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Cultivating vulnerability: power and the emotional ethics of oral history practice beyond the interview

Tracey Loughran

Introduction

Between 2017 and 2022 I led a project that investigated women's 'everyday health' in postwar Britain. The other members of the project team were postdoctoral researchers Daisy Payling and Kate Mahoney, and doctoral student Hannah Froom. We drew on resources including written and oral testimonies, mass-market publications, and archival materials to explore women's emotional, psychological, and bodily state-of-being in their day-to-day lives, and the strategies they pursued to maintain equilibrium in this state-of-being. The feminist and intersectional aims of the project demanded direct contact with women's voices, stories, and lives. Oral history was at the heart of the project, with plans to conduct interviews with fifty Global Majority, LGBTQ+, and working-class women born between 1940 and 1970. Our aim was always to archive these interviews as an enduring record of women's health experiences in late twentieth-century Britain.

We achieved most of these aims. In March 2018, the British Library Sound Archive agreed to archive interviews collected for the project. By May 2021, Daisy, Kate, and I had conducted eighty-seven interviews, with sixty-five of these taking place in the previous six months. Along the way, our plans hit some bumps in the road: initial difficulties in recruiting interviewees, ultimately unresolved problems in recruiting participants of diverse ethnicities

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and sexual orientations, learning to conduct interviews remotely because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and an unexpected spike in recruitment that generated substantial demands on the time, energy, and emotional resources of the team.[1] Despite these challenges, most interviewees expressed satisfaction or enjoyment at participating in the project. Our oral history research was therefore a 'success' in that participants deemed it worthwhile and we have created an important publicly accessible resource for future historians of postwar Britain.

Nevertheless, throughout the project the question of whether I could adequately fulfil my responsibilities to interviewees haunted me. These doubts centred on the oral historian's duty of care and respect to participants beyond the moment of the interview itself, and especially the potential consequences of archiving interviews. Standard guidelines on ethical oral history practice, and most institutional ethics review processes, focus on informed consent, avoiding harm to participants during the interview itself, copyright, and data protection. They do not say much about other concerns around how interviewees might feel about what happens to their stories afterwards, including third-party use.[2] Oral history theory explores issues of interpretive authority in publications but has less to say about the other potential afterlives of participants' stories.[3] Oral historians must continually negotiate 'personal ethical commitments' that are 'far more nuanced and contextual than the terms set out in our consent forms' with only the sketchiest of road maps.[4]

This chapter is a personal reflection on my doubts, whilst leading an oral history project, about power dynamics within the interviewer–interviewee relationship, the risks of abuse of power or paternalism, the 'ownership' of stories, and the potential consequences of the reuse of interviews in unanticipated contexts. I explore an experiment in the voluntary cultivation of vulnerability in the pursuit of an emotional engagement that insists on the constant remaking of ethics beyond the moment of the interview. This experiment was to be interviewed myself, using the same schedule used on the project to interview our participants, with the aim of archiving the interview. In doing so, I tried to make myself vulnerable and to constantly trouble my own sense of ethical practice. I remain uncertain as to whether I can fulfil my responsibilities to participants, but I now see this troubled status as necessary and even as a good.

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Oral history and (our) ethical practice

The project followed standard ethical procedures set out by my institution and the British Library Sound Archive. These included actions to ensure participants' informed consent (including awareness of subsequent uses of data), confidentiality, and/or anonymity; arrangements for safe storage, sharing, and archiving of personal data; and management of potential risks to participants and researchers. We provided interviewees with an information sheet about the project and required them to sign a participation agreement before the interview and a recording agreement afterwards. These forms set out terms for use of the interview in publications and other outputs, and for access to the recording and associated materials at the British Library. We reviewed information that might cause distress to third parties and discussed this with participants when sending them interview summaries or transcripts.[5] Our funding allowed the production of content summaries and transcriptions for each interview. The project therefore met major oral history organisations' criteria for best practice.[6]

