

# Feminist Oral History<sup>1</sup>

Women's oral history . . . is a feminist encounter, even if the interviewee is not herself a feminist.<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction and Terminology

Sociologist Sherna Gluck continues the foregoing quote by explaining that women's oral history is a feminist encounter because it creates new material about women, validates women's experience, enhances communication among women, discovers women's roots, and develops a previously denied sense of continuity. In the same article, she subdivides oral history into types: *topical* (similar to an open-ended interview),<sup>3</sup> *biographical* (concerns an individual other than the interviewee, or follows a life history format), and autobiographical (the "interviewee's life . . . determines . . . the form and content of the oral history").<sup>4</sup> This chapter discusses some of these properties and types, while also raising some controversies.

## Historical Roots of Feminist Recording of Women's Lives

Biographical work has always been an important part of the women's movement because it draws women out of obscurity, repairs the historical record, and provides an opportunity for the woman reader and writer to identify with the subject.<sup>5</sup> Historian Elisabeth Griffith, biographer of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, described the special connection between biography and the women's movement.

Initial efforts to record the lives of eminent American women were made in the 1890s, as the first generation of college-educated women sought to identify women of achievement in an earlier era. [These women] established archives for research and wrote biographies of colonial and contemporary women, like Abigail Adams and Susan B. Anthony. Organizations like the Daughters of the American Revolution related their members to a past that provided proud models of accomplishment. The second surge of biographies came with the renaissance of women's history in the late 1960's.<sup>6</sup>

Feminist biographers frequently looked to the women they studied for more than models of accomplishment—they also looked to them for help. Margaret Caffrey

describes the poignant plea of anthropologist Ruth Benedict who, as a young woman, lacked a sense of purpose in her life. As a result, she felt a “‘desperate longing’ to ‘know how other women have saved their souls alive’ and accorded ‘dignity’ to the rich processes of living.”<sup>7</sup> To satisfy her longing,

her “pet scheme” was to steep herself “in the lives of restless and highly enslaved women” of past generations and write a series of biographical papers from the standpoint of the “new woman.” . . . For . . . four years (1914–1918), the heyday of suffrage fervor in America, culminating in the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment giving women the right to vote, Benedict worked on her manuscript. . . . She was having trouble writing, but by 1916 had refined her “series of biographies” to three: Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797), the English author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, the classic book that sparked the Woman’s Rights Movement in England and America; Margaret Fuller (1810–1850), American Transcendentalist, author of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, the classic American argument for feminism; and Olive Schreiner (1855–1920), the contemporary author of *Woman and Labor*. . . . Her purpose for writing this book . . . [was] . . . the affirmation their lives gave other women. “I long to speak out the intense inspiration that comes to me from the lives of strong women,” she wrote. “They have made of their lives a great adventure.” They had proved “that out of much bewilderment of soul,” steadfast aims could be accomplished.<sup>8</sup>

Although Ruth Benedict tried to save her life by writing biographies, she ultimately realized she could not live through others.

Women . . . had to learn to re-see life as a chance for “vigorous living”. . . . She wanted her book [*Adventures in Womanhood*] to have an impact on society, but its impact on herself was already profound. . . . By writing about them and researching their lives she communed with them and with herself, keeping her creative energy alive in what became more and more a restrictive, isolated marital relationship.<sup>9</sup>

The idea of sisterhood gives feminists a sense of connection with women of the past. When we turn to women of the past for help, we help them as well by restoring them to a place in history. Adding another level to these connections, Australian historian Jill Matthews suggests that by writing about women of the past, “[t]he feminist historian [also] recognizes herself as part of the history she writes.”<sup>10</sup>

My own experience using biographical methods includes a study investigating the specifically female type of political action of Manya Wilbushewitz Shohat, a woman instrumental in the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. In the article I claim that feminist research on individual lives is

a type of scholarship that begins with an insight about women’s condition that requires further elaboration so as to solve the puzzle of one’s own life. . . . It may begin with a discovery about a hitherto ignored woman or trivialized aspects of women’s competence that needs careful examination and then distribution.<sup>11</sup>

Once the project begins, a circular process ensues: the woman doing the study learns about herself as well as about the woman she is studying.

### Types of Oral History Products

Many things have been done with completed feminist oral history projects. *Single* oral histories have been published as analyzed or unanalyzed documents;<sup>12</sup> *sets* of oral histories have been published with or without analysis;<sup>13</sup> *collections* of oral histories have been obtained and stored as an archive for future analysis;<sup>14</sup> and groups have been asked to record their life histories for subsequent collection by an editor.<sup>15</sup> Many accounts or collections contain accompanying photographs that give additional "life" to the life histories.<sup>16</sup>

In one instance, Gretchen M. Bataille and Kathleen Mullen Sands reanalyzed a group of previously published oral histories and autobiographies using techniques of literary criticism and ethnography. They gathered the autobiography

of Maria Chona, a Papago woman whose story was published by Ruth Underhill, an anthropologist, in the 1930s; of Mountain Wolf Woman, a Winnebago who told her story to anthropologist Nancy Lurie in the 1950s; of Anna Shaw Moore, a Pima whose story was published in 1974; of Helen Sekaquaptewa, a Hopi who wrote her autobiography with the help of a non-Indian woman editor during the 1960s; and of Maria Campbell, a Metis woman from Canada whose autobiography, *Halfbreed*, was published in 1973.

