Oral Evidence and the History of American Children’s Lives

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Two biases may dissuade American historians from pursuing the oral history of children’s lives. The first is the historian’s general reluctance to write the history of childhood from the child’s perspective. The history of childhood remains a small specialty within the larger social history of the family, but even the important contributors to the history of the child tend to write with the more articulate adult social world as the center of meaning. They display a version of the bias Brian Sutton-Smith calls the “triviality barrier” to the study of children’s folklore, by which he means the adult attitude that childhood is important only as a prelude to the adult lives that “really count.”

As a result, in their practice historians of childhood tend to omit the child as an autonomous actor in the social drama. Social historians have learned how to recover the historical cultures of slaves, workers, women, ethnic minorities, and other relatively powerless groups whose lives leave nontraditional sorts of evidence. But the adult bias remains even when the others are erased, so children remain the last underclass to have their history written from their point of view.

Even granting the importance of childhood in its own terms, however, a second bias arises. It is the historian’s reluctance to use oral evidence as a way of getting at children’s views of their own history. Historians of childhood almost exclusively use as their evidence written documents or material artifacts selected, preserved, and legitimated by adults. In part this bias is built naturally into a historian’s notion of what constitutes history. We interview older adults because we want to “collect” from their memories testimony about historical events or perspectives on those events that left little enduring physical evidence. It therefore makes little sense to collect “oral histories” from children. They have no “history,” in the usual sense, so the historian is as little interested in the child’s oral testimony about what happened two years ago as in the adult’s recollection of events so recent. On these two counts, then, the reluctance of historians to study the history of childhood from the child’s perspective and their reluctance to consider oral evidence as a potential source of that perspective, the oral history of children’s lives remains to be written.

American children talk plenty, of course, but they tend to save the talk for their

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own folk groups. Excepting the obligatory middle-class ritual of performing for home movies, home videotaping, or (more rarely) home audiotaping, most American children do not produce lasting oral evidence of their lives. Or so it seems.

There is abundant oral evidence of the form and content of children's lives, it turns out, but we must look for it in unusual places, not in a special archive of material collected from children and organized according to historians' questions. The oral evidence of children's lives is tucked into the corners of archives documenting the lives and social worlds of adults, lying in the interstices between the adult categories of reality. Oral evidence will play a crucial role in preserving children's viewpoints in our discourse on their history.

In this essay I shall describe four major sources of such oral evidence, assess the strengths and weaknesses of those sources, and suggest how historians might collaborate with folklorists, psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists to establish a rich and accessible body of children's testimony about their lives.

In this review I shall focus mainly on American children, for the most child-generated oral evidence has been collected from them. My definition of children includes those young humans through adolescence. The notions of childhood, youth, and adolescence vary from one social and historical context to another, to be sure, but I base my definition of the child upon current practice by those who call themselves children's folklorists. Such specialists follow Americans' commonsense understanding that graduating from high school (or at least reaching age eighteen) constitutes a transition from childhood to adulthood.

The first sort of oral evidence of children's lives shows up in adult recollection. Oral history collections are full of life-course interviews that include subjects' earliest recollections, though we lack a master index identifying the recollections across oral history archives. Some historians of childhood have used adult recollections to construct specific sorts of histories. In 1949–1950 Sutton-Smith gathered written and oral reminiscences from nearly three hundred adult New Zealanders, with the aim of reconstructing the history of children's play on New Zealand playgrounds. Many of the interviews reached into recollections of childhood play as long ago as 1870. Sutton-Smith gave interviewees a "reminiscence sheet" to help prompt memories of specific games, play formats, and play objects. Unfortunately, there are no audiotapes of those interviews, but Sutton-Smith's study stands as an exemplar for American historians.

A historian using adult recollections of childhood should keep in mind the same methodological and inferential cautions familiar to anyone doing oral history. Compounding the problem for the historian of children's lives is the pervasive American

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2 The Children's Section of the American Folklore Society publishes a quarterly newsletter. Direct inquiries to C.W. Sullivan III, Editor, Children's Folklore Newsletter, Department of English, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27834-4353.

tendency to romanticize the child and childhood. Sutton-Smith has been among the best of the scholars charting the intellectual history and rhetoric of Western adult discourse about childhood and reminding us that children can be as mean, deceitful, and disorderly as any other humans.\(^4\) In addition, we must remind ourselves that the adult recollecting in 1987 her 1920 childhood will be perceiving and interpreting that childhood through her adult, learned categories—from adult notions of propriety to the special vocabularies of popularized psychology. Moreover, the adult oral history informant will probably modify her performance of her recollection in accord with her reading of her audience's understanding of childhood. All such cautions about adult oral histories apply equally to written autobiographies, a related version of first-person testimony about a past life as a child.