It felt more chaotic on the ground. On paper, we were prepared. All team members had prior experience of conducting interviews and we undertook further training early in the project. We co-designed a semi-structured interview schedule that tried to avoid presuppositions about our participants' identities and to leave open space for unexpected responses. We agreed that our participants' emotional wellbeing was more important than our research outcomes. Aware of inevitable power differentials between interviewer and interviewee, we strove to demonstrate respect, empathy, and sensitivity in our actions before, during, and after each interview. Yet I felt in a constant state of sprawling, potentially infinite, disorganisation once the oral history research started. I had not anticipated the huge administrative burden of carrying out and preparing to archive the interviews: keeping track of correspondence, permissions paperwork, commissioning transcripts, producing interview summaries, and so on demanded constant attention.

I coped better with other forms of messiness. Conducting the interviews was never easy. Our schedule included questions on intimate topics and emotionally charged life events. Different questions provoked strong emotional responses in different women. Some

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narrators recounted extremely traumatic experiences. But, as a dynamic relationship, an oral history interview always requires deep responsiveness. The continual feeling of teetering on the edge of unintentionally causing distress to a person who is barely known, and whose wounds and scars therefore cannot be predicted, is unavoidably exhausting.[7] I expected this feeling, knew it would be temporary, and believed that it was in a worthwhile cause, so found little difficulty in living with it. I also believed that participants had actively chosen to tell their stories, and that once the interview started, my primary responsibility was to support this need. Buffered in these ways against the drain of interview encounters, I felt privileged to record these women's life stories.

Working within a research team also helped to transmute the unwieldiness of raw encounters into faith in the ultimate value of the project. This bolstered my confidence in our right to (unintentionally, temporarily, and with their consent) trouble our participants' emotional equilibrium. From late 2018 to mid-2020 the project team held lengthy transcript review meetings that provided opportunities to reflect on interview technique, changes to the schedule, and other practical matters. Above all, the rich understanding that emerged from our combined perspectives cheered me. This practice fell away in our intensive period of interviewing during the COVID-19 lockdown. We then encountered, separately and together, outside and within the team, different challenges.[8] Nevertheless, on my own part these meetings established lasting confidence in our shared ethos. I trusted Kate's and Daisy's capabilities as thoughtful and caring practitioners of feminist oral history at least as much as I trusted my own.

Yet from early on I felt troubled by the ethical dimensions of our oral history research. These concerns were not about the conduct of the interview or uses of the material in publications. I did feel apprehensive about how to do justice to these women's lives in print, but I also saw such concerns as business as usual. All historians face the problem of how to tread softly in the lives of others, whether our work involves deciphering the unfamiliar scripts of long-dead ancestors or sipping tea in the living rooms of women who remind us of our mothers.[9] I did not see writing about living people fairly and well as intrinsically different to other kinds of historical research. I also felt reassured by the prospect of writing about these women's lives with Daisy and Kate. I knew that we were all good historians

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and that together we could write a history greater than the sum of our parts.

Gradually, I realised that my sense of unease turned on what it might mean to deposit these stories, these digital ghosts of real lives, in an archive, for perpetuity, for people who had never met the participants to hear or read, for other researchers to paw and grub. What might be the afterlives of these interviews, and how much responsibility did I hold for what happened to stories that existed in this form only because I had asked to hear them? Did our participants, in giving informed consent, really understand what was at stake here? Did I?

Archiving oral history

History still worships the archive. Since the nineteenth century, archival research has been seen as fundamental to professional practice. Interrogations of the archive in recent decades have shaken but not demolished this status.[10] Oral history has a complicated relationship to the archive. For as long as history has been recorded, oral testimony has been used as source material. However, for centuries many viewed this testimony as suspicious because of its ephemerality. Sources that could not be independently verified and consulted did not meet the standard of documentary evidence. The invention of the portable tape recorder changed all that. It made interviews archivable, and this changed the status of oral history within the discipline and the profession.[11] It further promised the democratisation of history: oral history archives made of, by, and for the people, histories unspooled onto tape and then reeled back into local libraries, community centres, and archives as a resource for future generations.[12] Eventually, oral historians capitalised on the ability to return over and over to recordings of interviews to develop sophisticated theoretical approaches to memory, narrativisation, and (inter)subjectivity.[13] Oral history, then, has its own reasons to fetishise the archive.

