the search and analysis; it has not been our custom to put our reflections on the ways we reacted to the documents into print. But we need to not only question our own work, we need to place the published writing in a total context which includes revelation of our own agendas when the reader needs this information to evaluate the research. The fear is sometimes expressed that every research article or book will deal with the researcher's personal experiences and the research topic itself will take second place in the presentation. I am not advocating that the researcher's personal reactions become the emphasis of the research. What I am suggesting is that when we pretend there is nothing going on inside of us that is influencing the research and interpretation, we prevent ourselves from using an essential research tool. And in some cases, the reader needs to know what influenced the research and interpretation.

Anthropologist Victor Turner's goal of having "an objective relation" to our own subjectivity is something to aim for.⁶¹ Devereux expressed this stance well, "The scientific study of man . . . must use the subjectivity inherent in all observation as the royal road to an authentic, rather than fictitious, objectivity."⁶²

⁶⁰ Allan Futrell and Charles Willard, "Intersubjectivity and Interviewing," in *Interactive Oral History Interviewing*, Eva M. McMahan and Kim Lacy Rogers, eds. (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994), 84.

⁶¹ Turner, forward to *African Apostles*, 8.

⁶² George Devereux, *From Anxiety to Method in the Social Sciences* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), xvii.

Do I try to have my cake and eat it, too? Yes. I am talking about two aims which I see as indissoluble, not antithetical—(1) understanding the subjective aspects of the research and interpretation so that (2) we can carry out the project with as much objectivity as possible and use subjectivity to advantage. A value-free research process, the definition of objectivity I use here,⁶³ is not possible. But the intent of that definition is that we should not ignore evidence because it does not fit our prior assumptions—we have to be conscious therefore of what our prior assumptions are. To my mind, objectivity in research has two aspects: (1) the collection of all information, including the subjective, bearing directly on the research question and (2) the critical examination of the evidence with the methods of examination themselves under scrutiny. These aspects of research can only be goals, not actual attainments: we can never gather all the evidence, we can never be completely aware of all researcher intrusion. And the “complex web” in the interpersonal relations in an interview prevents us from sorting things out in discrete boxes.⁶⁴

Although this matter of researcher influence on the research is often mentioned now in oral history literature, it is not often dealt with in any detail. Even works on intersubjectivity have little to say that is specific about effects on the interviewer.⁶⁵ This kind of analysis is not simple or easy, but we can glean some information

⁶³ In the presentation of Louise Tilly’s essay, “People’s History and Social Science History,” and responses, “Between Social Scientists: Responses to Louise A. Tilly,” *The International Journal of Oral History* 1985: 6 (1):5-46, definitions of objectivity in social science research were blurred but seem to refer to using subjective elements in the document as opposed to “hard facts.” Louisa Passerini called attention to the fact that the two concepts, objectivity and subjectivity, cannot be separated, see pp. 22-23. And Ronald Grele noted that the selection of facts to present depends upon many factors, some of them subjective. “Louise A. Tilly’s Response to Thompson, Passerini, Bertaux-Wiame and Portelli, With a Concluding Comment by Ronald J. Grele,” *Ibid.*, pp. 40-46.

⁶⁴ Charles L. Briggs offers a critique of Durkheim’s notion that “social facts exist independently of the observer” and draws attention to the “complex web” of interpersonal relations in the interview. Charles L. Briggs, *Learning How to Ask: A Sociolinguistic Appraisal of the Role of the Interview in Social Science Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 21-22.