**Folklore archives** are the second major source of oral evidence about the history of children's lives and the closest thing to what a historian approaching the oral history of American childhood would want.\(^3\) Folklore archives typically contain individual items or larger collections gathered through nonintrusive observation in natural settings or through interviews with informants. When recording a folk item (such as the familiar children's song: “Never laugh when a hearse goes by”) for deposit in a folklore archive, the folklorist is interested in knowing the age, gender, ethnicity, and occupation of the informant, though the informant is offered the possibility of anonymity. Central to the archive item is the folklore “text,” accompanied by as much information on the “context” as the folklorist can provide. Part of the context might be the informant’s own, “native” interpretation of the meaning of the item.\(^6\)

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\(^4\) For a description of the romantic roots of these ideas, see Brian Sutton-Smith, *Toys as Culture* (New York, 1986). For an example of a nonromantic discussion of children's play, see Brian Sutton-Smith and Diana Kelly-Byrne, “Conclusion: The Masks of Play,” in *The Masks of Play*, ed. Brian Sutton-Smith and Diana Kelly-Byrne (West Point, 1984), 184–99.


\(^6\) SAMPLE FOLKLORE ARCHIVE ITEM: Folksong—American children [Genre—ethnic group]; Susan Venderlip, 20 [informant, age], Student, American [occupation, ethnicity], English [native language], Davis, California [place collected], April 9 1980 [date collected].

[Item]:
Never laugh when the hearse goes by
Or you will be the next to die.
They wrap you up in a big white sheet
And throw you down about 60 feet.
The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out,
They eat the jelly that's in your snout.
Your stomach turns a pretty green
And pus shoots out like whipping cream.
You slap it on a piece of bread
And that's what you eat, when you are Dead.

[Contextual Information]: Susan learned this song from a sorority sister (now aged 20), who remembered learning it as an 8-year-old kid in her trailer park in Fresno. "When you are dead" gets special emphasis and the word "dead" is accompanied by a widening of the eyes and looking directly in the eyes of the person you are singing to. There is also some hand movement, taking one's hands, with fingers curled in and moving them towards the person, especially his or her face, as you open the fingers. [Oral Criticism and Interpretation by Informant and Collector]: This song contains a child's superstition ("never laugh when the hearse goes by") and generally is meant to "gross
Ideally, the folklore text should be collected verbatim if the item is transmitted orally. Folklorists depend heavily on the analysis of variance as texts move across time and space in oral transmission. The precise nature of variants and their relationships to social and cultural contexts are the basis for the folklorist's interpretation of the texts. Because of their interest in even the most subtle changes in a song, joke, local legend, proverb, or riddle, folklorists were among the earliest users of sound recording technology to collect their texts. One folklorist used an Edison machine as early as 1890, and the practice was common by the 1920s. The texts deposited in folklore archives are often verbatim transcriptions from recordings or from the live performance (as best the folklorist could write it down). In many cases, however, the historian will find the original sound recordings in the archives, and in some cases, film and video recordings.

Fortunately for the historian of childhood, children's folklore constitutes large portions of some folklore archives. In such archives the historian will find songs, stories, jokes, riddles, urban legends, customs, rituals, beliefs and superstitions, pranks, games, and more.

