



# THE ORAL HISTORY READER

Edited by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson

## Learning to listen

### Interview techniques and analyses

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Oral history interviews provide an invaluable means of generating new insights about women's experiences of themselves in their worlds. The spontaneous exchange within an interview offers possibilities of freedom and flexibility for researchers and narrators alike. For the narrator, the interview provides the opportunity to tell her own story in her own terms. For researchers, taped interviews preserve a living interchange for present and future use; we can rummage through interviews as we do through an old attic—probing, comparing, checking insights, finding new treasures the third time through, then arranging and carefully documenting our results.

Oral interviews are particularly valuable for uncovering women's perspectives. Anthropologists have observed how the expression of women's unique experience as women is often muted, particularly in any situation where women's interests and experiences are at variance with those of men.<sup>1</sup> A woman's discussion of her life may combine two separate, often conflicting, perspectives: one framed in concepts and values that reflect men's dominant position in the culture, and one informed by the more immediate realities of a woman's personal experience. Where experience does not 'fit' dominant meanings, alternative concepts may not readily be available. Hence, inadvertently, women often mute their own thoughts and feelings when they try to describe their lives in the familiar and publicly acceptable terms of prevailing concepts and conventions. To hear women's perspectives accurately, we have to learn to listen in stereo, receiving both the dominant and muted channels clearly and tuning into them carefully to understand the relationship between them.

How do we hear the weaker signal of thoughts and feelings that differ from conventional expectations? Carolyn Heilbrun urges biographers to search for the choices, the pain, the stories that lie beyond the 'constraints of acceptable discussion'.<sup>2</sup> An interview that fails to expose the distortions and conspires to mask the facts and feelings that did not fit will overemphasize expected aspects of the female role. More important, it will miss an opportunity to document the experience that lies outside the boundaries of acceptability.

To facilitate access to the muted channel of women's subjectivity, we must inquire whose story the interview is asked to tell, who interprets the story, and with what theoretical frameworks. Is the narrator asked what meanings she makes of her experiences? Is the researcher's attitude one of receptivity to learn rather than to prove preexisting ideas that are brought into the interview? In order to learn to listen, we need to attend more to the narrator than to our own agendas.

## INTERVIEW TECHNIQUES: SHEDDING AGENDAS

*Kathryn Anderson*

My awareness of how both personal and collective agendas can shortcircuit the listening process developed while scanning oral histories for the Washington Women's Heritage Project. This statewide collaborative effort received major support from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Washington Commission for the Humanities to develop educational workshops and to produce a traveling exhibit documenting women's lives in interviews and historical photographs. The first stage of the project involved training dozens of interviewers in a series of oral history workshops held throughout the state. A typical workshop provided information on equipment, processing tapes, interviewing techniques, and a crash course in the new women's history scholarship. Prospective interviewers left with a manual, which included Sherna Gluck's 'Topical Guide for Oral History Interviews with Women'.<sup>3</sup>

To select excerpts for the exhibit, we reviewed dozens of interviews produced by project staff and workshop participants along with hundreds of interviews housed in archives and historical societies. We found them filled with passages describing the range and significance of activities and events portrayed in the photographs. To our dismay and disappointment, however, most of them lacked detailed discussions of the web of feelings, attitudes, and values that give meaning to activities and events. Interviewers had either ignored these more subjective dimensions of women's lives or had accepted comments at face value when a pause, a word, or an expression might have invited the narrator to continue. Some of us found discrepancies between our memories of interviews and the transcripts because the meaning we remembered hearing had been expressed through intense vocal quality and body language, not through words alone.

We were especially confused that our interviews did not corroborate the satisfactions and concerns other historians were discovering in women's diaries and letters, or the importance of relationships social scientists were uncovering in women's interviews. To understand why, I scrutinized the interviews with rural women that I had done for the project, paying special attention to interview strategies and techniques. My expectations that the interviews would give rural women a forum to describe their experiences in their own terms and to reflect on their experiences as women in the specific

context of Washington state were thwarted to some extent by three factors: the project's agenda to document women's lives for the exhibit; an incomplete conversion from traditional to feminist historical paradigms; and the conventions of social discourse.

