

**WHO SPEAKS FOR WHOM? THE PROBLEM OF REPRESENTING AND INTERPRETING
THE LIVES OF 'OTHERS'.**

By

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Abstract

Most historical research and writing has neglected and obscured the lives of women. As a way of correcting this omission, feminist historians have embraced narrative or oral history as a research method which places women's voices at the centre and thereby conveys women's consciousness and experience through the voices of women themselves. However, as much of this form of scholarship are presented and interpreted by the researchers, dilemmas with regard to the interpretation of other people's lives must be acknowledged. Complex questions about 'othering' come to the fore, such as: Who is the 'other'? Who are we? Who speaks for whom? Are researchers simply conduits through which the voices of others can be heard? In addressing the role and relationship between the researcher and those telling their stories, issues of dominance and difference, motivation and reward, and the possibilities for social change need to be extrapolated. This paper illustrates these predicaments, making use of the preliminary findings of a generational study of Xhosa women in Grahamstown speaking about transformations in coping strategies within households. The paper concludes with some observations and pointers regarding research into the lives of 'others'.

My motivations in undertaking an oral history study on Xhosa women in Grahamstown were: to hear women speak for themselves; to give voice to the previously silenced; to hear from 'ordinary' women about their own lives; to add to the body of historical writing on women and by women; to gain insight into otherwise hidden forms of consciousness and coping strategies developed by women in a rapidly changing world.

As a feminist, it was important for me to utilise feminist theory and methodology for the study. This has meant I have had to interrogate my research practices and measure them against what are considered feminist methods of inquiry. Basic to feminism is that the 'personal is political' and the personal should therefore also be present within research experiences as much as within any other experiences. Excluding the personal from feminist presentations of research is to deny the importance of the personal elsewhere. Academic feminists must integrate feminist beliefs into our research (Stanley and Wise 1993:157).

In this paper I will raise some of the dilemmas I faced in the process of doing feminist oral history research. Questions arose that have been so critical that they almost overshadow the content of the study itself.

Feminist Research

There is no one 'feminism' and no checklist to be used to establish whether research is feminist or not. However, some unifying features of feminist scholarship are: its commitment to political and social change and its determination to undermine and challenge traditional boundaries which are defined by patriarchy. Angela Mills writes that

Feminism's difficult but exhilarating political challenge is to build sisterhood/solidarity across differences, using the differences as resources in developing shared critiques and visions ... it is feminist's deep commitment to women and uncompromising critique of patriarchal power that enables them to participate fully in anti-racist, anti-colonial, and anti-capitalist struggles and to affirm diverse cultures (Mills 1998:174).

This raised questions for me as to what challenges to traditional boundaries and what political or social change my study would bring about. Given the fact that the audience or readership of a Master's degree may be only a small group of academic researchers, just how much change would this bring about in the lives of the women interviewed?

But challenging the boundaries and bringing about political change may not rest only in the results of the study. It may be in the actual process and presentation, the methodology of the research itself.

Feminists such as Ann Oakley, ditch the objective, dominant and distance approach to interviewing for a more friendly, subjective and interpersonal style (Oakley 1981). Stanley and Wise remind us that research is always a human activity which comes with all the emotions, feelings, moods and prejudices that make up the human person. All of which influence how we understand and interpret what is going on. They stress the fact of the researchers consciousness being the medium through which the research occurs (Stanley and Wise 1993).

Placing oneself in the centre of the research, being open and honest with those we interview can make us very vulnerable. But, for 'the researched' vulnerability is precisely what they feel. Very seldom are they powerful enough to prevent publication or renounce the result of the study. From where they stand, they have very little control over the research. Their feelings, understandings and lives may become mangled in the interpretation, and yet will be presented as 'truth' by the researcher (Stanley and Wise 1993).

The call from feminist researchers then, is to take into account the personal context of both the interviewer and the narrators. To acknowledge ourselves in the research process and to allow for some control, if possible, from 'the researched'. To make space for the personal in the research and to let go of some of our objectivity and instead recognise and accept our subjectivity.

Oral History

Oral history is not a new method, nor is it inherently feminist, but it does become a feminist methodology when used in certain ways. Susan Geiger believes that oral history is only a method when the interests of the interviewer go beyond the mere pleasure of listening to the story being told. When scholars use the information derived from the interview it becomes a method, and methodological questions arise about it. It can only become feminist methodology if it is used in particular feminist ways and if the objectives for collecting the data are feminist. Key objectives in feminist oral history emphasise understanding rather than controlling the material or information generated and conceptualising the interpretative task as one of opening rather than of closure (Geiger 1992:177).