⁶⁵ Notable recent exceptions to this are articles in the *International Annual of Oral History, 1990: Subjectivity and Multiculturalism in Oral History*, ed. Ronald J. Grele (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992). See Michelle Palmer, Marianne Esolen, Susan Rose, Andrea Fishman, and Jill Bartoli, “‘I Haven’t Anything to Say’: Reflections on Self and Community in Collecting Oral Histories,” pages 167-189, see especially p. 176-177; LuAnn Jones, “Voices of Southern Agricultural History,” pages 135-144.

from research in psychology and communication studies relevant to this topic of reflexivity in oral history interviewing—particularly, the research on how the ways we think about ourselves influence our judgment of the narrator.⁶⁶ In any one-on-one situation, we are bombarded with many stimuli—so many that we have to focus on certain aspects of the other person’s behavior and ignore others. We have to be selective, and we may select according to what we value. What we value comes from thinking about our own experiences. Psychologists Hazel Markus and Jeanne Smith described the assumption researchers make about this phenomenon: the self-structure (sometimes referred to as the self-schema) is comprised of thoughts and feelings about the self in certain domains and influences the individual’s perception of others in those domains.⁶⁷ This assumption has been tested and research results do indicate that “self-relevant qualities (traits and behaviors) can figure in the description of others.”⁶⁸

Furthermore, it appears from the research that we notice variation in the behavior of others in those areas of pre-defined importance to us. Markus and Smith explained: “Thus when some aspect of the stimulus (the person-to-be-perceived) is relevant to an area that is important to the perceiver, this aspect is likely to be focused on and elaborated with information from the individual’s own self-structure.”⁶⁹

The schema about the self is only the beginning. In the plural, there are constructs based on gender, class, age, race, ethnicity, and ideology which influence how the interviewer relates to the narrator. These schemata, or preconceived ideas about what a person or situation should be, are learned in the subculture we grew up in or live in as an adult.⁷⁰ Raymond Gorden gives the example

⁶⁶ E. Mintz, “An Example of Assimilative Projection,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 52 (1956): 270-280. H. J. Goldings, “On the Avoval and Projection of Happiness,” *Journal of Personality* 25 (1954): 50-57. See the volume, M. Sherif and C. I. Hovland, *Social Judgment: Assimilation and Contrast Effects in Communication and Attitude Change* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961).

⁶⁷ Hazel Markus and Jeanne Smith, “The Influence of Self-Schemata on the Perception of Others” in *Personality, Cognition, and Social Interaction*, eds. Nancy Cantor and John F. Kihlstrom (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Erlbaum, 1981), see p. 234 for section I paraphrase here.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁷⁰ Peter A. Andersen, “Cognitive Schemata in Personal Relationships,” in *Individuals in Relationships*, ed. Steve Duck (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1993), 16-18.

of the interviewer who asked a narrator living in an urban slum about parenthood. Her views were unlike his middle-class views and his disapproval was subtly communicated. His narrator did not respond so candidly after that.⁷¹

Howard Sypher, Mary Lee Hummert, and Sheryl Williams concluded that this self-schema research provides a “cautionary message” for the interviewer: “As interviewers, we must attempt to move beyond our own self-schemas, focusing the interview not on what is important to us in our lives, but what is important to our interviewees—regardless of the accuracy with which they actually recall events.”⁷²

Recently an example of this smacked me in the face. I was interviewing family members of a woman whose literary biography I was engaged in writing. I had read all of her published work, including her autobiography, and much of her documents collection in the archives. The first narrator came to my cottage to record. I was excited about finding the answers to the questions that had been flooding my mind. Soon I became aware of a feeling of great heaviness. By the end of the interview, although I managed to serve tea and express my gratitude to the narrator, I was depressed. I packed the tape away and did not listen to it for three months. When I did take courage and listened, I realized that I had wanted information on family relationships and on clues to this woman writer’s internal life. The narrator recounted external events, purely factual information. I had had unrealistic expectations of the narrator: I wanted him to think out loud along the lines I was thinking. He did not say what I thought was important—he said what in his view was important.

Now there is a body of research literature in communication studies, especially sociolinguistics, on the effects of gender in conversation. Some of these studies, but not all, are applicable to the interview situation. For example, a male interviewer may begin to

⁷¹ Raymond L. Gorden, *Interviewing: Strategy, Techniques and Tactics* (Chicago: Dorsey Press, 1987), 251.