While the project's general goal was to accumulate a series of life histories, my special task was to discover women's roles in northwest Washington farming communities. Project deadlines and the need to cover a representative range of experiences combined to limit interviews to no more than three hours. In retrospect, I can see how I listened with at least part of my attention focused on producing potential material for the exhibit—the concrete description of experiences that would accompany pictures of women's activities. As I rummage through the interviews long after the exhibit has been placed in storage, I am painfully aware of lost opportunities for women to reflect on the activities and events they described and to explain their terms more fully in their own words.

In spite of my interest at the time in learning how women saw themselves as women in specific historical contexts, the task of creating public historical documents as well as the needs of the project combined to subvert my personal interests and led to fairly traditional strategies. As a result, my interviews tended to focus on activities and facts, on what happened and how it happened. They revealed important information about the variety of roles women filled on Washington farms, and how they disguised the extent and importance of their contributions by insisting that they were just 'helping out' or 'doing what needed to be done'. Left out, however, was the more subjective realm of feelings about what made these activities fun or drudgery, which ones were accompanied by feelings of pride or failure. The resulting story of what they did tells us something about the limitations under which they operated but less about the choices they might have made. My interests were not incompatible with the project's goals but my methods often failed to give women the opportunity to discuss the complex web of feelings and contradictions behind their familiar stories.

My background included both women's history and interpersonal communication, but no specific training in counseling. My fear of forcing or manipulating individuals into discussing topics they did not want to talk about sometimes prevented me from giving women the space and the permission to explore some of the deeper, more conflicted parts of their stories. I feared, for good reasons, that I lacked the training to respond appropriately to some of the issues that might be raised or uncovered. Thus, my interview strategies were bound to some extent by the conventions of social discourse. The unwritten rules of conversation about appropriate questions and topics—especially the one that says 'don't pry!'—kept me from encouraging women to make explicit the range of emotions surrounding the events and experiences they related. These rules are particularly restrictive in the rural style I had absorbed as a child on an Iowa farm. In a context where weather, blight, pests, and disease were so crucial to productivity and survival, conversation often tended towards the fatalistic and pragmatic; we certainly did not dwell on feelings about things beyond our control. As I interviewed rural women, the sights, sounds, and smells of a farm kitchen elicited my habits of a rural style of conversation and constrained my interview strategies.

Another interviewer experienced tensions between project goals and rules of conversation in a different context for different reasons. As she interviewed Indian women from various Washington tribes, she felt torn between a need to gather specific information and an awareness of appropriate relationships between young and old: the rules she had learned as an Indian child prohibited questioning elders, initiating topics, or disagreeing in any form, even by implying that a comment might be incomplete. When, as in these instances, interviewer and narrator share similar backgrounds that include norms for conversation and interaction, interview strategies must be particularly explicit to avoid interference.

Although I approached the interviews with a genuine interest in farm women's perceptions of themselves, their roles, and their relationships in the rural community, I now see how often the agenda to document farm activities and my habit of taking the comments of the farm women at face value determined my questions and responses. Both interfered with my sensitivity to the emotionally laden language they used to describe their lives. My first interview with Elizabeth illustrates a lost opportunity to explore her discussion of the physical and mental strains of multiple roles.<sup>4</sup> We had been talking about her relationships with her mother and half-sister when she offered the following:

I practically had a nervous breakdown when I discovered my sister had cancer, you know; it was kind of like knocking the pins [out from under me]—and I had, after the second boy was born, I just had ill health for quite a few years. I evidently had a low-grade blood infection or something. Because I was very thin, and, of course, I kept working hard. And every fall, why, I'd generally spend a month or so being sick—from overdoing, probably.

Instead of encouraging further reflection on the importance of her relationship with her sister or on the difficulties of that period in her life, my next question followed my imperative for detailing her role on the farm: 'What kind of farming did you do right after you were married?'

Elizabeth was a full partner with her husband in their dairy farm and continued to play an active role as the farm switched to the production of small grains. Her interview has the potential of giving us valuable information about the costs incurred by women who combined child-rearing and housework with the physical labor and business decisions of the farm. It also suggests something of the importance of relationships with family and close friends in coping with both roles. The interview's potential is severely limited, however, by my failure to encourage her to expand upon her spontaneous reflections and by my eagerness to document the details of her farming activity. Not until later did I realize that I do not know what she meant by 'nervous breakdown' or 'overdoing'. The fact that other farm women used the same or similar terms to describe parts of their lives alerted me to the need for further clarification. I now wish I had asked her to tell me in her own words of the importance of the relationship with her sister and why its possible loss was such a threat.