The authors stress the shared characteristics of the oral histories of these women despite their differing life-styles and cultures. Clara Sue Kidwell, a reviewer of this book, points out, that in

these works drawn from oral traditions, . . . the sense of time . . . is not strictly linear. . . . there is emphasis on event, attention to sacredness of language, concern with landscape, and attention to tribal values. . . . these autobiographies stress not the importance of women as individuals within their cultures but as representatives of their cultures, preservers, as it were, of traditions and values and a tribal way of life.<sup>17</sup>

Oral histories are also used to identify empirical patterns. For example, in an oral history study of 25 black U.S. urban women between the ages of 32 and 80 identified by community members as having been activists for at least eight years, sociologist Cheryl Townsend Gilkes found that their activism served as a trajectory into the middle class.<sup>18</sup> This study showed that institutions other than formal education and employment<sup>19</sup> provide opportunities for upward mobility.

Groups of oral histories may be examined quantitatively. An example is social psychologist Brinton Lykes' work drawn from the Black Women's Oral History Project collection at Radcliffe College. The intent of her study was to analyze the

perceptions of discrimination among American black women 70 years of age or older who have made a significant contribution to the improvement of the lives of black people especially in the 1940s and 1950s. By listening directly to the voices of black women as spoken in their oral histories we may perhaps more effectively resist the temptation to "artificially dissect" . . . them, to think of them sometimes on the basis of sex and other times on the basis of color or race.<sup>20</sup>

The oral histories enabled her (and others) to "hear" individual women and to "see" patterns derived from the study of larger numbers of women. Her work is also an example of the way journalists, historians, and social scientists who did not collect histories can use oral history collections stored in libraries and other archives for secondary analyses.<sup>21</sup>

Oral histories have also been published as what I would call "paired histories." An example is Susan Tucker's collection of southern black female domestic workers and their white female employers.<sup>22</sup> Juxtaposing how each woman spoke about her relation with the other, Susan Tucker illuminates the texture of their relationships. Encountering oral histories in this paired, contextualized way, the reader learns about each woman and about the social distance and myths that sustained their seemingly close relations.

Feminist oral history projects combined with the collection of artifacts and photographs have been developed into full-scale exhibits. Kathryn Anderson and Susan Armitage, for example, worked together on the Washington Women's Heritage Project, which illustrated the everyday lives of women by drawing on photographs and excerpts from oral history interviews.<sup>23</sup> Sociologist Doris Wilkinson created "The Afro-American Presence in Medicine: A Social History Exhibit (1850-1930)," which raises consciousness by displaying history in a tangible way. My own related work is the creation of a set of videotapes of contemporary feminist social scientists speaking about other female social scientists or themselves. I use these tapes for teaching and for comparative analysis of women of different generations.<sup>24</sup>

### Terminological Variety

A striking feature of the literature on oral history is the lack of uniformity in terminology, as in the case of interviewing. Because of the variety of terms, people may be doing similar research under different labels. In reviewing this work, I found the following terms used interchangeably with "oral history": case studies, in-depth life history interviews,<sup>25</sup> biographical interviews, life histories, and personal narratives. In addition to the variety of labels for the overall method, anthropologist Faye Ginsburg questions what the *parties* should be called:

Because the creation of these life stories was so clearly a collaborative effort, I chose to call the people with whom I worked "interpreters" rather than "informants." While the latter connotes betrayal, voyeurism, and infiltration, interpreter suggests that the ethnographer is more of an interlocuter, in dialogue with both the people with whom she or he works and the audience "back home."<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, she explains the origin of her choice of labels:

Credit for this term belongs to Melissa, the woman in whose home I lived while in Fargo (ND). During the course of my fieldwork, I had occasion to use the word "informant" in conversations with people in Fargo with whom I was working. Although I had long accepted the term as part of the jargon of anthropology, I had always felt uncomfortable with it. One evening, Melissa asked me what the

term meant. I explained that it referred to the people who, like herself, were helping me to understand what was going on in the community. She paused—a long pause appropriate to the rhythms of Fargo conversations—and then said, “Don’t you think we’re really more like your interpreters?” I was struck by her comment and felt her choice of that term better expressed my experience of the relationship I had with people there. They were translating a discourse I was struggling to master.<sup>27</sup>

Sociologist Ruth Linden, on the other hand, uses the terms “interlocutor,” “respondent,” and “subject.” Unlike Faye Ginsburg, she believes these terms reflect the intersubjective nature of the interview process.<sup>28</sup>

A third area of terminological disagreement is the distinction between oral history and other related methods. The question is how texts produced by feminist oral history are different from interviews, autobiographies<sup>29</sup> and biographies. Marcia Wright classifies work in terms of

the degree to which the subject controls and shapes the text. Autobiography entails the telling of a story to convey what was important in a person’s development, arranging and restating events to prepare for a climax or denouement. It is retrospective, in effect making a case. The life story, on the other hand, is ambiguously authored, and may be more or less actively composed by a mediator who arranges the testimony and quietly supplies explanatory interventions. Resulting frequently from interrogation, life stories are constructed to serve the ultimate purposes of ethnography, or of a court case, or simply of eliciting the common and uncommon experience of ordinary people, in the mode of new social history. Biography brings to the fore the commentator, whose portrait is usually based on a diversity of sources and whose goal is not only to reveal but also to judge. . . . The line between autobiography and life stories is subtle. . . . People who may begin their recording of experience in response to questions may develop their own agenda and convert the enterprise from life story to autobiography, discover a drama in their own lives, so to speak . . . A life history is the product of sustained conversations between a social scientist and a subject. . . . Biography often derives from a political interest.<sup>30</sup>

Marcia Wright’s comment that life histories are “ambiguously authored” is one of their perplexing features. The subtle lines she draws among oral history, interviews, biographies,<sup>31</sup> and autobiographies means that features of each method are shared by others. For example, oral history and autobiography involve a person telling her own life story. The fact that oral histories are typically created through interaction, however, means they draw on another person’s questions. That person may inhabit a very different culture.