Oral historians are nevertheless often wary about the archive in relation to their own practice. As April Gallwey notes, research on archived oral histories is often viewed as 'inferior to the practice of first-hand interviewing'.[14] This attachment to the moment of the

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interview echoes the long-established tenet that it is essential to listen to recordings rather than read transcripts.[15] I share many of these views, but want to pause on the strangeness of oral historians' ambivalence towards the archive, especially towards actually *using* archived oral histories. Making interviews accessible to wider audiences is often presented as an ethical imperative, an integral part of oral history's democratic mission.[16] Assumptions that archived interviews are second best sits uneasily alongside this insistence on archiving as an unambiguous good. It is an ambivalence that doubtless contributed to my hesitancy over what it meant to archive our interviews.

Certainly, I had not fully thought through the implications of archiving oral history interviews when I applied for the research grant that funded the project. I was not an experienced oral historian. Buoyed by an idealistic commitment to recording and preserving women's 'everyday' experiences and spurred on by the pragmatic aim of providing my funder with value for money, listing an archived oral history collection as an output in the bid seemed like common sense. My naivety became clear during early talks with the British Library. When the oral history curator explained that it was impracticable for participants to retain copyright of the interviews, I decided to assign copyright to myself rather than the Library (unless participants chose to opt out of this arrangement).[17] She then asked who would retain copyright of the interviews in the event of my death. I had not anticipated facing my own mortality, far less the administrative headaches it might generate, that day – though the shock may have been greater for Kate, who suddenly found herself legatee of our participants' life stories. Assigning copyright to myself felt like a heavy burden. My actions could potentially lead to misuse of someone's life story; I might unintentionally betray their trust and cause them pain or harm. I realised for the first time what a responsibility it is to bring a story into the world, and that there can be no security in promises of keeping it safe.

I did not dwell on these misgivings but at intervals they resurfaced, with greater insistence as we interviewed more women and discussed their transcripts in team meetings. I felt stilted in the first few project interviews, partly because I feared Kate and Daisy noticing deficiencies in my interview technique, but also because I was aware that unknown others would later listen to the recordings. Although I knew that

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an oral history interview is an organic (if semi-formal, part-structured) encounter, I worried about making mistakes or ‘not doing it right’ (what would ‘right’ have looked like?). I wanted interviews to be a safe space, but they felt very public. It did not help that, despite my best efforts to ensure informed consent, participants often seemed quite cavalier about signing the participation and recording agreements – a problem that deepened when we moved to remote interviewing. I had to accept responsibility if interviewees suffered in any way because they did not fully realise what they were getting themselves into, but I never felt certain that I had really done enough to guide this realisation.

Alongside conducting interviews, I was undertaking research with archived oral history collections. This brought home the potential disjuncture between interviewees’ knowing participation in a specific and delimited project and the uses to which subsequent researchers might put their words. In the late 1980s, could any of Elizabeth Roberts’ interviewees have imagined a researcher like me poring over their words to understand their body image, intergenerational relationships, and concepts of agency? Might they have spoken differently if they had? Attending conferences where speakers showed selfie-style photographs of themselves with oral history participants deepened my unease. Would people who had never attended academic conferences really want all these appraising gazes on their scaled-up faces in Lecture Theatre A? Similarly, at our project team meetings we spent hours discussing – always with care, with respect – the lives of each woman. I could not but wonder: did she imagine this, four people sitting round a table, parsing her every word, scrawling over transcripts in multicoloured pens, making connections between the different parts of her life? Would she mind?