The framing of questions, the language used, assumptions of marginality and representativeness, ways of deriving meaning and evaluating validity, ways of sharing authority will all determine whether the oral history is feminist or not (Geiger 1992).

Contemporary historians now include voices of the previously unheard such as women, the poor, black people and other oppressed peoples. We now hear voices from all sectors of society. We have moved from the idea of the Voice of History to 'heteroglossia', which is defined as 'varied and opposing voices'. Historians now speak with different mother tongues (Burke 2001:6).

In order to hear the stories of women themselves, they need to be the narrators of their own histories. Amina Mama (Mama 1996) calls these stories ‘herstories’ and suggests that they lend themselves to in-depth fieldwork and convey women’s consciousness and experience in an authentic manner. ‘Herstories give women’s voices pride of place and reflect a specialised methodology. Portelli writes that oral history is true to itself when it listens to those who are not already acquainted with public speaking (Portelli 1998).

With all the above in mind, the next complex problem to be examined was that of representing ‘others’.

‘The Other’

At the outset of the research I was acutely aware of some of the problems connected with interviewing: finding and choosing participants; developing a set of questions that would tell me what I needed to know; the frustration of setting up appointments that were not always kept; the fallibility of machinery; the lengthy process of transcribing and sometimes not being able to decode what has been said. But the major questions by far surrounded the idea of representing and presenting ‘the other’.

No one should ever ‘speak for’ or assume another’s voice ... it becomes a form of colonisation. (Sinister Wisdom Collective, 1990:4)

We must take on the whole world; we cannot afford ‘no go areas’ of imagination; we cannot afford to refuse an opinion on any subject.

(Anna Livia)

These two quotes were sent out as a ‘Call for Short Contributions’ to a publication addressing questions of representation and difference (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1998:1). The articles in *Representing the Other* raise complex questions with regard to who is the ‘other’; power relationships between researcher and narrator; and in what ways representing the Other can create social change. These questions include: who is the other and who are ‘we’? Along what shifting lines of power and powerlessness is Otherness constructed? What are the costs and benefits of ‘including’ or of ‘excluding’ the Other in our research, and on what terms? Should we speak only for ourselves? Should we act simply as conduits through which the voices of others can be heard? How do we solve disagreements between ‘us’ and the Other about the meanings and implications of what is said between us? In what ways can representations of Others create social change? How can we interrupt the process of Othering? (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1998:3)

Who then would be the appropriate person to interview women? Should women only interview women? Should they be of the same age and class and race? Is oral history a way through which the previously disenfranchised can tell their stories and for that to happen will there always be an imbalance of power and a representation of 'the other'?

Amanda Kottler writes of the particular difficulty of conducting research in South Africa, with its history and ever present consideration of racism. On the problem of black people writing only for black people, or white researchers only researching other whites, she concludes:

[P]erhaps in the end, since we cannot ever totally transcend either our historical position or our prejudices, the best that can be done, when faced with this kind of dilemma, is to interpret in such a way as to give access to our past and continually open up new possibilities for the future. In South Africa in particular, we need to do this now by finding a way of speaking about difference without reinvoking a racializing discourse (Kottler 1996:62)

Faced with criticism of her research as a white woman on black women, Diana Russell defends her position by saying if she accepted that feminists should never represent 'the Other', I would have to confine my research to upper-class, white, South African-born ex-Anglican women in their 50s, who now live in America. If we do not continue to 'take on the whole world', many of us could not do research or publish material that contributes to furthering radical feminist goals (Russell 1998).

In South Africa we have a long history of black people having been represented by white people in government. It was acceptable practice for certain people to represent 'others' different from themselves, but who, it was thought, nonetheless understood completely the needs, aspirations and problems of those whom they represented. This is not only true for this country, but universally societies surmised that accurate information about various groups of people could be gained through the opinions and experiences of certain individuals who were not themselves part of the group under discussion. These individuals were mostly male, educated, and thought to be reliable in their presentation of certain facts, events and opinions. Thus it was that men spoke on behalf of women, white people on behalf of black people, the educated and articulate on behalf of the illiterate, the wealthy on behalf of the poor, the heterosexual on behalf of the homosexual, husbands on behalf of wives, adults on behalf of children.