Interviews and oral histories, too, are similar, but interviews focus typically on a particular experience or phenomenon, while oral histories deal more broadly with a person’s past. Oral histories generally range over a wide range of topics, perhaps the person’s life from birth to the present. In her study of 21 incarcerated women in Massachusetts, for example, Mary Gilfus used oral histories (which she sometimes called interviews) to understand the chronology of the woman’s experiences from her earliest memories to the present. To accomplish this, she used a

set of questions that ensured coverage of certain topics such as family composition, childhood development, family patterns of substance abuse, educational history, physical and sexual violence, own substance abuse, and arrest histories. Within this loose structure, "every woman was encouraged to tell her own life story in her own words as much as possible within a chronological and developmental framework."<sup>32</sup> The openness and thoroughness of these oral histories enabled Mary Gilfus to see that being sexually abused as children destroyed these women's ability to distinguish right from wrong, and prepared them, even as very young children, to be exploited by others. When feminist oral histories cover extensive portions or profound experiences in an individual's life, they assist in a fundamental sociological task—illuminating the connections between biography, history, and social structure.<sup>33</sup>

Oral histories differ from biographies in the method of transmission. Some histories *must* be transmitted orally because the individual is incapable of writing. Oral testimony is invaluable for historians who seek information unlikely to be contained in written records. To the extent that men's lives are more likely to produce written documentation, men are more likely to be the subject of analysis by historians who use archival data. Thus oral history, in contrast to written history, is useful for getting information about *people* less likely to be engaged in creating written records<sup>34</sup> and for creating historical accounts of *phenomena* less likely to have produced archival material.<sup>35</sup> Relatively powerless groups are therefore especially good candidates for oral history research.

Despite the variation in terminology and focus, there is also some common ground among these forms of research. Most feminist oral historians share the goal of allowing/encouraging/enabling women to speak for themselves,<sup>36</sup> although there is some disagreement about how much the interviewer should be "present" in the resulting manuscript. The role of the oral historian is to produce the written document, audio- or videotape (or a combination) alone or with the assistance of the person being studied. The role of the "interpreter," "informant," "interviewee," or "subject" is to discuss the development of all or part of her life, as an individual, as a representative of a specific group, or as an eyewitness to specific historic events or periods.<sup>37</sup> The interviewee is assisted by the questions and attentive attitude of the oral historian.<sup>38</sup> The oral historian and interviewee collaborate in a single, retrospective conversation or in a series of conversations<sup>39</sup> in which either may take the lead in defining the most important topics.

The wealth of U.S. oral history projects about women suggests an affinity between the study of women's lives and oral history as a research method. I located one such project in a small New Hampshire newspaper article about Rebecca Courser, a woman who won an award for 15 years of substantial service to her community:

One of her greatest achievements has been the development of the Warner Women's Oral History Project. In its early stages she was the driving force for the project, personally conducting many interviews and transposing tape recordings for hours on end. Funded by the New Hampshire Council of Humanities, this fine program has been performed more than one hundred times to audiences

throughout New Hampshire over the past five years and this November it will receive national recognition when it will be presented before the National Oral History Association in Cambridge, Mass.<sup>40</sup>

The Summer 1977 issue of *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* contains lengthy appendices with lists of women's oral history projects.<sup>41</sup> Undoubtedly there are many others.

Although feminists have shown that oral history is valuable for the oral historian and the "subject," Marcia Wright insists that women also deserve *more than* oral histories, a "lower order" type of autobiography or biography. She argues that we should not be complacent with oral histories. Women deserve full-fledged biographies and should be encouraged to write their own autobiographies. Thus, oral histories have both value and hidden costs for African women, in her view:

We must . . . encourage the transition from life history to autobiography, increasing the self-management of the communicators, even though it entails much work to understand what is propelling the story line. As scholars, on our side, we must come away from the ambiguity of authorship and behind-the-scenes arrangement of life histories to become fully responsible biographers. Social and intellectual accountability will follow, if not from our own successful internal debates, then by the vigor of the public exchanges that will become increasingly possible.<sup>42</sup>

The distinctions among autobiography, biography, and life history illustrate the numerous ways the story of a life can be told. When a feminist scholar selects a particular method, she chooses a certain type of control over her subject matter and a certain type of focus. If she chooses oral history, she must contend with the difficulties (and enjoy the delights) of writing about a living person in a way that satisfies both parties. In general, the feminist oral historian must make crucial decisions concerning her own role, her choice of the individual(s) whose oral history she will write, and the analytic framework she will use.

The oral history method has been used by historians, journalists, community groups, anthropologists, women's studies scholars, and sociologists who want to understand individual lives or social phenomena.<sup>43</sup> Oral histories or life histories have been created as a solo project by an individual scholar<sup>44</sup> and have been coordinated by larger organizations devoted to specific oral history projects. The flexibility of the method makes it amenable to scholars working alone or in teams. The conversational quality of the method facilitates collaboration with community members.

### **Marginality of Oral History in Mainstream Social Science**

One reason for the variety of terms concerning oral history is its marginal place in the social sciences.<sup>45</sup> Typically oral histories are not even discussed in research methods texts. Because mainstream social scientists find little value in studies of individuals that draw on subjectivity, there is little discussion of and training in

this method, and little agreement on terms. Sara Evans' experience is an exception to this conventional lack of training. In the introduction to *Personal Politics*, she describes "the anxious, ecstatic summer of my oral research. I prepared for it by attending Lawrence Goodwyn's inspiring seminar on oral history methodology and by extensive research in traditional literary and archival sources."<sup>46</sup> Typically, the only context for oral histories in mainstream social science is in ethnographies or community studies. Although there was some interest in the first quarter of the twentieth century in the United States, the method has long been overshadowed by other approaches to social science research.