Later in the same interview I was more sensitive to Elizabeth's feelings about the difficulty of combining roles, only to deflect the focus from her experience once again. She was telling me how hard it was to be a full partner in the field and still have sole responsibility for the house:

This is what was so hard, you know. You'd both be out working together, and he'd come in and sit down, and I would have to hustle a meal together, you know. And that's typical.

*How did you manage?*

Well, sometimes you didn't get to bed till midnight or after, and you were up at five. Sometimes when I think back to the early days, though, we'd take a day off, we'd get the chores done, and we'd go take off and go visiting.

*Was that typical? Neighbors going to visit each other after the chores were done?*

While Elizabeth was telling me how she managed, I was already thinking about patterns in the neighborhood. My first question had been a good one, but, by asking about what other people did, my next one told her that I had heard enough about her experience. The two questions in succession have a double message: 'Tell me about your experience, but don't tell me too much'. Part of the problem may have been that even while I was interviewing women I was aware of the need to make sense of what they told me. In this case, the scholar's search for generalizations undermined the interviewer's need to attend to an individual's experience. Ideally, the processes of analysis should be suspended or at least subordinated in the process of listening.

If we want to know how women feel about their lives, then we have to allow them to talk about their feelings as well as their activities. If we see rich potential in the language people use to describe their daily activities, then we have to take advantage of the opportunity to let them tell us what that language means. 'Nervous breakdown' is not the only phrase that I heard without asking for clarification. Verna was answering a question about the relationship between her mother and her grandmother when she said:

It was quite close since my mother was the only daughter that was living. My grandmother did have another daughter, that one died. I didn't know it until we got to working on the family tree. My mother was older than her brother. They were quite close. They worked together quite well when it would come to preparing meals and things. They visited back and forth a lot.

Her answer gave several general examples of how the closeness was manifested, but what did Verna mean when she described a relationship as 'close' twice in a short answer? What did her perception of this relationship mean to her? My next question asked, instead, for further examples: 'Did they [your grandparents] come to western Washington because your parents were here?'

Even efforts to seek clarification were not always framed in ways that encouraged the interviewee to reflect upon the meaning of her experience. Elizabeth was answering a question about household rules when she was a child and commented: 'My mother was real partial to my brother because, of course, you know that old country way; the boy was the important one.' My question 'How did her partiality to the brother show?' elicited some specific examples, but none of a series of subsequent questions gave her an opportunity to reflect upon how this perception affected her understanding of herself and her place in the family.

A final example from Verna's interview illustrates the best and the worst of what we are trying to do. Her statement is a powerful reflection upon her roles as a mother; the subsequent question, however, ignores all the emotional content of her remarks:

Yes. There was times that I just wished I could get away from it all. And there were times when I would have liked to have taken the kids and left them someplace for a week—the whole bunch at one time—so that I wouldn't have to worry about them. I don't know whether anybody else had that feeling or not, but there were times when I just felt like I needed to get away from everybody, even my husband, for a little while. Those were times when I would maybe take a walk back in the woods and look at the flowers and maybe go down there and find an old cow that was real gentle and walk up to her and pat her a while—kind of get away from it. I just had to, it seems like sometimes...

*Were you active in clubs?*

As the above portion of her remarks indicates, Verna was more than willing to talk spontaneously about the costs of her choice to combine the roles of wife, mother, and diligent farm woman. Perhaps she had exhausted the topic. If not, my question, even though it acknowledged the need for support at such times, certainly did not invite her to expand upon the feelings that both she and I knew might contradict some notion of what women ought to do and feel. She was comfortable enough to begin to consider the realities beyond the acceptable façade of the female role, but my question diverted the focus from her unique, individual reflections to the relative safety of women's clubs and activities, a more acceptable outlet for such feelings. In this case, my ability to listen, not Verna's memory, suffered from the constraints of internalized cultural boundaries. Until we can figure out how to release the brakes that these boundaries place on both hearing and memory, our oral histories are likely to confirm the prevailing ideology of women's lives and rob women of their honest voices.