Power, authority, and subjectivity

I had to believe that our interviewees knew what they were doing when they agreed to speak to us, and that they had actively chosen the circumstances under which they told their stories. Any other stance would be hopelessly paternalistic. But they seemed to trust too easily, and I was not sure, despite my best intentions, despite the safeguards of the consent process, despite best ethical practice,

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that either I or the process could really be trusted. I hadn't thought through what archiving the interviews meant. I hadn't realised the responsibility it entailed. I was busy, tired, sad, and often getting things wrong in my daily encounters with people I actually knew. What if I made mistakes here too?

The dynamics of power within any oral history interview depend on the collisions, often unpredictable, between its participants' multitudinous identities and histories. Likewise, material dimensions of the interview such as location, room set-up, and technology affect the extent to which each participant feels able to act and to shape the encounter in the moment.[18] The interplay of these elements constantly shifts. Within the interview context, power is skittish and capricious. Left to its own devices, however, power will skew towards interviewers, especially if they are academic historians: the interviewer determines the parameters of the project, decides what questions to ask, invites others to participate, clips on the microphones to capture voices, presses record-pause-stop, stores the recording, edits interviewees' words, and interprets their stories for wider audiences. Interviewees participate under their own volition, for their own reasons, and tell their own stories in their own ways, but once they have signed over copyright, they lose a certain amount of control. It is the historian's name on the front of the book.[19]

Oral historians have long worried about power disparities within the interviewer–interviewee relationship. From the 1970s, feminist oral historians reconceptualised the interview encounter as the melding of unique subjectivities and sought ways to rebalance power within the relationship.[20] Building on this scholarship, in 1990 Michael Frisch formulated the concept of 'shared authority' to describe practices that 'redefine and redistribute intellectual authority' and therefore empower all parties, but especially interviewees.[21] The pursuit of 'shared authority' appeals greatly to those who seek more democratic means of creating history, but even enthusiasts acknowledge that it may not be achievable.[22] Judith Stacey goes so far as to suggest that the *belief* that authority has been shared enables the interviewer to hold power in ways that are unseen, unacknowledged, and veiled by the benevolent façade of equality.[23] This is dangerous because, against the best intentions of practitioners, the result is a de facto denial of power imbalances. That denial can only ever work in favour of the person who already holds most power.

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Many oral historians labour in earnest to achieve 'shared authority' and/or to co-produce research and creative outputs.[24] I admire their work and I am very glad it exists, but I am unable to follow them in my own practice. It is my view that, in the end, academic oral historians are almost always able to choose, if they wish, to have the last (published) word about an interview encounter. Always and inevitably, that ability to choose is an outcome and sign of power. This power is usually exercised with great thought, care, and respect, but it is nevertheless power that participants do not possess.

As its lead, my beliefs about the operation of power shaped oral history practice on this project. We tried to make space for women to tell their own stories within the parameters of our schedule: we allowed them to decide the location, format, and pace of the encounter; during the interview itself we posed open questions, and avoided interruptions, voicing interpretations, or challenging their worldviews. But we did not take any formal measures to share authority or to co-produce outputs. In the main, this is because I could not square such measures with maintaining interpretive authority. In presenting oral history research I try to avoid overdetermined interpretations of participants' life stories, to put their own words before readers with minimal editing insofar as this is possible, and to indicate where I suspect they might disagree with my interpretation. But I do not see how I can commit both to putting forward honest interpretations based on my expertise as a professional historian and to ceding interpretive authority to others who do not hold this expertise – a failure of imagination, perhaps, and definitely hierarchical, but a stance based on unwillingness to promise participants something I *know* I cannot deliver.[25]

I am a feminist oral historian, but this blunt assertion of power may seem 'heretical' to other feminist oral historians.[26] In my research, the principle that the personal is political is expressed as a turn inwards, towards subjectivity, reflexivity, and the self, rather than outwards towards relationships with research participants.[27] This turn inwards predates my practice as an oral historian and arises out of fascination with the troubled status of the concept of 'historical objectivity' as simultaneously unobtainable and an inescapable ideal.[28] Some scholars perceive historians' autobiographical efforts as evidence of the profession's 'self-absorption'.[29] This may be true. But for me, explorations in professional selfhood create a productive uncertainty

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that pervades my praxis. At intervals, I return to writing autoethnographically to remind myself that historians are always present in what they see and write, to maintain a dynamic relationship with my sources, and to sharpen myself into points that prick against the temptation of complete assurance.