⁷² Howard Sypher, Mary Lee Hummert, and Sheryl Williams, “Social Psychological Aspects of the Oral History Interview,” in *Interactive Oral History Interviewing*, ed. Eva M. McMahan and Kim Lacy Rogers (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Erlbaum Associates, 1994), 58.

feel some competition with his male narrator;⁷³ or a woman who is interviewing may express empathy only to find it is received by the male narrator as condescension.⁷⁴ Expertise, if the interviewer is a woman, may come across differently to the narrator than if the interviewer is a man: men may use expertise to establish authority while women may use expertise to get a feeling of empowerment from being helpful.⁷⁵

Age can also make a difference in what kinds of information the interviewer thinks is important. Attorney and historian Amy Tobol interviewed attorneys who had been active in a law school student organization which assisted southern civil rights attorneys in the 1960s and 1970s. She found that they were puzzled when she raised the question of whether they perceived of themselves as activists or lawyers and whether these roles seemed at odds with each other. She had trouble getting clear answers. She observed, "It occurred to me, particularly after I interviewed people who participated during the late 1970s and 1980s that I was speaking in 'nineties language' about 'sixties' experiences."⁷⁶ She had framed the question in terms of vital interests in her own life experience of the 1990s, but these were not terms they used to view their reality in the 1960s and 1970s.

Another facet of the interview situation is interviewer's need—whether instrumental or emotional. Barbara Erskine described her reaction to interviewing a man who had been a pilot during World War II. He talked about seeing his buddies in planes around him, dying. Suddenly his narration brought back to her own mind her father's death in a plane crash thirty years earlier. She said, "Dad's

⁷³ Don H. Zimmerman and Candace West, "Sex Roles, Interruptions and Silences in Conversation," in *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance*, ed. Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley (Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1983), 125. H. M. Leet-Pellegrini, "Conversational Dominance as a Function of Gender and Expertise," in *Language: Social Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Howard Giles, W. Peter Robinson, and Philip M. Smith (Oxford: Pergamon, 1980), 102. For discussion of these findings applicable to the in-depth interview, see Valerie Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Practical Guide for Social Scientists* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1994), 129-134.

⁷⁴ Research findings summarized by Daniel N. Maltz and Ruth A. Borker, "A Cultural Approach to Male-Female Miscommunication," in *Language and Social Identity*, ed. John J. Gumperz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 198.

⁷⁵ Leet-Pellegrini, "Conversational Dominance as a Function of Gender and Expertise," 98.

⁷⁶ Amy Ruth Tobol, "Talking to Advocates: Interviewing Law Students, Civil Rights Research Council Activists," paper delivered at the Annual Conference of the Oral History Association, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, October 19, 1995.

face momentarily became that of my informant. I had to ask myself, ‘Whose story am I listening to?’” She had not allowed herself to cry at her father’s funeral—the family needed her to be stoic and in control. Now she grieved with the narrator over losses. In this case, the sharing of a feeling, she believes, may have been “a springboard to better interviewing.”⁷⁷

Still, another possibility in the interaction of two people is the process by which a person infuses into a current personal situation feelings about someone from the past.⁷⁸ Transference usually operates on an unconscious level, but it does not have to remain an unconscious influence. Transferring past feelings onto a person in a present situation can go on in any interpersonal encounter, including the oral history interview. I do not merge here the distinctly different purposes and methods of the clinical interview and the oral history interview, but the concepts are of some practical value for the oral historian.

For example, an interviewer may take an instant dislike to the senior foreign service narrator because he evokes some feelings of injustice another authority figure has caused. If you feel at the beginning of the interview a real dislike of the narrator, transference may be one of the influences impinging. Here the interviewer’s transference could set up a negative dynamic as he or she keeps challenging the narrator’s every statement even when it is not warranted. If you can get a minute to think it over (for example, taking time to check the recording device), you can make yourself aware of the negative feeling and gain some control over it so that you do

⁷⁷ Barbara Erskine, “Loss and Grief in Oral History,” paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Oral History Association, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, October 19, 1995.

