

## Family stories

From Block 5: The roles of families by Daniel Weinbren, pp. 32-34

Listening to family members' personal tales can bring the past to life in a thought-provoking way, can illuminate society's understanding of the past and can help us to depict and understand the complexity and richness of the subject. Using interviews as sources of perception rather than of fact allows you to explore the qualitative dimension of human experience, how families came to decisions, and how kinship networks helped people to get and keep jobs, how far families facilitate and inhibit social change and provide strategies for dealing with economic and social upheaval. Reminiscence can be a process for establishing a sense of self and of relationships with others. People may evaluate experiences in order to give meaning to their lives and, in so doing, employ culturally recognised coherent stories structured by known canonical narrative forms. If these are problems with oral testimony then similar dilemmas might be expressed about many other accounts of the past. It is difficult not to rewrite or reconceptualise one's life when recalling it some years after the events being described and even some diarists have amended the accounts that they wrote at the time. For example, when the social worker, investigator and author Beatrice Webb wrote *My Apprenticeship* in 1926 (which incidentally contains a very useful guide to interviewing), she based it on the revised and edited version of the detailed diaries she had kept since 1872.<sup>78</sup> Autobiography is the construction of an individual; oral testimony is created by both the interviewer and interviewee.

Just as with written primary sources, historians can gain insights into how the past was experienced through analysis of people's contradictions, selection, silence and repetition. Gillis, in the book from which you read an extract earlier, suggests that we employ stories in our understanding of the world, whether or not we articulate them, and that people compose their lives through the myths by which they live. He argues that we live in a world of symbolic interpretations of ourselves to ourselves, that the Victorians created the notion of stable authentic families and the 'idol' of the family is a fable devised to help us cope with harsh economic realities. Oral testimony can help get inside the black box of 'the family' by providing new insights into how people understand their own past. The conclusions of adults, often middle-class adults, who controlled manuscripts and printed evidence, can be balanced against the words of working-class children. In the UK there were over 100 pupil's strikes between 1889 and 1939 but there is little written evidence of these beyond scanty press reports. The memories of the participants, collated and framed in his own terms by Stephen Humphries, suggest complex motives and help to counter the notion of an age of lost innocence when children were disciplined, conformist and submissive.<sup>79</sup> Oral testimony can enlarge, enrich and restructure history by broadening our understanding of society, and allow us to gain fresh dimensions for our judgements. It can correct and supplement other sources. An example of work by oral historians which confronts the issues raised about the uses of oral history and provides scrupulous explanation of their methods is a text about 'invisible' people by A. James Hammerton and Alistair Thomson.<sup>80</sup> Australia received more than two million British immigrants in the post-war decades, and both the decision to leave the UK and, in the case of 250,000 people, to return, was very closely related to ideas about family and kinship ties. Meeting interviewees can often lead to the discovery of new sources. In the case of Hammerton and Thomson's book, letters, postcards, diaries and scrapbooks, slides and tapes sent home all came to light and were employed by the authors in their analysis of these migrants' self-representations.

Whole-life interviews can be a coherent source because they connect the social and the individual in one experience. There is a dialectical relationship with individuals forming society and society-forming individuals. Each individual account reveals the history of a period through the relationship of the individual with others, and how people are both constrained by, and create, economic and social relationships. People live within the material and cultural boundaries of their time span and their life histories can reveal relations between individuals and social forces and changes in experience over time. People place their experiences within the context of their whole life. Often we do not know what is typical, we do not have a satisfactory knowledge of the parameters of many social phenomena in the recent past. Each life is a unique sensory and psychological entity, but its social determinations are shared by others. A single perspective can illustrate social and historical developments, can add human context and recognise the value of individual experience.

Angela Davis provides examples of how people construct their pasts and of the disparities between private experiences and public images.<sup>81</sup> In 2004, she interviewed Annie (born in 1944, a secretary who married aged twenty-two and had children in 1969 and 1971) and Helen (born 1943, a secretary who married aged twenty and had children in 1968 and 1970). These women, when talking about their experiences of childhood, conceptualised it in terms of an ideal, a myth about the family. They both presented their own childhoods as innocent and carefree. Annie said that it 'always seemed to be long hot summers' and Helen said that she had 'a lot more freedom. Nobody worried'. When Annie recalled childbirth for an interview she initially said that she 'didn't have any complications everything was fairly, fairly easy'. However, she then revealed that she had been sick for four months during pregnancy. Helen said that she 'had a fantastic pregnancy' but then explained that she found the forceps delivery traumatic. Possibly these women were being conventionally polite, just as people say 'Fine' when asked about their health, and possibly they thought that pain in childbirth was unavoidable and not worth mentioning. It may be that muting is endemic to the epistemology of oral testimony. Perhaps their accounts were influenced by their sex education.<sup>82</sup> Both ceased paid employment and stayed at home to look after their children. They, perhaps defensively, felt the need to argue that this decision was beneficial for child and mother. Helen said 'the first five years of a child's life are their actual development years'. Both struggled to reconcile their own sense of reality and their ideals, having had personal experiences which diverged from that which they presented as the social norm (for example, Helen's husband left when the children were young).

When you listen to accounts of the past you might conclude that the respondents were not as critical as you might have been or that they appear to show more interest in the personalities of those in positions of power than in how that authority was exercised. However, it may be that the interviewees were explaining how they coped with humiliating or exploitative experiences. Values and attitudes are elements of history and open to investigation. What is fact and what is value is often difficult to ascertain. People's memories and experiences of families are in part determined by myths, images and the prevailing ideas of the time. Family languages, stories, images and rituals do not reflect a pre-existing reality but are agents within the construction of that reality. Oral sources can indicate not simply what people did, but that which they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing and what they would like the interviewer to think they did. Listening to evaluations, the theories, the self-censorship, the taboos, the silences, the ways in which interviewees use narrative models or reconstruct the past to render it more acceptable may help you to gain a better understanding of the fables which sustain the family.

## Notes

78 Beatrice Webb, *My Apprenticeship* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1926).

79 Stephen Humphries, *Hooligans or Rebels? An Oral History of Working-Class Childhood and Youth, 1889–1939* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981).

80 A. James Hammerton and Alistair Thomson, *Ten Pound Poms: Australia's Invisible Migrants* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005).

81 Angela Davis, 'Oral History and the Creation of Collective Memories: Women's Experiences of Motherhood in Oxfordshire c.1945–1970', *University of Sussex Journal of Contemporary History*, 10 (2006), 1–11.

82 This possibility was explored later by the same author. See Angela Davis, "'Oh No, Nothing, We Didn't Learn Anything': Sex Education and the Preparation of Girls for Motherhood, c. 1930–1970', *History of Education*, 37 (2008), 661–77.