All of these dualistic relationships suggest an imbalance of power, with those perceived to be weaker, abnormal or less significant placed at the mercy of those who are regarded as more knowledgeable, normal and important. Perhaps what I have described here are forms of colonization in which 'the other' is regarded as hostile, as subject that is foreign, and that needs to be examined. The plight of 'the other' is open to unscrupulous use by and for the benefit of the researchers, the politicians and those seeking

power. This theory of the autonomous subject standing independently of the knowable object has been challenged from a number of quarters. I mention here a glimpse of what the arguments entail.

Feminist and post-structuralist philosophy and psychology have explored the idea of ‘the other’ in relation to the self. This complex relationship, they argue, can become a place of dynamic encounter or a place in which ‘the other’ is eliminated because the encounter is seen as hostile confrontation, and not one in which the uniqueness of the other and the self are made mutually accessible and interconnectedness established (Trisk 2002).

One of the projects of feminism is to demonstrate that the self and the other are inextricably linked and it is in being with the other that I most profoundly experience myself. The loss of rigid boundaries, far from being threatening, is in fact creative. It is indeed the capacity for mutual, reciprocal connections that allows for the constitution of subjectivity. In contrast to Lacan’s threatening “other” who will subsume me unless I conquer and expel him, for many feminist writers the other is the one who will bring me to who I am, so that “I” am both self and other (Trisk 2002:64).

It seems to me that, whilst there are obvious differences between peoples and societies, these need not necessarily preclude relationship and understanding of each other. It seems that it is possible for one to be heard through another if the relationship and motivation are not about the gaining of power ‘over’, if there is no desire to change the other, and if there is an understanding of the possibility of fluidity in the relationship of who is and/or becomes the other.

Having said all this, no matter how well intentioned the motivations are for speaking for or representing the other, there will always be problems due to difference, to reward and various other factors. These issues need to be taken seriously even if they are not solved. Difference cannot be ignored, researchers cannot be objective and the final product will benefit the researcher and the participants in different ways. It is no real surprise then, that in my research I was confronted with this notion of ‘otherness’ and the consequent questions it raised.

A key issue in feminist theory and practice is whether, and how we should represent members of groups to which we do not belong – in particular members of groups oppressed in ways we are not (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1998:1).

Stanley and Wise take up this issue and comment that although all women share oppression, they are not all oppressed in the same way and they cannot fully understand the ways in which other women are oppressed because ‘*the material forms of the oppression differ*’ (Stanely and Wise 1993:170).

This struck a chord with me. Many white women researchers face the same dilemma. I am a middle-class, white, forty-nine year old women with tertiary education. I have no children and have never been married. I speak English and do not speak Xhosa. I grew up in apartheid South Africa. I am also a priest in the Anglican Church. All of these characteristics make me very different to the women I was meeting in interviews and all of them have some bearing on what I asked as the interviewer, what my objectives were for the study, what I expected to hear and what was actually said to me.

All the participants are Xhosa women for whom English is a second, or even third, language. All of them have been affected by the apartheid policies of this country but in very different ways to the way I was affected. Some of them are a lot older than I am, some very much younger. Some have strong affiliations to churches, some do not. Some have children, others do not.

Whilst I recognised the ‘otherness’ of these women, I had to acknowledge that I am the ‘other’ to them. And because of this otherness, each of us would choose what to say and what not to say, understand and also not grasp what is being implied, and we would perform for each other in ways we thought would be required by and acceptable to the other.

Indeed, if we are to take the idea of ‘the other’ to be those different from ourselves, whether in class, gender or even experience, then in line with Russell’s comment quoted earlier, we would always only have permission to speak for ourselves alone. Perhaps we do indeed speak only for ourselves when we give only *our* opinion, *our* understanding of how things are presented to *us*.

This is not as simple as it sounds because the researcher is never an outsider. Perhaps a way forward is for researchers to present themselves and their understandings of what is going on.

Joan Sangster addresses this issue of interpreting other women’s lives and acknowledges the ethical dilemmas many oral historians face. She notes that there is often an imbalance of power or at least different motivations for questioning and telling stories, with the final product being shaped by the interviewer and the narrator. But even the best attempts at equalising an interview cannot completely eradicate the unequal, intrusive and potentially exploitative relationships, simply by virtue of our position as researchers and that of other women with less control over the finished product, as ‘subjects’ of study ... After all we are using this material for the purpose of writing books which are often directed, at least in part, to academic or career ends. I gained access to women’s memories not as a friend, but as a *professional historian* (Sangster: 1998:92).

Sangster goes on to say how, despite her intention to allow the words of the women whom she interviewed to speak for themselves, no matter how far her own interpretation and perception and those of

the narrators diverged, her voice would always assume precedence in the writing. And yet she still believes it is the responsibility of historians to convey insights despite these inevitable imbalances.