What I learned by listening carefully to my interviews is that women's oral history requires much more than a new set of questions to explore women's unique experiences and unique perspectives; we need to refine our methods for probing more deeply by listening to the levels on which the narrator responds to the original questions. To do so we need to listen critically to our interviews, to our responses as well as to our questions. We need to hear what women implied, suggested, and started to say but didn't. We need to interpret their pauses and, when it happens, their unwillingness or inability to respond. We need to consider carefully whether our interviews create a context in which women feel comfortable exploring the subjective feelings that give meaning to actions, things, and events, whether they allow women to explore 'unwomanly' feelings and behaviors, and whether they encourage women to explain what they mean in their own terms.

When women talk about relationships, our responses can create an opportunity to talk about how much relationships enriched or diminished life experiences. When women talk about activities or events, they might find it easy to take blame for failures, but more sensitive responses may also make it possible to talk about feelings of competence or pride, even for women who do not consider such qualities very womanly. When women talk about what they have done, they may also want to explore their

perceptions of the options they thought they had and how they feel about their responses. We can probe the costs that sometimes accompany choices, the means for accommodating and compensating for such costs, and how they are evaluated in retrospect. We can make it easier for women to talk about the values that may be implicit in their choices or feelings. When women reveal feelings or experiences that suggest conflict, we can explore what the conflict means and what form it takes. We can be prepared to expect and permit discussion of anger. If our questions are general enough, women will be able to reflect upon their experience and choose for themselves which experiences and feelings are central to their sense of their past.

The language women use to explore the above topics will be all the richer when they have ample opportunity to explain and clarify what they mean. When they use words and phrases like 'nervous breakdown', 'support', 'close', 'visiting', and 'working together', they should have an opportunity to explain what they mean in their own terms. With letters and diaries we can only infer what individuals mean by the language they use; with oral interviews we can ask them. As they discuss examples, the particularities of their experiences often begin to emerge from behind the veil of familiar and ambiguous terms.

As a result of my discussions with Dana, a trained therapist, I have developed a new appreciation for oral history's potential for exploring questions of self-concept and [self]-consciousness, for documenting questions of value and meaning in individuals' reflections upon their past. Important distinctions remain between oral history and therapeutic interviews, but as we shed our specific agendas the women we interview will become freer to tell their own stories as fully, completely, and honestly as they desire.

## **INTERVIEW ANALYSES: LISTENING FOR MEANING**

*Dana Jack*

I have been using oral interviews in research on depression among women and on moral reasoning among practicing attorneys.<sup>5</sup> In broad terms, both studies examine the interactions among social institutions, social roles, and women's consciousness. The women I interviewed are grappling with ideas about relationships, self-worth, career, and personal integrity in the context of society-wide changes in women's roles. As I listened to a woman's self-commentary, to her reflection upon her own thoughts and actions, I learned about her adaptation to her particular relationships and historical circumstances, especially her adaptation to the ideas of 'good lawyer', 'good wife', 'good woman', to which she tried to conform.

I listened with an awareness that a person's self-reflection is not just a private, subjective act. The categories and concepts we use for reflecting upon and evaluating ourselves come from a cultural context, one that has historically demeaned and controlled women's activities. Thus, an exploration of the language and the meanings women use to articulate their own experience leads to an awareness of the conflicting social forces and institutions affecting women's consciousness. It also reveals how women act either to restructure or preserve their psychological orientations, their relationships, and their social contexts. This was true for two very different studies and populations—depressed women and practicing lawyers.

The first, and the hardest, step of interviewing was to learn to listen in a new way, to hold in abeyance the theories that told me what to hear and how to interpret what these women had to say. Depressed women, for example, told stories of the failure of relationships, an inability to connect with the person(s) with whom they wanted to experience intimacy. These were the expected stories, predicted by existing models, and the temptation was to interpret the stories according to accepted concepts and norms for 'maturity' and 'health'. Because psychological theories have relied on men's lives and men's formulations for these norms, they explain women's psychological difference as deviant or 'other'.<sup>6</sup> The interview is a critical tool for developing new frameworks and theories based on women's lives and women's formulations. But we are at an awkward stage: old theories are set aside or under suspicion and new ones are still emerging. We must therefore be especially attentive to the influences that shape what we hear and how we interpret. How do we listen to an interview when we have rejected the old frameworks for interpretation and are in the process of developing new ones? How can an interview pull us beyond existing frameworks so that we stretch and expand them?