Michal McCall and Judith Wittner, on the other hand, claim that "life history research is enjoying a revival" among feminists, because feminists can use the method "to study social life from the vantage point of women."<sup>47</sup> Feminist interest in these methods may reflect an attempt to work outside the mainstream.<sup>48</sup> Elizabeth Higginbotham writes that in the United States,

in the South, the oral history or personal narrative has emerged as a critical means for sharing with others the details and fabric of women's lives. This tradition has produced many lasting autobiographies, oral histories and personal statements that challenge stereotypical images of southern women.<sup>49</sup>

In doing an oral history, the researcher's purpose is to create a written record of the interviewee's life from his/her perspective in his/her own words. Judy Long, a theorist of sociobiography stressed the value of this perspective for the social sciences:

The feminist scholarship of the past two decades has made it clear that third-person accounts and "generic" sociology have not, in fact, told us anything about women's experiences. First person accounts are required to understand the subjectivity of a social group that is "muted," excised from history, "invisible" in the official records of their culture (including sociological theory).<sup>50</sup>

One contemporary methodological contribution of feminist scholarship to the social sciences, therefore, is the revival of this dormant method.

On the other hand, many obstacles prevent its acceptance in the mainstream. People whose view of social science is parochial and who fear or discount the debunking results of feminist historical research are likely to marginalize this work.<sup>51</sup> For example, sociologist Mary Jo Deegan had difficulty getting support for her work on Jane Addams and the Chicago School of Sociology:

Over a decade ago, I wanted to write a popular paper, only eight or ten pages long, on an early woman sociologist. I believed there must have been at least one woman who worked in my discipline, and I wanted to remember and celebrate that work. To my utter amazement, when I examined the early sociology journals, I found not one but dozens of early women sociologists. . . . I haunted archives, read musty organizational records, and pored over correspondence. These were unfamiliar tasks for a sociologist of our era. . . . Financial support for this research was very difficult to obtain. Because Jane Addams has been defined as "not a sociologist" and because I was using historians' techniques instead of "mainstream" sociological methodology, peers who read my funding application did not feel that my project was justifiable as a sociological inquiry.<sup>52</sup>

Mary Jo Deegan's work in feminist biography was threatening because it had the potential to rewrite standard sociological history and question conventional heroes. I encounter the same incredulity from sociologists when I suggest that students read Harriet Martineau's *How to Observe Morals and Manners*, a text that preceded Emile Durkheim's canonical *Rules of Sociological Method* by 60 years, or her *Society in America* in contrast with Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*.

Biography and oral history have the potential of bringing women "into" history and making the female experience part of the written record. This form of research thereby revises history, in the sense of forcing us to modify previously published accounts of events that did not take women's experience seriously. Sara Evans found that the oral history method enabled her to uncover completely undocumented material in the U.S. political movements of the 1960s:

I set out with a growing file of names, most without addresses, and a list of people with whom I might stay. The research grew as I travelled. I had not imagined the subtle complexity, both positive and negative, of women's experiences in various parts of the new left, or the intricacy of a network of relationships that stretched across the country and over nearly a decade. None of the written sources gave more than the barest hint of what I would find.<sup>53</sup>

Feminist oral history's success in increasing awareness of women's lives and in modifying the historical record is responsible for a shift in historical methodology, according to Mary Jo Maynes. The shift reflects, in part, "the distinctive feminist agenda," that "focused on making women central to historical interpretations." Because of this focus,

the attention of feminist historians . . . has turned to the search for sources permitting glimpses into female perspectives on life in the past . . . [At first] the heavy emphasis on personal testimony so central both to the women's movement and to feminist theory and scholarship was largely eschewed by early social historians, who sought statistical averages and perhaps feared that reliance on such testimony represented a return to past practices that had privileged the point-of-view of the educated and powerful creators of most written records.<sup>54</sup>

But women's oral history has this potential only if it reaches out to study the greatest possible diversity among women.<sup>55</sup>

### Contemporary Reasons for Doing Feminist Oral History

Just as in the past, contemporary feminist researchers are interested in oral histories and biographical work for several reasons: to develop feminist theory, express affinity and admiration for other women, contribute to social justice, facilitate understanding among social classes, and explore the meaning of events in the eyes of women. I will discuss each of these briefly, using the researcher's own words.

Margaret Randall collected oral histories of women involved in the Nicaraguan Revolution against Somoza. She deliberately "talked with women from very dif-

ferent backgrounds . . . whose levels of involvement varied widely" because she "wanted to know how they began to articulate their need to join in the political struggle, how they made the decision, a decision that would affect every facet of their lives; and how they overcame the traditional obstacles thrown up by family and social prejudice."<sup>56</sup> Her purpose was to illuminate the relation between feminism and Marxism, a topic long debated in feminist theory. As Lynda Yantz points out in the preface to this book, "*Sandino's Daughters* situates that debate in an actual practice,"<sup>57</sup> i.e., feminist oral history helps the theoretician test feminist theory, in this case Marxist-feminism. On the other hand, Elizabeth Roberts did an oral history project of working-class women between 1890 and 1940 in three British towns. She deliberately suspended feminist theory even though she had planned to incorporate it:

[S]ome feminists may be disturbed to find that the book does not seek to investigate patriarchy or male oppression of women. . . . Such a great proportion of women's lives was spent in the private sphere of home, family and neighbourhood . . . [I]t became evident that there was little feeling among the majority of women interviewed that they or their mothers had been particularly exploited by men, at least not by working-class men. . . . In their interviews many women indicated their awareness of the limited horizons and opportunities of their lives, but were just as likely to associate their menfolk with this lack of choice. . . . They tended to blame the poverty. . . . In other words, women who were conscious of their exploitation interpreted it in terms of class conflict. . . . only two [were] involved in the suffragette/suffragist movement, but eleven were active in the Labour Party.<sup>58</sup>