⁷⁸ Karl Figli presents a discussion of transference in the oral history interview in “Oral History and the Unconscious,” *History Workshop Journal* 26 (Autumn 1988): 120-132. In this issue, there is a Special Feature on psychoanalysis and history. Transference is difficult to measure and therefore researchers have shied away from this topic in empirical research. Most often the research literature contains case by case analysis of the way transference and countertransference have operated. See Charles J. Gelso and Jean A. Carter, “Components of the Psychotherapy Relationship: Their Interaction and Unfolding During Treatment,” *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 41/3 (1994): 296-306. Charles J. Gelso and Jean A. Carter, “Level of Generality and Clear Thinking in Theory Construction and Theory Evaluation: Reply to Greenberg (1994) and Patton (1994),” *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 41/3 (1994): 414. See also Edward S. Bordin, “Theory and Research on the Therapeutic Working Alliance” in *The Working Alliance: Theory, Research and Practice*, Adam O. Horvath and Leslie L. Greenberg, eds. (New York: Wiley, 1994) 13-37, see especially 29-30 and 33-34.

not unconsciously prejudice the interview. Later, when you have time for reflection, you can ask yourself some questions about what might be causing the negative feelings.

Another example of this occurs frequently, I suspect: A narrator may be consciously or unconsciously relating to a younger interviewer as a daughter or son. Not only may transference be influencing narrators' attitudes in the interview but there may be transference as the interviewer responds to this. Micaela di Leonardo in *Varieties of Ethnic Experience* said that her middle-aged narrators often thought of her as a daughter—they fitted her into “an established role.” She enjoyed the warm rapport this infused into the interviewing. However, she was not so pleased when one narrator scolded her in a parental manner: “You mean Mommy and Daddy *allowed* you to have Thanksgiving away from home?”⁷⁹

When the feelings between narrator and interviewer are positive, the influence of this on the progress of the interview will usually be positive and you will have time later to muse over this. But I have found myself hesitating to ask some things of narrators for whom I felt affection lest my questions cause them discomfort. Awareness of this positive transference might help the interviewer to confront the narrator with the difficult questions that would have perhaps been avoided otherwise.

There is also the possibility that the interviewer can be too much invested in the topic, too closely identifying with a person or cause. In the interview mentioned above in which I sought information for a biography and became more and more dispirited, the narrator near the end said in his factual way that my subject's husband died without a will. All the money and property was divided equally among his heirs so that at the end of her life, she had only her house and no money to heat it. He found her living in winter in one room of her house with only a little space heater for warmth. I had begun to identify with the subject of the biography so much that when he described her poverty, I felt such distress that his next words passed me by.

There is also the unique situation in oral history research with which psychological research is not concerned. In the oral history interview, just by virtue of the fact that you are recording the testi-

⁷⁹ Micaela di Leonardo, *Varieties of Ethnic Experience: Kinship, Class and Gender Among California Italian-Americans* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), 37.

mony means that both interviewer and narrator have in the back of their minds the presence of other audiences.⁸⁰ Both have a need to articulate a view of their reality consonant with the communities they identify with, an ideology they share. Ronald Grele described this as a “particular vision of history” which provides a context for each participant. Grele analyzed an interview with Mel Dubin, a cutter in the garment industry, union organizer for the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, and later an officer. Grele said that the narrative interwove four different historical strands: “his own autobiography, the history of the organization and success of the ILGWU, a history of the garment industry, and a brief history of the City of New York.”⁸¹ People involved in labor struggles, especially in his union, were Dubin’s imagined audience; his ideology was based on his conviction of the union’s championship of the working person. Undoubtedly, the interviewer asked questions soliciting information of interest to a different audience—labor historians and other academics who would pass judgment on his work. The interviewer’s ideology was similar to Dubin’s in that there is shown sympathy to the struggles of working-class men and women.