First, we must remember that the researcher is an active participant in qualitative research. My initial training was as a therapist, and the practice of listening to others while also attending to my own response to them has helped in conducting interviews. Theodore Reik calls this quiet involvement of the self 'listening with the third ear'.<sup>7</sup> As a researcher, I have learned that critical areas demanding attention are frequently those where I think I already know what the woman is saying. This means I am already appropriating what she says to an existing schema, and therefore I am no longer really listening to *her*. Rather, I am listening to how what she says fits into what I think I already know. So I try to be very careful to ask each woman what she means by a certain word, or to make sure that I attend to what is missing, what literary critics call the 'presence of the absence' in women's texts—the 'hollows, centers, caverns within the work-places where activity that one might expect is missing...or deceptively coded.'<sup>8</sup>

And what is it that is absent? Because women have internalized the categories by which to interpret their experience and activities, categories that 'represent a deposit of the desires and disappointments of men',<sup>9</sup> what is often missing is the woman's own interpretation of her experience, or her own perspective on her life and activity. Interviews allow us to hear, if we will, the particular meanings of a language that both women and men use but that each translates differently. Looking closely at the language and the particular meanings of important words women use to describe their experience allows us to understand how women are adapting to the culture within which they live. When their behavior is observed from the outside, depressed women are called passive, dependent, masochistic, compliant, and victimized by their own learned helplessness. Yet, when I listened to the women's self-reflection, what became clear was that behind the so-called passive behavior of depressed women was the tremendous cognitive activity required to inhibit both outer actions and inner feelings in order to live up to the ideal of the 'good' woman, particularly the good wife. Statements such as 'I have to walk on eggshells in dealing with my husband', and 'I have learned "don't rock the boat"' show awareness of both their actions and their intended effects: not to cause discord.<sup>10</sup>

How do we listen to interviews without immediately leaping to interpretations suggested by prevailing theories? The first step is to immerse ourselves in the interview, to try to understand the person's story from her vantage point. I found that three ways of listening helped me understand the narrator's point of view. The first was to listen to the person's *moral language*. In the depression study, I heard things like: 'I feel like I'm a failure', 'I don't measure up', 'I'm a liar, a cheat, and I'm no good.' In the lawyer study, when lawyers were describing fulfilling the obligations of role, we heard statements such as: 'It's like being forced into a sex relationship you didn't anticipate. It's a screw job. It feels horrible to do something that you wouldn't do normally.'

Or 'I have to contradict myself depending on what role I'm taking...it's sort of professional prostitution.' Or finally, 'Sometimes you feel almost like a pimp or something...[I]t felt sleazy to cut the truth that finely.'

Although very different in tone, these moral self-evaluative statements allow us to examine the relationship between self-concept and cultural norms, between what we value and what others value, between how we are told to act and how we feel about ourselves when we do or do not act that way. In a person's self-judgement, we can see which moral standards are accepted and used to judge the self, which values the person strives to attain. In the depression study, this was the key to learning about gender differences in the prevalence and dynamics of depression. Negative self-judgement affecting the fall in self-esteem is considered to be one of the key symptoms of depression. Research by Carol Gilligan and her colleagues indicates that women and men often use differing moral frameworks to guide their perception and resolution of moral problems.<sup>11</sup> Listening to the moral language of depressed women illuminated both the standards used to judge the self and the source of their despair. The women considered the failure of their relationships to be a *moral* failure; their sense of hopelessness and helplessness stemmed from despair about the inability to be an authentic, developing self within an intimate marriage while also living up to the moral imperatives of the 'good woman'.

Attending to the moral standards used to judge the self allows the researcher to honor the individuality of each woman through observing what values she is striving to attain. An oral interview, when structured by the narrator instead of the researcher, allows each woman to express her uniqueness in its full class, racial, and ethnic richness. Each person is free to describe her idiosyncratic interaction between self-image and cultural norms. Each person can tell us how she comes to value or devalue herself. During the interview, the researcher's role is to preserve and foster this freedom, and to restrict the imposition of personal expectations. When the woman, and not existing theory, is considered the expert on her own psychological experience, one can begin to hear the muted channel of women's experience come through.