Feminists have used the oral history method to pay tribute to people they admire. For example, Sydelle Kramer wrote

that this project started on my grandmother's knee, for it was there, when I was a small girl, that I first heard the stories about life and death in Russia, emigration to America, and the struggle to "make good" here. Years later, at a small feminist publishing meeting, some women and I discussed the need for some sort of book describing the experiences of our grandmothers and paying tribute, however, indirectly, to their lives. The sharing of his kind of desire, and the same early fascination with our grandmothers, led Jenny Masur and me into the collaboration which produced this book.<sup>59</sup>

Similarly, Pat Taylor uses oral history to express her respect for a faith healer who is a "model . . . of a strong, individualistic woman coming into her own powers without benefit of the support either husband or community would usually provide."<sup>60</sup> Feminist oral history acknowledges the value of women's lives. It encourages identification among women through the recognition of common experience.

In some instances a feminist researcher begins with one purpose and finds that her material leads her in new directions. An example comes from the work of sociologist Evelyn Nakano Glenn's oral history project:

When I started gathering materials for what turned out to be this book, my goals were modest. . . . to collect and assemble a set of oral interviews of Japanese-

American women employed as domestics. In teaching and writing about women and work, I had become acutely aware of the dearth of materials documenting the day-to-day struggles of Asian-American, Latina, and Black women working in low-status occupations, such as domestic service, the most prototypical job for racial-ethnic women. Little was known about the conditions they confronted, what they felt about their situation, or how they responded to menial employment. Accounts in which women spoke in their own words about themselves and their work seemed the best vehicle for illustrating how gender, race, and class intersect to shape the lives of racial-ethnic women. Once started, the project took momentum and drew me along. Questions raised by the initial interviews led to a broadening of the study both empirically and theoretically. My new aim was to uncover the relationship between Japanese-American women's experience as domestic workers during the first seventy years of the twentieth century and larger historical forces: the transformation of the economy and labor market in Northern California and the process of labor migration and settlement in that locale. How did these forces affect women's work, both paid and unpaid, and what were their strategies for dealing with the conditions engendered by these forces?<sup>61</sup>

Some feminist scholars believe that injustices can be righted when "people tell their stories"; others believe that history can be improved. In my view these are two aspects of the same phenomenon. The production of an oral text may "right the injustice" of a particular person's (or group's) voice being unheard. Jean Bethke Elshtain wrote:

One who bears witness voices the discontents of society's silenced, ignored, abused, or invisible members. The witness proffers reasons for that suffering in order that the silenced may find a voice, cry out for justice, demand to be seen.<sup>62</sup>

At the same time an oral history corrects the biased view of history that had not included her/their voice. A poignant example of "righting the injustice" comes from the work of Daphne Patai, a collector of Brazilian women's life stories:

On one occasion a young man . . . took me to the house of a nun working in a slum in Recife. He had told her about my project and she had agreed to the interview. . . . Hours later the young man came back to get me, having spent the evening hanging around waiting for me to finish. We walked down the steep paths back to the avenue at the bottom of the hill, where I could catch a bus. When I thanked him for his help, he said, "I don't give a damn about you or your research. I'm helping you because it's important that these people's stories be told."<sup>63</sup>

Reflecting on her own work with the !Kung<sup>64</sup> and on Barbara Myerhoff's<sup>65</sup> work with elderly U.S. Jews, anthropologist Marjorie Shostak believes that we have an *obligation* to collect life histories. She writes that "We should . . . go out and record the memories of people whose ways of life are preserved to some extent in those memories; and . . . we should do it urgently, before these ways of life are destroyed by one force or another."<sup>66</sup> Diana Russell suggests the same, in her study of women antiapartheid activists in South Africa. First she marvels at their willingness to risk their lives and speak to her; then she recognizes how important it is to them that "the real story of their struggle be known in the United States and other countries."<sup>67</sup>

There is a dilemma, however, in publishing life histories of women's suffering and courage. Although oral histories may break the silence, they may also encourage readers to view sociopolitical problems in individualistic terms. While reading a personal story is useful in making a distant society seem less remote, the personalized form of the story may detract from our ability to develop a sociopolitical understanding of events and forces.<sup>68</sup>

Oral histories of lower- and working-class women have the potential of enabling middle-class readers to get to know women of those classes, as Nancy Siefer observed.<sup>69</sup> In her view, this knowledge is useful to the extent that it is authentic and not mediated by "an interpreter." She claims that working-class women usually are not heard and when they are, it is through someone else's voice. She also worries that her middle-class origins might interfere with her understanding of working-class women's lives. Thus she commits herself to letting the subjects of her working-class oral histories speak for themselves. To achieve this, she does not analyze the accounts she collects, but presents them as they were given to her. By not analyzing the accounts, she prevents herself from speaking for, speaking better than, or transforming them. Her politics concerning how she wants to relate to working-class women is the basis of her methodological position of *not analyzing* oral histories.<sup>70</sup> Nancy Siefer believes that the women are capable of analyzing their lives, and that an analysis is contained in what they are saying. Moreover, she believes that if the women are heard directly, without her interference, the reader will be able to identify with them. It is this identification that will produce social change,<sup>71</sup> not the oral historian's analysis of the women's lives. Nancy Siefer is not alone in this view, as the following quotation from Patricia Sexton shows:

While the book tries to let the women come through, the task has not been easy, for many wise people have urged me to interpret more and include more of myself in the account. I have resisted those urgings but not with total success; yet I have tried to listen carefully to what others say, without imposing my own voice on theirs.<sup>72</sup>

Elizabeth Hampsten<sup>73</sup> disagrees. She urges us to *use our authority* to help bring other voices into print and to use our voices to comment on what we have learned. She encourages us to analyze women's writings and women's words from many different perspectives.<sup>74</sup> She suggests we worry less about imposing our ideas and worry more about taking initiative. She would like us to take women's journals and diaries that were not intended for publication, for example, and "nudge them along" into publication. Not only should we examine the form and content of these materials, we should also question if the documents actually reveal women's experiences or someone else's.