In the drive to reflexivity, oral history is both a powerful accelerant and a foot slammed on the brake. On the one hand, oral historians write in the first person, and usually accept that analysis of the interaction of self and other is an essential part of practising oral history, whether this reflection makes it onto the page or not.[30] On the other hand, an oral history interview is someone else's story, someone else's life. The contract is that interviewees speak and interviewers (mostly) listen. The oral historian dishonours that contract if she directs too much of the attention to herself within the interview or in her subsequent expositions of it.[31] In retrospect, a certain amount of my unease about oral history practice on this project arose because I could not reconcile the pull to explore subjectivity and the push to efface myself; the coexistence of these equally powerful impulses generated intellectual static. Gradually, I articulated the concept of cultivated vulnerability out of this white noise.

Cultivated vulnerability

In an influential set of essays, the anthropologist Ruth Behar explores what participant observation, the foundational method of social anthropology, might become in the postcolonial world. As the traditional boundaries that anthropology instituted between 'I' (white, male, western) and 'them' (racialised, feminised, other) dissolve or are kicked down, what arises in their place? Behar proposes forms of connection rather than separation; for anthropologists to become 'vulnerable observers', taking themselves as raw material and excavating similarities between their own self and other selves, and to write 'anthropology that breaks your heart', that elicits emotional identification in the effort to create a bond with readers.[32]

Behar explains that ethnography always depends on 'some form of ethnographic authority', but that she distrusts her own authority, seeing it as 'being constantly in question, constantly on the point

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of breaking down'. Her solution is to reject 'reigning paradigms' of 'distance, objectivity, and abstraction' and instead train her lens on herself to better understand different cultures and experiences, to stimulate new understanding in her readers, and to refashion anthropology itself.[33] Behar's success relies on her ability to expertly wield, draw out, and probe vulnerability. Her insights depend on her willingness to confront herself – but she can ask readers to meet these artful confessions with broken hearts only because her own is already pinned, sprawling and wriggling, to the page.

What does it mean to cultivate vulnerability in oral history practice beyond listening, beyond the moment of the interview?[34] As this project wore on, I came to feel that in asking participants to make themselves vulnerable through trusting another to hold their story, I had to ensure that this exchange was equitable. I had to be willing to put myself at stake, to prod my own open sores and show my scars. In oral history interviews, I listened carefully, did not impose myself, and gave little away unless directly asked. But in conference papers and published chapters, I felt compelled to push at the boundaries of bearable exposure, publicly disclosing experiences of grief, self-harm, and borderline sexual assault. I was trying to practise feminist history, but in retrospect I was also swept up in a confessional culture that makes unequal demands of women and too easily incites self-exposure as a visible mark of feminism (the #MeToo movement was at its height).[35] I agreed that autobiography was ethical practice, that 'we should not ask people to share difficult experiences and emotions with us if we are not willing to do the same'.[36] But there are limits to this commitment. I may have been ill at the time, and, eventually, I became sick of myself.

The belief that I *had* to put myself on the line because of my oral history practice was well-intentioned but ill-formed, incompletely articulated, and probably harmful. But it coalesced with a healthier desire to better understand what was at risk or on offer for interviewees. In 2018, when interviewing *Guardian* writer Annalisa Barbieri for a project on 'agony aunts', I accidentally stumbled into the role of interviewee. During our discussion, I referred to an article of Barbieri's on bereavement. Later, the interview turned to family relationships and grief. When I explained that I remembered that article because it resonated with my own experiences of grief, Barbieri – compassionate in real life as in the newspaper, but also

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a skilled journalist who was usually the person asking questions – stayed with those emotions. She led the interview for the next fifteen minutes or so. We were both aware of the recorder, and I realised at the time that my own experiences were now 'on the record', but I continued anyway – perhaps because at that time so many other people ran away from my grief, as though it had the power to drown them too, forcing me to become the flood barrier against my own pain. The moment mattered more than who might bear witness afterwards.