In analyzing the depression study, for example, I heard how women use the language of the culture to deny what, on another level, they value and desire. A key word for depressed women is 'dependency'. Psychologists consider depressed women to be excessively dependent upon their relationships for a sense of self and self-esteem. But when I looked at how depressed women understand dependence, and how their negative evaluation of themselves as dependent affects their self-perception and their actions, the concept was cast in a new light.

In a first interview with a thirty-three-year-old depressed woman, the issue of dependence was central and problematic: 'You know, I'm basically a very dependent person to start with. And then you get me married and tied down to a home and start not working...'

Asked what she meant by dependent, she responded:

I like closeness. I like companionship. I like somebody, an intimate closeness, even with a best friend. And I've never had that with my husband... Sometimes I get frustrated with myself that I have to have that, you know.

I look at other people that seem so self-sufficient and so independent. I don't know—I just have always needed a closeness. And maybe I identified that as dependency.

...[S]ince I've been married I realize it's kind of a negative thing to be that way. I've tried to bury that need for closeness. And so I guess that has also contributed to a lot of my frustrations.

Saying that she 'had been feeling that my need for intimacy and my need for that kind of a deep level of friendship or relationships with people was sort of bad', this woman began 'to believe there was something the matter with me'. In her attempt to bury her needs for closeness, she revealed the activity required to be passive, to try to live up to self-alienating images of 'today's woman'.

This interview contains an implicit challenge to prevalent understandings of dependence. Looking closely, we are able to see how this woman has judged her feelings against a dominant standard that says to need closeness makes one dependent, when one should be able to be self-sufficient and autonomous. Further, she reflects upon her own experience, her capabilities, and her needs not from the basis of who she is and what she needs but in terms of how her husband and others see her. Her capacity for closeness and intimacy goes unacknowledged as strength. Rather than a failure of the husband's response, the problem is identified as her 'neediness'. If a researcher went into this interview with the traditional notion of dependence in mind, s/he would find the hypothesis that depressed women are too dependent confirmed. But if one listens to the woman's own feelings about dependence, her confusion about what she knows she needs and what the culture says she *should* need, one begins to see part of the self-alienation and separation from feelings that is a key aspect of depression.

The second way of listening that allowed me to hear the voice of the subject instead of my own preconceptions was to attend to the subject's *metastatements*. These are places in the interview where people spontaneously stop, look back, and comment about their own thoughts or something just said.

For example, in the lawyer study, a woman is answering the question, 'What does morality mean to you?':

...[I]t seems to me anything that raises to mind hurting other people or taking things away from other people or some sort of monetary gain for oneself...And I suppose just how we interact with each other, if there's a contentiousness or bad feelings or bad blood between some people, that raises some moral issues because I guess I see us all as having a bit of a moral obligation to be nice to each other and to get along. *So—do I sound much like a litigator?*

Meta-statements alert us to the individual's awareness of a discrepancy within the self—or between what is expected and what is being said. They inform the interviewer about what categories the individual is using to monitor her thoughts, and allow observation of how the person socializes feelings or thoughts according to certain norms.<sup>12</sup> Women lawyers made many more meta-statements than men, indicating they were 'watching' their own thinking. Because women have come into a legal system designed by men, for men, and because they still face discrimination, it is easy for them to develop an 'onlooker' attitude of critical observation toward themselves.<sup>13</sup> This woman looks at herself being looked at in law and notices the difference. Second, these remarks show how powerfully a stereotypic image of the successful, adversarial lawyer divides them from their personal experience and makes some women, early in their careers, question their ability within law. Finally, such comments reveal the lack of public validation of frameworks that women use to understand and value their own feelings and experiences.<sup>14</sup>

The third way of listening was to attend to the *logic of the narrative*, noticing the internal consistency or contradictions in the person's statements about recurring themes and the way these themes relate to each other. I listened to how the person strings together major statements about experience so I could understand the assumptions and beliefs that inform the logic and guide the woman's interpretation of her experience.