In my view, feminist oral historians need not silence themselves to let other women be heard. The refusal to analyze transcripts does not produce a kind of purity in which women speak for themselves in an unmediated way. After all, the oral historian already had a role in producing the oral history and preparing it for publication. Since any involvement at all by the oral historian is a *de facto* interpretation, feminist researchers should be interested in providing an analysis so that

the reader has a sense of the perspective used. Fran Buss, mentioned above, included analyses in her oral histories of lower income women and shared some of her personal history:

The stories told by the women in this book did not occur as monologues, but were the product of a developing relationship between each woman and myself. As much as I tried to be objective and encourage each woman to take the lead in what we discussed, by asking certain questions, responding in specific ways, and choosing which material to include in the final editing, I have certainly influenced the final telling of each story. Because of the influence I had, it is important that readers have some knowledge of my background, beliefs, and interests.

I did not enter these women's lives as a total stranger to the life experiences they describe. I am a white woman who grew up in a primarily working-class neighborhood in a small city in the Midwest. Our neighborhood bordered on some of the most impoverished areas in our community, and when I was young, my mother pointed out to me the disturbing inequities between the neighborhoods.

I was married relatively young and divorced when my three children were preschoolers and we were living in the West. Following my divorce, my struggle to support the children became especially difficult. At one point, I worked four part-time jobs and spent more than 50 percent of my income on child care. Food stamps were crucial to our physical and emotional survival, and we went on welfare for a period of time. It was during this time that I came to understand the importance of the strength women can give each other. Despite this valuable resource, I became ill and received several years of extremely poor, indigent medical care. I also personally experienced sexual violence and institutional violence against women and the poor.

Then I married again, and with the assistance of my present husband and those close to us, I became healthier and finished my education. During those years I did community organizing with low-income women, founding a women's crisis and information center, and thus came in contact with many other women experiencing some of the basic struggles of life. I have continued community organizing throughout the years and am presently on leave of absence from the ministry of the United Church of Christ and am teaching women's studies part time at the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater.<sup>75</sup>

Similarly, Diana Russell begins her moving collection of the oral histories of South African women with the story of her own life and her connection to these women.<sup>76</sup>

### **Whose Voice Is It?**

Julia Swindells raised important questions about the "voice" in oral history and in personal documents such as diaries. Her question might be put this way: who is speaking when women speak for themselves? She believes we have been naive in not analyzing the conditions under which voices are speaking. Her skepticism about the "authenticity" of voices hinges on the fact that their very production may be a form of oppression.

The case of Hannah Cullwick suggests this broader point. Hannah Cullwick was a nineteenth-century British maid who was asked to write diaries of her labors by Arthur Munby, an upper-class British man who derived sexual pleasure from reading about women immersed in dirt and hard work. As Julia Swindells dramatically demonstrates, Hannah Cullwick felt compelled to service Arthur Munby with her gender and her class. Recognizing that she was not free in writing her diary means that we cannot use her diary to “give her a voice.” If we abandon that project, we begin “to liberate ourselves as socialist feminist subjects” from the myth that we are ending her silence or that women like her led liberated lives.<sup>77</sup> Julia Swindells’ analysis of the Hannah Cullwick case leads her to conclude that instead of deluding ourselves that we are “liberating” women, we should take on the responsibility of “analyzing the conditions of their lives”:

There is no “authentic” voice of woman in history, no unity of that sort, transcending history. Neither should we muddle up the business of enabling voices to be heard with finding our sisters suddenly “liberated” in their lives as in the sounds of these texts. Rather, we should be asking questions about specific histories, specific texts. Whose stories do the diaries of Hannah Cullwick tell? Whose subject is being inscribed? . . . [If] we listen carefully to the voices . . . we begin to hear and see, surely, the liberation, not of Hannah Cullwick, but of Arthur J. Munby, finding a voice in text, already a relatively free(d) man in life.<sup>78</sup>

In a related paper, Katherine Goodman<sup>79</sup> suggests that the so-called “authentic voice” may be a form of imitation. In this case, the author imitates fictional genres that are popular at the time.

Anthropologist Marjorie Shostak suggests that in a published oral history there actually are three voices, as in her own book, *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*:

First, there was Nisa’s. I presented that as a first-person narrative, translated and edited from the tapes, and chronologically ordered (from “Earliest Memories” to “Growing Older”), in 15 chapters. The second voice was the anthropologist’s, putting Nisa’s story in cultural perspective: the ethnographic background to each topic Nisa touched upon is included as headnotes preceding each chapter of narrative. The third voice was mine, not as anthropologist, but as an American woman experiencing another world. Sandwiching the 15 chapters of narrative and headnotes, a personal introduction gives an overall framework to Nisa’s story and to my own, and an epilogue summarizes my second field trip, my final encounter with Nisa, and my closing thoughts.<sup>80</sup>

Thus, feminist oral historians disagree about what kind of voice and whose voice is present in a published oral history—is it the voice of oppression, the voice of imitation, the authentic unsilenced self, or multiple voices?