Just as folklore has provided crucial evidence for the new histories of women, of minority people, and of other groups whose cultural discourse is primarily oral, so children's folklore will help write their history. The historian interested in children's responses to certain historical events or social trends, for example, should turn to children's jokes, riddles, rhymes, and songs for folk commentary on those events and trends. Sometimes the folklore encodes the historical material, as in the case of the "dead baby joke" cycle and its indirect commentary on abortion. ("What's the difference between a truckload of dead babies and a truckload of bowling balls? You can't use a pitchfork to unload the bowling balls.") But just as often the historian will find the children's folk commentary to be very explicit, as in the antiteacher themes in the cycle of Christa McAuliffe jokes circulating among children immediately after the Challenger space shuttle explosion. ("Why was Christa McAuliffe a bad teacher? She blew up in front of her class once too often.") And antischool parody songs (for example, "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the burning of the school...") are a very old tradition in the United States. Similarly, historians can find in children's oral lore detailed expression of attitudes toward ethnic groups. Historians not accustomed to using folklore might consult the work of leading practitioners, such as Richard M. Dorson and Lawrence W. Levine.

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7 A folklorist's perspectives on using sound recording in fieldwork is offered by Edward D. Ives, The Tape-recorded Interview (Knoxville, 1974).

8 To understand the rationale, theory, and methodology underlying collections of children's folklore, the historian ought to consult introductions to the field. See, for example, a special issue devoted entirely to the specialty, Western Folklore, 39 (July 1980); and Jay Mechling, "Children's Folklore," in Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction, ed. Elliott Oring (Logan, 1986), 91-120.

9 On the "dead baby" jokes, see Barre Toelken, The Dynamics of Folklore (Boston, 1979), 270-71; on jokes showing children's attitudes toward teachers, see Elizabeth Radin Simons, "The NASA Joke Cycle: The Astronauts
There are folklore archives at many major universities and museums across the country. The American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress publishes a list of “Folklife and Ethnomusicology Archives and Related Collections in the United States and Canada.” There are major archives at the four institutions with doctoral programs in folklore and folklife—Indiana University; the University of California, Los Angeles; the University of Pennsylvania; and the University of Texas, Austin. The University of California, Berkeley; the University of Utah; the University of Oregon; the University of Maine; the State University of New York at Buffalo; Utah State University; and Brigham Young University also have significant collections, but even the smaller folklore archives are likely to have children's folklore.

The University of Texas, Austin (UT), folklore archives are especially rich in children's folklore. Several folklorists there participated in an early 1970s project funded by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory with a grant from the National Institute of Education, and much material resulting from the project is deposited in the UT folklore archive, housed at the Center for Intercultural Studies in Folklore and Oral History. Among the publications based on that project, for example, are studies of children's riddling, other genres of children's verbal folklore, and a fine essay on children's traditional speech play.\(^{11}\) Historians using folklore archives to study the history of children's lives ought to be aware of some limitations to the materials in them. There is great variation in the quality of the collecting and of the contextual information provided by the collector. Much material is collected by undergraduate students, for example, who vary considerably in their collecting conscientiousness. There is also the problem of adult access to certain sorts of folklore performed by children.\(^{12}\) Children sometimes are guarded in the presence of adults and may not share shocking or forbidden folklore expressions. Folklorists collecting from children face a number of technical and ethical problems. Nevertheless, folklore archives hold high-quality materials little used by historians of childhood.

A third source of oral evidence of children's lives is the single author's *ethnography* of children. Folklorists, anthropologists, and sociologists often use fieldwork as a basis for articles and books about children's expressive cultures. British folk-

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10 Direct inquiries to the Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, 10 First Street, SE, Washington, DC 20540.
lorists Peter Opie and Iona Opie have been the consummate collectors of children's folklore, and Iona Opie continues to produce books from the materials she and her late husband collected over several decades. No American folklorist has approached the scale of the Opies' work, but American anthropologists have collected children's folklore since the beginning of that discipline in the United States. William Wells Newell (one of the founders, with Franz Boas and others, of the American Folklore Society in 1888) collected children's games and songs in the streets of New York City, and Stewart Culin collected the games of native American children and adults.13

Children's folklore is still an active specialty within folklore studies, and several scholars in this area regularly use sound- and image-recording in their work with children. Marjorie Harness Goodwin, for instance, wrote a folklore analysis of girls' play using over two hundred hours' worth of transcribed tapes recorded during her fieldwork among black, working-class, preadolescent girls in Philadelphia. Similarly, other ethnographers have tried giving their child informants tape recorders with which to "play," with the understanding that the ethnographer could listen to the tapes (while guaranteeing the children anonymity). One folklorist wrote an M.A. thesis entirely from tapes recorded by her daughter and the daughter's preadolescent girl friends at a slumber party. Such tapes, if preserved and deposited in folklore archives, will constitute invaluable evidence for future historians of American childhood.14

Finally, the historian can find in child study scholarship an amazing amount of oral evidence documenting American children's lives. This category includes child development projects undertaken regularly by psychologists, psychiatrists, linguists, sociologists, and other social scientists to test scientific hypotheses or, as in the case of therapeutic interviews, to help young patients.