A woman I call Anna, age fifty-four, hospitalized twice for major depression, provides an example of a contradiction within the logic of her narrative, a contradiction that points to conflicting beliefs. Anna says:

I was telling my daughter-in-law, 'I guess I was just born to serve others.' But we shouldn't be born to serve other people, we should look after ourselves.

Anna constructs the most important issues in her life—how to balance the needs of her self with the needs of others—as an either/or choice that presents her with loss on either side. The choice is either loss of self or loss of other. Such dichotomous thinking leaves Anna with feelings of hopelessness about how to resolve the conflicts in the relationships, and restricts her perception of choice.

On the surface, Anna's statement simply pits the traditional female role against the new 'me first' ethic of self-development. But, looking more deeply, one sees that she describes two visions of relationship: either isolation or subordination. Through Anna's construction of her possibilities in relationship, one gains a glimpse of how specific historical ideas about women's roles and women's worth affect her own depression. Anna's vision of her self in relationship as either subordinated or isolated is profoundly influenced by a social context of inequality and competition. When unresolved personal issues intersect with conflicting social ideals that limit women's lives, that intersection increases the difficulty of forming a positive and realistic vision of self toward which one can strive.

Rather than conclude, as do cognitive theories of depression, that cognitive errors 'cause' depression, observing this dichotomous thinking led me to see how the female social role is structured in thought and works to constrict women's perceptions of their relationships and their choices. Such logic of the narrative allowed me to see how a woman deals with conflicting cultural ideas, and how easy it is to feel depression as a personal failure rather than to recognize its social and historical aspects.

## CONCLUSION

The process of sharing and critiquing our interviews has helped us sharpen our listening skills and improve our interviewing methods so that narrators feel more free to explore complex and conflicting experiences in their lives. Because of our divergent disciplinary interests, we have changed in different ways. The historian has become more alert to the subjective dimensions of events and activities; the psychologist has gained greater awareness of how the sociohistorical context can be read between the lines of a woman's 'private' inner conflict. Both are more determined to discover how individual women define and evaluate their experience in their own terms.

Realizing the possibilities of the oral history interview demands a shift in methodology from information gathering, where the focus is on the right questions, to interaction, where the focus is on process, on the dynamic unfolding of the subject's viewpoint. It is the interactive nature of the interview that allows us to ask for clarification, to notice what questions the subject formulates about her own life, to go behind conventional, expected answers to the woman's personal construction of her own experience. This shift of focus from data gathering to interactive process affects what the researcher regards as valuable information. Those aspects of live interviews unavailable in a written text—the pauses, the laughter—all invite us to explore their meaning for the narrator. The exploration does not have to be intrusive; it can be as simple as 'What did that [event] mean for you?'

This shift in focus, from information (data) gathering to interactive process, requires new skills on the researcher's part. In our view, it stimulates the development of a specific kind of readiness, the dimensions of which have been sketched in this paper. As Anderson has suggested, its most general aspects include an awareness that (1) actions, things, and events are accompanied by

subjective emotional experience that gives them meaning; (2) some of the feelings uncovered may exceed the boundaries of acceptable or expected female behavior; and (3) individuals can and must explain what they mean in their own terms. Jack described three ways of listening during the interview that sharpen the researcher's awareness of the feelings and thoughts that lie behind the woman's outwardly conventional story: (1) listening to the narrator's moral language; (2) attending to the meta-statements; and (3) observing the logic of the narrative. Incorporating these insights has helped us learn how to remain suspended and attentive on a fine line between accomplishing our research goals and letting the subject be in charge of the material in the interview.

While by no means conclusive or inclusive, the following points suggest further ways to sharpen our attentiveness to the interactive process of the interview:

### **A. Listening to the narrator**

1. If the narrator is to have the chance to tell her own story, the interviewer's first question needs to be very open-ended. It needs to convey the message that in this situation, the narrator's interpretation of her experience guides the interview. For example, in the depression study, Jack started with, 'Can you tell me, in your own mind what led up to your experience of depression?'
2. If she doesn't answer the interviewer's question, what and whose questions does the woman answer?
3. What are her feelings about the facts or events she is describing?
4. How does she understand what happened to her? What meaning does she make of events? Does she think about it in more than one way? How does she evaluate what she is describing?
5. What is being left out, what are the absences?