Over the next few months, I returned to this encounter often as I reflected on the mess of ethical issues that our interviews generated. By early 2019 I had hit on the idea of arranging to be interviewed myself, using the project schedule and archiving this interview alongside our others (but with the same option our participants held to edit or withdraw the interview). I thought this experiment might help me to negotiate an ethical stance, resting on emotional as well as intellectual understanding of the risks of misuse, towards the care of their stories. I knew it was impossible to recreate our participants' experiences of interview in this way. I am a professional historian with expertise in oral history; I had helped to design the interview schedule and had conducted interviews using it; I had already devoted a lot of thought to archival practices; and I would be able to choose my own interviewer. But in learning what it felt like to be interviewed, even under these semi-artificial conditions, I might improve my practices as an interviewer and as an interpreter of the lives of others. Aware that my own interview lived on in an archive, representing one moment among millions between my birth and death, I would be better armed against foreclosing the potential meanings of our participants' lives.

Above all, I saw living with the possible afterlives of my own archived interview as a high-wire act, one that could create a more tightly knitted safety net for our participants' stories – a way of ensuring that when I had to make decisions about what to do with these interviews, I would think once, look down at the far-off ground, think twice, and remember the consequences of losing my balance. Cultivating my own vulnerability and maintaining this state of tension through giving up (some of) my power to the archive offered a way to stay alive to that power, and to fix the indeterminacy of the present into my attempts to create a history out of these lives.

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The interview and beyond

This interview was held in mid-2021, two or three months after conducting the final interview with an external participant for the project.[37] Until 2020, we had struggled to recruit oral history participants, and it looked like I had plenty of time to sort out my own interview. Then the pandemic struck, we were thrown into disarray, and an unexpected spike in recruitment meant I had little time to do anything but interview other people. Also, I didn't know who to ask to conduct the interview. As their line manager, it would be wildly inappropriate to approach Kate or Daisy. I had to find a different, skilled oral historian, generous enough to give up their time, with whom I felt able to speak freely. I toyed with the idea of asking practitioners I knew well but decided that I would probably end up feeling too constrained. For the experiment to work, I had to be committed to the same degree of honesty as our interviewees. But whereas our participants spoke to strangers who melted away after the interview encounter, whoever I asked would already be within my wider professional circle. I was likely to bump into them in other professional contexts in future years. This was a daunting prospect.

I eventually approached Amy Tooth Murphy. I did not really know Amy, though I had read her work, seen her deliver papers, and thought she was a superb oral historian. During lockdown, I interviewed her about her professional practice for a module on oral history that I convened. In that encounter I found her warm, funny, and thoughtful, and intuitively felt that I could trust her. Fortunately, Amy was enthusiastic about the possibilities of this experiment, as well as very generous with her time. I spoke so much that our interview had to be held over two sessions – the recording ran to six hours in the end.

I wanted to come to the interview schedule 'fresh', despite conducting dozens of interviews using it, so I tried not to think about the interview ahead of the first session. I wanted to leave space for our conversation to develop in unanticipated directions. Amy's personal and creative adaptations of the schedule to suit her interviewing style, as well as her sensitivity to my responses, meant that I was never in danger of finding the terrain too familiar. In fact, many of her starting assumptions and follow-up questions threw open my

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blind spots about the project. I became aware of other areas we might have probed in our oral histories, and might consider, using different sources, in our future research. At times in the interview, I did think about other participants' responses to similar questions, but not as often as I had expected. Instead, I was surprised at the prominence of certain themes (body image, depression, my passion for history) that emerged as I spoke. These are/were important parts of my present/past but I did not think the narrative of my life would take this shape. This first session was rewarding, but extremely draining – I felt more tired and exhausted than when I conducted interviews myself and realised that I may have been careless with some of our project participants.