Sutton-Smith and his colleagues at Columbia University and, later, at the University of Pennsylvania have collected and analyzed a large body of oral evidence in their study of narrative competence in children. Sutton-Smith reproduces transcriptions of the taped stories elicited from their two- to ten-year-old child informants and offers an analysis of the structures of those narratives and what they tell us about imagination and creativity in children.15

In fact, just about all current research in children's epistemology, memory, and learning routinely employs methodologies relying on children's oral testimony. A standard research technique is to have children tell stories or repeat stories told to them in live performance or through electronic media. Some data are collected less intrusively through observational studies at child development "laboratory schools," such as the Early Childhood Laboratory at the University of California, Davis. The

University of Minnesota and several other research universities have similar lab schools that collect and preserve audio and video recordings of children performing their oral traditions. Thus, child psychologists daily record in laboratory and other experimental settings exactly the sorts of children's oral performances that folklorists collect in less structured settings.16

The psychological or psychiatric interview can also generate important oral evidence for the study of the history of children's lives. Robert Coles's multivolume study of American children's lives in crisis shows us the potential in this approach, and elsewhere in the child therapy literature we can read life history accounts by children.17

Social scientific studies of children in what Erving Goffman called "total institutions," such as hospitals and prisons, often generate rather complete, oral accounts by the young inmates or patients. James Bennett's book, *Oral History and Delinquency*, makes an unusual contribution to this literature. Beginning with the goal of evaluating a collection of life histories in the archives of Chicago's Institute for Juvenile Research, Bennett ended up writing a history and rhetoric of the life history as a genre in American juvenile delinquency research.18

There is an enormous amount of recorded evidence generated and preserved by child study research projects, but such data remain a resource largely untapped by historians. The historian faces logistical and methodological problems in attempting to locate and use child study materials, partly because they have usually been collected under research designs far different from the ones a historian would select. But the extant attempts suggest the materials have great potential, offering us the chance to write otherwise inaccessible history. Glen H. Elder, Jr., for example, used the University of California, Berkeley, archives of a longitudinal child development study (begun in 1932) to write his excellent history of the American child in the Great Depression. Elder pays special attention to the problems and possibilities of using child development archives to write the history of children's lives.19

Oral historians should begin collaborating with folklorists, psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists toward creating more systematic ways of preserving collections of oral testimony from children and making them accessible. Oral historians might work with such fieldworkers on a protocol for the study of children's lives through oral histories collected from adults. Historians have a great deal to learn

16 For overviews of these research traditions, see Paul H. Mussen, ed., *Handbook of Child Psychology*, vol. III: *Cognitive Development*, ed. John H. Flavell and Ellen M. Markham (New York, 1983). The National Organization of Child Development Laboratory Schools (based at Michigan State University's College of Human Ecology) can provide membership lists and some information on the sorts of oral and visual data collected by lab schools.


from folklorists, I believe, about the study of children’s lives from the child’s viewpoint. In turn, folklorists and other ethnographers working directly with children’s lives can learn from historians what events and forces, we believe, affect children’s lives and change the contexts for those lives over time.

The time may be right for reviving G. Stanley Hall’s dream of a comprehensive museum (or interconnected set of museums) devoted to children’s lives. Research library and museum collections on children’s lives have tended to restrict their collecting to printed sources or to the material artifacts of childhood. We should begin adding collections of children’s oral evidence to those archives and museums.

“Children should be seen and not heard,” suggests an American proverb often invoked by adults seeking to quiet an intrusive or embarassing child, and, indeed, many Americans tend not to listen to their children. The proverb is bad advice for the historian of childhood. Like other relatively powerless groups, children have had their history told largely through evidence created and preserved by the more powerful, in this case, adults. Listening to children who can no longer be seen is an important antidote to the adult bias inevitable in history written with traditional sorts of evidence.

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