This consideration of the influence of ideology leads to a closely allied one, the influence on the research process of the community the researcher is identified with. Michael V. Angrosino in his article “Conversations in a Monastery” explained why he thought the monks were willing to talk to him. He was Catholic and he often stayed in the monastery for several days at a time, following the daily schedule of prayers and meals. They knew that he was “sympathetic with their aims.” They must have identified him with the community of practicing Catholics and with people who appreciate the monks’ way of life. He said, “I believe that I was able to overcome (or, at least, to mitigate) these resistance factors mainly because I was perceived as something of a participant-observer, that I had attended retreats at the monastery and had been involved

⁸⁰ Eva M. McMahan, *Elite Oral History Discourse: A Study of Cooperation and Coherence* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1989), 19. See brief discussion of Lacan’s idea that in any two-person conversation, there is at least a third audience present, George E. Marcus and Michael J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 31.

⁸¹ Ronald Grele, “Listen to Their Voices,” in *Envelopes of Sound*, ed. Ronald Grele (Chicago: Precedent Publishers, 1985, 2nd rev. ed.), 213 and 216.

in various community programs that had brought me into contact with some of the monks, including the Abbot.”⁸²

Consider how a *difference* in ideology can impinge. As long as we are interviewing people of similar ideology, there is no problem with empathy. (Possibly there is a tendency to make heroes of our narrators in this case.) Having empathy with someone whose values you abhor is difficult. Even if you repress an expression of disdain, body language and subtleties in the phrasing of the questions will reveal your attitude. William Sheridan Allen described his attitude about interacting with former Nazis in his research for *The Nazi Seizure of Power*—he needed to understand why and how people on all sides did what they did.⁸³ I think you would have to keep reminding yourself of this.

Sometimes, you simply cannot empathize with a narrator for good reason, but you have to be aware of what is happening to be in control of yourself and make a conscious decision about what to do. For example, you might explain briefly your point of view and respectfully remind the narrator that this is her or his opportunity to record for a wider audience. But expect the responses to be different from those the narrator would give a sympathetic listener. Interviewers who can respond to narrators with empathy can expect fuller answers, while an inability to have empathy may cut short the interview.⁸⁴

In summary, liking or not liking, feeling repelled by difference in ideology or attracted by a shared world-view, sensing difference in gender or age or social class or ethnicity, all influence the ways we ask questions and respond to narrators and interpret and evaluate what they say. As analyst and fieldworker George Devereux argued nearly 30 years ago, we must view our difficulties (and I would add, pleasures as well) as important data in their own right.⁸⁵

⁸² Michael V. Angrosino, “Conversations in a Monastery,” *Oral History Review* 19/1-2 (Spring-Fall, 1991): 60 and 71.

⁸³ William Sheridan Allen, *The Nazi Seizure of Power: The Experience of a Single German Town, 1922-1945* (New York: F. Watts, 1984), see author’s preface, x and xi.

⁸⁴ Deborah Davis and William T. Perkwitz, “Consequences of Responsiveness in Dyadic Interaction,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37: 544.

⁸⁵ George Devereux, *From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioral Sciences*, xvii.

There are specific questions to ask so that we understand what is happening:

1. What am I feeling about this narrator?
2. What similarities and what differences impinge on this interpersonal situation?
3. How does my own ideology affect this process? What group outside of the process am I identifying with?
4. Why am I doing the project in the first place?
5. In selecting topics and questions, what alternatives might I have taken? Why didn't I choose these?
6. What other possible interpretations are there? Why did I reject them?
7. What are the effects on me as I go about this research? How are my reactions impinging on the research?

Now we have a paradigm that permits us awareness and use of the interactive process of interviewer and narrator, of interviewer and content. This kind of awareness is on the main stage—it's not the side show that it used to be.