Portelli comments on the crucial role oral historians play in the interview situation itself and in the presentation of the material.

The expression *oral history* therefore contains ambivalence ...: it refers both to what the historians *hear* (the oral sources) and to what the historians *say* or *write*. On a more cogent plane, it refers to what the source and the historian do *together* at the moment of their encounter in the interview (Portelli 1998:23).

Power Relations

Assuming that the issue of ‘the other’ and who speaks for ‘the other’ will be an ongoing debate, I now turn to the actual interview and discuss some of the dynamics involved in this method of research.

One of the motivations I had for embarking on this research study was to obtain a further qualification for myself. However much I tried to deny this as a significant motivation, it would not go away. I may well be able to justify this motivation with legitimate reasoning, but the bottom line is that I certainly gained more from doing the study than the participants gained. In fact, I am not sure whether they obtained anything at all!

Stanley and Wise are scathing in their attack on any research that would treat people as ‘objects’ for the researcher to do research ‘on’. For them, the more morally acceptable form of research would be research ‘with’. This implies ‘researched’ being involved in the designing the research method (Stanley and Wise 1993:168).

This factor in research has called into question what could be termed ‘the commodification of persons’. No matter in what language we couch this concept, there remains the very real fact that the academic researcher’s dependence on the participant is far greater than the other way around. Whilst connectedness and conversation and community may be a by-product of interviews and life story telling, at the end of the day it is the academic researcher who will benefit first and foremost. Any social or economic benefit to the participants may be ‘by products’

The social and personal relationship between the narrator and the interviewer plays a significant role in how the interview will take shape. In my research the participants and I share only minimal similar life experience. For the rest, we are poles apart. Given the history of racial bias in this country, my being a white woman had the potential to place the black woman participant in a position, albeit in our minds only, at a disadvantage because of the power so held in the hands of white people. An example of this is when one interviewee insisted on calling “Ma’am”, possibly as she had only just met me, knew I was a

friend her employer and she saw this designation as a sign of respect for me. I, however, felt most uncomfortable as it placed me in apposition of authority. Which leads to the next issue of who does indeed have the authority to shape an interview?

It has been suggested that the interviewer and the narrator together set the agenda for the interview thereby giving some control to the narrator. This is a most appealing theory but in practice it is difficult for a number of reasons. The researcher has a specific agenda of her own which is to gain certain information about certain issues. The participant may not have the confidence to shape the interview for herself, preferring to be asked questions rather than pose them or to speak without any indication of what she should say. There is scope, however, for the participant to guide the discussion if the interviewer allows for 'digressions' (though these digressions may indeed be of more value to the researcher than answers to set questions) and between the two they renegotiate the course of the conversation. Personal testimony may raise other issues which lead the interviewer to ask new questions and they can add another dimension to the lives of these ordinary people.

Performance

I have become increasingly aware of the idea of performance in many areas of life and research is one of them. This is something I would like to explore further, but for now will mention some insights from Ruth Finnegan (Finnegan 1996).

Performance is a form of human communication and action; it is a form of language which is influenced by, *inter alia*, the interaction between individuals and cultural expectations. For the oral historian, the interview is a concrete event in time and the way it is set up, when and where it is conducted, how it is prepared for and what expectations there are, all need to be taken into account. Oral historians are encouraged to question performance and its implications for the analysis of the interviews. Criteria to be examined include: how words are delivered; interaction with and behaviour of the interviewer; non-verbal gestures and facial expressions; cultural conventions; and the context of the interview.

Merely describing someone as 'the author', 'the performer', 'the narrator', etc., is therefore not enough, for complex interactions and problems lie behind these simple-sounding terms (Finnegan 1996: 96).

For the most part, the participants in my study had only been given a brief explanation at the setting up of the interview time as to what they would be expected speak about. This meant that they may have had different stories to tell had they been given the questions in advance and time to mull over them. They were thinking on their feet as it were and, given a different day and different time, they may well have answered differently had they had more time to think. Many of them may never have been asked such

questions before, indeed may not even have thought about the issues I raised in the interview. The personal nature of some questions may have posed a difficulty for them to answer as openly as they would have liked given a different context. Even if stories have been told before or questions reflected upon

they have never been told to that special listener and questioner who is the oral history interviewer. The interview implicitly enhances the authority and self-awareness of the narrator, and may raise questions about aspects of experience that the speaker has never spoken or even seriously thought about (Portelli 1998:24).