In the week before we reconvened for the second session, I was unable to put the interview to the back of my mind. I felt, in turn, flushes of embarrassment at how I had discussed sexuality (I have been in a heterosexual relationship for nearly twenty years; my sexual identity is taken for granted in most contexts); invaded by grief at my brother's death (I had expected to talk about bereavement, but not that these feelings would stay so close to the surface); and troubled about the disclosures I might feel compelled, in the name of honesty, to make next time (but not worried that Amy might push for such admissions). These fears and feelings receded almost as soon as we started the next session. At the outset, Amy asked me to reflect on our previous encounter and this provided an opportunity to order and digest my thoughts before we went any further. This was only one of many points when I marvelled at Amy's skills as an interviewer; if the sole purpose of the experiment had been to improve my own interview technique through direct engagement with another's expertise, it would have been a worthwhile exercise.

I did not find the second session difficult, or as draining as the first. It was shorter, but knowing how it might affect me also acted as a safeguard. My dominant impression after the session was of how difficult it is to tell a life without drawing in other people. I could not speak honestly about myself without risking hurting others or giving a lopsided account of my actions. Close to the end, Amy asked how my parents might feel, knowing that I was talking about them. I had not disregarded their feelings, but I had spoken spontaneously, knowing that they would not locate or listen to an archived

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interview. My life as an academic is too far away from their lives. I realised that interviewees might feel similarly secure about becoming part of 'research'. Perversely, it was liberating to recognise that there could be no realistic expectation of simultaneously satisfying myself, others, and the archive. In telling my story, as in any conversation, from second to second I had to make myriad tiny calculations, conscious and unconscious, in the effort to be true to myself and neither untrue nor unkind to others. It is possible that participants felt the same. In making myself vulnerable, I discovered a certain invulnerability in myself (and perhaps in our participants?); what I felt at that moment was part, not all of me, and the telling was a moment in time, not a whole life.

Conclusion

Almost three years after the interview, I have not quite decided how to archive it. It is likely that I will withhold access for a period of at least ten years. At that distance of time, we will all be different people. The years should blunt the impact of any words that might seem sharp now. I have not listened to the interview yet and I may never do so. I read the transcript for the first time only to write this chapter. It was a surprisingly emotional experience. I felt cast back not only to the events I described, but to the moment of the interview itself: the sunlight through the window, the tiredness of the pandemic world, the hope that it was all over now, the fear that it was not. As I avoided the decision about archiving in the intervening months, I sometimes returned in my mind to specific moments of the interview and revelations that had felt far too raw and open. On reading the transcript, I was surprised to find these moments tamed on the page. I was vague, allusive, oblique. A stranger might not even fully grasp what I was talking about. In the light of day, the monsters in the dark turned out to be shadows on the wall.

Other moments hit like a ton of bricks. I found my account of adolescent depression and self-harm, facets of my past that I have written and spoken about publicly and that I believed no longer had the power to trouble me, very difficult to read. I did not find these issues challenging to talk about during the interview. If anything, I felt mildly anxious that it might be a lot for Amy to process. But

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it all looked so different written down; so much more concrete, so much harder to wave away. The emotional jolt of reading these passages confirmed my suspicion that it might be best to first give participants interview summaries, offering transcripts if desired rather than automatically sending them on. Not everyone wants to be confronted with visceral past words or selves, but I suspect few can resist the temptation to rifle through the pages once the transcript is there. If we do not want to overwhelm participants when we are face to face with them, we should try to avoid causing the same effect from a distance.