### The Interviewer’s Voice

Usually the printed version of an oral history is an edited version of the interviewee’s speech excluding signs of the interaction with the interviewer. The feminist

oral historian's role in obtaining the transcript is muted. In other cases, the oral history is an amalgam of material obtained through interviews, material written by the interviewee, and observations made by the interviewer. This was the case in Pat Taylor's oral history of Jewell Babb, an example that clearly separates the various voices:

A great deal of the material in this book was transcribed orally during a three-month period when I stayed with Mrs. Babb. . . . However, Mrs. Babb also wrote long segments of the story in long hand. Her voice is weak, and she is somewhat reticent about speaking directly about herself. Thus, after long talking sessions would wear her out, she would turn to writing. We would then go over the written sections together, so that she could supplement orally in places which seemed to need elucidation. She also continued to send me additional segments whenever she would recall some incident which seemed to her to be of value in the story. I have tried to edit her writing as little as possible, other than to arrange the spoken and written segments in order to preserve the enjoyable way of telling which is Mrs. Babb's unique "voice."<sup>81</sup>

Pat Taylor was explicit about the reasons for including her own voice:

I have included my own impressions of the time I spent with her and of the environment which, in my opinion, has contributed to the formation of her personality and beliefs. These personal notes have been provided so that historical and descriptive material which would provide a context for her story could be supplied and so that some ideas of the circumstances in which the interviewing was done would be supplied to enable the readers to judge for themselves how these circumstances might have influenced Mrs. Babb in shaping her story. Mrs. Babb and I consider this to be a joint writing project, and we have worked equally hard putting together a manuscript which we hope will be both informative and enjoyable.<sup>82</sup>

Feminist oral histories concerned with clarifying the different voices find ways of *highlighting* the dialogue and sharing that occurred.

In some instances the researcher and the person whose story is being told are one and the same person. Because many feminist researchers self-disclose as a research method in interviewing and oral history, examples exist of researchers who include autobiographical material in analyses of a particular topic. Sociologist Ruth Harriet Jacobs did so in a study of sexism and ageism,<sup>83</sup> as did Lee Zevy and Sahli Cavallaro in their study of lesbian identity:

This is the story of an odyssey. A story about lesbian invisibility: how lesbians grow into, maintain, and attempt to undo this invisibility so that they may know themselves and love other women; so that the quest for the princess is reconciled, and intimacy with a real woman and a charmed relationship is attained. To explain the complexity of this process, we chose to combine psychological theory with the telling of one of our stories. Although the details . . . are about Lee Zevy's life, the themes of invisibility and fantasy and the subsequent search for intimacy are common threads that run through the lives of women we both know and the lesbians with whom we work professionally.<sup>84</sup>

The self-disclosure in interviewing, and the self-study in some oral histories are examples of some feminists' disdain for the separation of subjectivity and objectivity, self and other, and personal and public.

### **Contradictions in Listening**

Feminists typically advocate oral histories for "getting at the experience" rather than at facts. But, according to Kathryn Anderson, the prestige of "facts" may lead feminist oral historians claiming to seek insights into women's experiences to be drawn to the "facts" instead of listening to the feelings.<sup>85</sup> Too often, an avowed interest in experience masks a deeper interest in activities, networks, and other "hard information."<sup>86</sup> Dana Jack suggests another subtle contradiction: oral historians are likely to give more authority to their own orientations than to the women's stories. To avoid this,

the first step is to ask the meaning of words in order to understand them in the subject's own terms. . . . When one listens, one hears how women use the language of the culture to deny what, on another level, they value and desire. We must learn to help women tell their own stories, and then learn to listen to those stories without being guided by models that restrict our ability to hear.<sup>87</sup>

In this vein, Michal McCall and Judith Wittner, theorists of feminist oral history, suggest that we not turn to oral histories for history or "eyewitness accounts" of events; rather, we should seek women's interpretations, thus honoring their minds.<sup>88</sup> In their view, oral history compels researchers to confront how individuals and groups create meaning.

Feminist researchers document changes that occur in their own lives as a consequence of doing deeply engaging research. In words reminiscent of Ann Oakley,<sup>89</sup> Fran Buss described the personal changes that resulted from her oral history work:

I have become personally involved with most of the women, maintaining friendships through letters, the telephone, and visits. I have also tried to help them locate resources when specific needs have arisen, but primarily the total experience has deepened my political conviction that we must all struggle to make our society more just.<sup>90</sup>

Fran Buss' inclusion of this reflexive information enables me to better understand the oral history material she presented.

### **Who Is Studied by the Oral Historian?**

Oral histories are typically, though not exclusively, done with two frequently overlapping types of people: older and relatively powerless people. In many societies older individuals are seen as repositories of historical knowledge. They may have the time and inclination to share what they know, but may lack access

to publication and may not choose to express themselves in written form. Many feminist writers and researchers have adopted the oral history method precisely for the purpose of enabling people to publish their views who otherwise would not have done so. For example, in a play on the "speak-out" concept,<sup>91</sup> which she calls a "sing-out," Patricia Sexton presents her study of largely unseen and unrecognized hospital workers. Her book represents a unique amalgam combining analysis of the problems of hospital workers with their own testimony about their lives.