### **B. Listening to ourselves**

1. Try not to cut the narrator off to steer her to what our concerns are.
2. Trust our own hunches, feelings, responses that arise through listening to others.
3. Notice our own areas of confusion, or of too great a certainty about what the woman is saying—these are areas to probe further.
4. Notice our personal discomfort; it can become a personal alarm bell alerting us to a discrepancy between what is being said and what the woman is feeling.

Oral history interviews are unique in that the interaction of researcher and subject creates the possibility of going beyond the conventional stories of women's lives, their pain and their satisfactions, to reveal experience in a less culturally edited form. But despite the value of this focus on the oral history interview in its dynamic, interactive form, we must offer one word of caution. The researcher must always remain attentive to the moral dimension of interviewing and aware that she is there to follow the narrator's lead, to honor her integrity and privacy, not to intrude into areas that the narrator has chosen to hold back.<sup>15</sup> This is another part of the specific kind of readiness the researcher brings to the interview: a readiness to be sensitive to the narrator's privacy while, at the same time, offering her the freedom to express her own thoughts and experiences, and listening for how that expression goes beyond prevailing concepts.

## **NOTES**

Public discussion of this collaborative work began at the National Women's Studies Association Conference held in Seattle, Washington, in June 1985 and continued with coauthors Susan Armitage and Judith Wittner in the *Oral History Review*, 1987, vol. 15 (Spring), pp. 103-127.

- 1 See S. Ardener (ed.), *Perceiving Women*, New York, John Wiley & Sons, 1975, pp. xi-xxiii. In that volume see also E. Ardener, 'Belief and the problem of women', pp. 1-27, and H. Callan, 'The premise of dedication: notes towards an ethnography of diplomats' wives', pp. 87-104.
- 2 C. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1988, pp. 30-31.
- 3 'Women's oral history resource section', *Frontiers*, 1977, vol. 2 (Summer), pp. 110-118.
- 4 K. Anderson and others, interviews for the Washington Women's Heritage Project, Center for Pacific Northwest Studies, Western Washington University, Bellingham, Washington. In the following account, two interviews from the collection are cited: interview with Elizabeth Bailey, 1 July 1980; interview with Verna Friend, 31 July 1980.
- 5 D.C. Jack, 'Clinical depression in women: cognitive schemas of self, care and relationships in a longitudinal study', unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 1984; and D.C. Jack, 'Silencing the self: the power of social imperatives in female depression', in R. Formanek and A. Gurian (eds), *Women and Depression: A Lifespan Perspective*, New York, Springer Publishing Co., 1987. The lawyer study is in R. Jack and D.C. Jack, *Moral Vision and Professional Decisions: The Changing Values of Women and Men Lawyers*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- 6 C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1982.

- 7 T. Reik, *Listening with the Third Ear*, New York, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1948.
- 8 C. Heilbrun and C. Stimpson, 'Theories of feminist criticism: a dialogue', in J. Donovan (ed.), *Feminist Literary Criticism*, Lexington, Ky., The University Press of Kentucky, 1975, pp. 61-73.
- 9 K. Horney, *Feminine Psychology*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1967, p. 56.
- 10 Jack, 'Clinical depression in women', p. 177.
- 11 Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*. See also C. Gilligan, J. Taylor and J. Ward (eds), *Mapping the Moral Domain*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1989.
- 12 See A. Russell Hochschild, 'Emotion work, feeling rule, and social structure', *American Journal of Sociology*, 1979, vol. 85 (November), pp. 551-575.
- 13 The onlooker phenomenon is described by M. Westcott, *The Feminist Legacy of Karen Horney*, New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press, 1986.
- 14 J. Baker Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1976, writes 'When...we can think only in terms given by the dominant culture, and when that culture not only does not attend to our own experiences but specifically denies and devalues them, we are left with no way of conceptualizing our lives. Under these circumstances, a woman is often left with a global, undefined sense that she must be wrong' (p. 57).
- 15 The American Psychological Association (APA) has adopted ethical standards for the treatment of research subjects that provide some guidelines for thinking through issues of researcher intrusiveness. A copy of the APA Ethical Principles may be obtained from the APA Ethics office, 1200 17th Street NW, Washington, DC 20036.