Openness and honesty from participants can only really be expected if the interviewer is honest about herself and what the interviewer reveals about herself will have an effect on what the narrator reveals about herself. For my research it was crucial that I sought certain women to be interviewed: they had to be Xhosa speaking, but able to converse in English; they had to be of differing age groups in order to gain the generational dimension; they had to reside in Grahamstown. They were chosen mostly because I knew someone connected with them or I myself was connected with them. All of them know that I am a priest. Many of the women spoke strongly of their faith, how they had seen God's guidance in their lives and how much they enjoyed their church life. Whilst this may well be absolutely true, there is the chance that such strong references to their faith may have been due to their understanding of my expectations. As Portelli puts it

I only speak because you asked me to (and, often, I will say what you want to hear)
(Portelli 1998: 29).

And yet, the words spoken by the narrators are the words the researcher will use, perhaps sifting and selecting which words would best illustrate the theme of the academic research.

...[T]he historian speaks through the sources, quoting their words to make a point, and using their artificial textuality to enhance the authority of historical discourse (Portelli 1998:29).

With tape-recorded interviews, once the 'performance' is completed, it is then transcribed into written text. The narrator's embodied words are fixed on tape later to be transcribed, edited and published. This brings us to the next question: how is the text related to the performance and which has priority?

Embodiment

Whilst the transcribing of spoken words into written text is both legitimate and necessary, there are serious issues to be explored in this process.

When an interview is under way, there are two (or more) persons in a face-to-face, embodied dialogue. The characters in this performance see each other, recognise each other and hear each other. This is a 'real live performance' in which much energy and connection may be present and during which some relationship is formed between the 'players'. Once this event is over a process of disembodiment and distancing takes over. I almost want to say 'dehumanising' but that may be too strong a word.

The tape recorded words are listened to and transcribed into writing and thereby removing the body one step from the words. Then the text is edited and pieces selected and written into a thesis, an article a paper, whatever the purpose of the interviews was, and the body is removed a step further. Then this weakened text is read by a completely foreign audience who will judge it and try to understand its meaning when it is by now three steps away from the original human speaker.

Can we then say that what eventually ends up as the words of 'the other' are indeed the words of 'the other'? What representation and interpretation has already damaged or at least changed, the intention of the speaker? How much is lost in the translation from spoken word to written text? As scholarly writers and not authors of novels, how much 'beauty and truth' (Portelli 1998) is sacrificed for the facts?

Representation

Having heard the voices of ten women answer very much the same questions, can I conclude that what they have said is representative of other women of their age, class, etc.? Feminist scholars would challenge the assumption that individual stories typify the cultural norm. We need to consider the subjectivity of the narrators and the motives and interests of those who are recording.

The personal contextualisation of women's lives found in life stories makes them invaluable for deepening cross-cultural comparisons, preventing facile generalisations, and evaluating theories about women's experience or oppression (Geiger 1986:338).

Do individual stories typify or deviate from the cultural norm? Either way we answer this implies knowledge against which the individual's story can be evaluated or compared. Some feminist researchers have challenged this because there is not enough research done by, on and for women. The cultural norm with which we have been presented is often a male norm, with men representing the experiences of women (Geiger 1992).

This view also presumes that one set of circumstances can be applied in others which are seen to be 'the same'. The counter argument to this is that knowledge is contextually specific with the narrator and the interviewer/researcher as active agents, constructing a viewpoint that is partial in its representativeness and understanding (Stanley and Wise 1993).

If the women in the study are not representative of other women, then what is the significance, if any, of their stories? Could it be enough to say that life stories and narrations of personal experiences are inherently valuable because they *are* individual, subjective and personal? Can we value these stories for what they tell us of how individual women made their own lives under the conditions that are specific to them? Whilst each life is different, they may provide evidence of historical activity – the working out within a specific life situation of deliberate courses of action that in turn have the potential to undermine or perpetuate the conditions and relationships in which the life as involved (Personal Narratives Group 1989:6).

In order to see these individual stories as inherently valuable, it is necessary to let go of the notion that there is a single unseamed reality existing ‘out there’ which the special expertise of science can investigate and explain as it ‘really’ is, independent of observer-effects (Stanley and Wise 1993:6).

Conclusion

As my study goes forward I become increasingly aware of these key elements in academic research and oral history. I am aware, too, that as a feminist researcher much of what I have read and internalised has to be put into practice. This may mean I may have to defend the approach I take against negative reactions and criticisms from researchers and scholars for whom this is relatively new slant to the methodology predominantly in use. I am grateful to feminist scholarship that has prompted me into a method of research I find both exciting and challenging.

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