The form of the book underscores its main substance in that it gives women a voice, an opportunity to discuss matters that affect their work lives, and recognition for what they say. The voices of the workers and the unionists are sometimes separate and sometimes mingled, which is the way it is in real life too. My own voice is also in there, and louder than the sheer quantity indicates, since I also edited all the other voices. . . . The book does not examine the views of doctors, administrators, or the public with respect to hospital care or the experience of work. It is perhaps more than enough that it breaks the silence of workers and unionists on these subjects. Nor does the book focus on the registered nurse, the "professional" hospital worker, although her presence is often noted. Rather, the book is about "hospital workers," those non-professionals who assist in patient care and in typing, cleaning, cooking, and keeping the hospital going. References to literature on hospital workers are very slim since little is written about them.<sup>92</sup>

Although feminist oral historians generally study the relatively powerless, Fran Buss makes the point that this is not usually the *most* vulnerable populations. Commenting on her own work, she wrote:

On the whole, the women whose stories appear in this book are survivors, and they are often not the desperately poor. For each of these women who have somehow made it through all the barriers of class, racial, and sexual discrimination, there are those who did not survive. Those women's stories tend not to be told, because they are not very visible, because they are so vulnerable that publicity would be dangerous, or because they have died or have been too "beaten down" to discuss their lives.<sup>93</sup>

Whom do we exclude because of our fears? Do we study only "captive" populations? People with whom we can create rapport?

### The Study of Men

Feminist research is not restricted to the study of women and Marcia Wright argues the value of feminist oral histories of men, using an example from her African research.

A feminist approach to male subjects must be ventured, in part because men who are "public" affect women and in part because they must also be rendered as private persons influenced by women and involved in the social reproduction of gender relations in the intimate as well as the extradomestic arenas. In a bio-

graphical sketch of a British magistrate, who shaped the early colonial political economy in Meli's neighborhood, I moved from an appreciation of the special way in which he had allied with African women in his jurisdiction at the turn of the century, to a focus on the way in which his career was a dramatization of upward mobility in British class terms. In the course of this transition, it was his marriage to a solidly middle class woman which sealed the success of the transformation . . . I am committed to the scrutiny of male lives for the sake of showing the play of power in its fullest sense, inclusive of women.<sup>94</sup>

This example illustrates what may be a more general pattern of the focus in feminist oral history of men. These studies examine the role women played in their lives, or the impact these men had on women.

### Writing One's Own Story

Aside from oral history studies of relatively powerless people, and of men who affect women's lives, some feminist autobiographical/life history work is done among people who are literate and highly educated but who have experiences that have remained hidden. In these cases, a feminist research method may consist of soliciting written statements about a particular topic, without prior interviewing or subsequent analysis. These products do not "give voice to the voiceless," but rather allow a different voice within some person to emerge. When a set is gathered, the result is a collection of personal statements such as the following by Stephanie Dowrick and Sibyl Grundberg about voluntary childlessness.

We set out to sample the effect of the Second Wave of women's liberation on women's choices about motherhood, wanting to explore further the knotty problem of "choice" . . . In seeking contributors to *Why Children?* our aim was to convey the complexity, the deep personal significance of the decision whether or not to have children, the most irrevocable and important one that most of us will make. We sought women with a wide range of backgrounds and experience. Inevitably the end result does not put forward as many different views or life situations as we would have liked. All the women writing in this book have something strongly felt to say. We opted to go with their urgency rather than attempt the impossible: a truly representative cross-section of women. Sadly, there were women whose perspectives we cherished who found the subject too painful to write about, or who felt that the honesty crucial to the project would have been too hurtful to others involved in the consequences of their "choice."

Our contributors do include mothers in traditional "nuclear" families, single mothers, women bringing up children to whom they did not give birth, women involved in raising children collectively; heterosexual, bisexual and lesbian women, mothers of teenagers, mothers of infants; women who have made the decision not to have children with reluctance and pain, women who have made that decision conscious of the benefits for them of a childless life; women who still hope to exercise their choice in the future . . . It is an intense and many-sided dialogue among women who speak in many different voices. Except to ask for clarification or explanation, we did not intervene in the expression of those voices.<sup>95</sup>

The point they make about some women being unable to write is reminiscent of Fran Buss' point that oral histories do not include the stories of the most distressed.<sup>96</sup>

### **Oral Histories Are Trans- or Interdisciplinary Endeavors**

Historian Susan Armitage writes that oral history is not a unique method but draws on the methodologies of history, psychology, and sociology. At the same time, oral history criticizes these disciplines. For this reason, she believes it is important to recognize the interdisciplinary nature of feminist oral history. She explains that feminist oral histories should be done by teams of researchers with different skills:

We propose a definite structuring of oral history methods to achieve the goals of feminist research . . . we will not find out about women's consciousness unless we ask. We will need to incorporate considerable psychological awareness and listening skills into our interviews in order to succeed. The stance we adopt toward our completed interviews is equally crucial. The desire of feminist researchers to make sure that women are the subjects and not the objects of study is laudable but difficult to accomplish. Here we need the sophisticated sociological awareness of the reciprocal relationships between individual and institution developed by interactionist sociologists. . . . This range of skills makes it virtually mandatory that future women's oral history projects be conducted by interdisciplinary teams. Why bother? Why not just continue our present uncritical interview methods? The answer, of course, is that they do not reflect the insights of the new feminist scholarship. The old methods will not tell us what we now know we can learn about women if we ask the right questions.<sup>97</sup>

Women's Studies programs seem ideally suited to the creation of such inter- or transdisciplinary teams.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

It is difficult to summarize this chapter—there is little agreement on terminology, the product, whose voices are being expressed, whether an individual can even do an oral history, whether the oral historian should analyze the material, and even if oral history exists as a separate entity or overlaps with the various disciplines. Despite these disagreements, I also detect an esprit de corps among feminists who do oral histories and biographical work. I believe this enthusiasm stems from the blending of purposes that feminist oral history affords—the writing of history, the encounter with other women, and the development of new concepts. The enthusiasm is probably also related to the disagreements. Feminist oral historians may feel particularly free to work in ways that reflect their personal resolutions of these methodological dilemmas precisely because there is no orthodoxy, and because feminist oral history remains outside the mainstream.