This jolt also forced recognition of how my narration worked overtime to play down the importance of this period in my life. In the interview, I tried very hard to claim that past pain not only doesn't *now*, but also didn't in the past, really matter that much. This tendency to minimise certain emotions reflects my own unique subjectivity, but also the cultural factors that encourage women not to recognise, dwell on, or speak about their own psychological or physical pain.[38] Reviewing other participants' transcripts, I am now often struck by moments when they work hard to efface the importance of particular events, emotions, and behaviours. More than this, I realise that as I conducted those interviews, I was sometimes unwittingly complicit in this erasure; imbricated in the same gendered culture, at the time I did not always recognise the substance of what I heard, and instead unthinkingly helped them to brush off its import.

As a result, I am now thinking again about the primacy that oral historians bestow on the act of listening to recordings rather than reading transcripts. Certainly, there are crucial aspects of conversation that no transcript can ever capture; the written word is not an adequate substitute for the speaking voice. At the same time, in listening to interviews I conducted, I am often transported back to the emotions I felt and the sense of that past moment – recall that is perhaps a false guide to what was happening both for the interviewee and under the surface of our discussion. As the voice tells us what the written word cannot, so the written word might help us to hear that voice in its fullest resonances.[39]

Did the experiment achieve what I had hoped – do I feel better equipped to hold participants' stories in trust? Yes and no. Just as participants' stories will live on in the archive, handling them ethically and well must be a living commitment. There is no possibility of

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resolution, only the continual remaking of this commitment.[40] In this sense, there can be no final judgement on success or failure. The purpose of the exercise is to conjure productive uncertainty, perpetual and self-conscious doubt, as the means of maintaining care of this powerful legacy. So far, it is working. As a result of making myself vulnerable, I have made and remade my understanding of participants' stories. For now, this staves off the dangers of taking their meaning for granted, taking their narration at a specific point in time as standing in for their whole lives, or failing to understand my power as legatee of their stories.

Cultivating vulnerability is a way to channel the interviewer's power within the interview relationship into operation from a similar (but not the same) position as the interviewee. This manoeuvre depends on acknowledgement of power differentials. The interviewer has no ethical obligation to be interviewed or to put her own story into the archive simply because participants have agreed to do so. Choosing to do so underlines her power. However, this acknowledgement is the starting point for a series of actions based on the simultaneous exercise and voluntary renunciation of that power. The story in the archive keeps the interviewer in a state of vulnerability, and in doing so keeps her closer to the state of nervousness and dauntedness that is 'an integral part of what it means to do oral history'.[41] Attending in this way to the afterlives of interviews creates an emotional ethics that has little to do with the paperwork submitted for institutional approval and then filed away. Instead, it is a matter of continual, reflective, and dynamic practice. An emotional ethics predicated on vulnerability is therefore imbued with the spirit of the oral history encounter itself – changing from moment to moment, as unpredictable as any human relationship, shimmering with the desire to know and to understand through connection, fixed only in its indeterminacy.

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I would like to thank Amy Tooth Murphy for her generosity as a person and skill as interviewer; the experiment outlined in this chapter would not have been possible without her.

Notes

1 Tracey Loughran, Kate Mahoney, and Daisy Payling, 'Reflections on remote interviewing in a pandemic: negotiating participant and researcher emotions', *Oral History*, 50:1 (Spring 2022).
2 The kinds of issues I have in mind are not explored in the otherwise comprehensive discussions in Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 62–72, 186–9; Paul Thompson with Joanna Bornat, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 4th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 332–50.
3 Katherine Borland, '"That's not what I said": interpretative conflict in oral narrative research', in Sherna Gluck and Daphne Patai (eds), *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London and New York: 2010), pp. 166–9.
4 Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembryzycki, 'Introduction', in Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembryzycki (eds), *Oral History Off the Record: Toward an Ethnography of Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 14.
5 In addition, sensitive sections are redacted and closed to public access for a set period under British Library rules.
6 Oral History Society [Rob Perks], 'Are you legal and ethical?': www.ohs.org.uk/legal-and-ethical-advice/legal-and-ethical-preparation/ (accessed 7 January 2023); Oral History Association, 'OHA principles and best practices': https://oralhistory.org/principles-and-best-practices-revised-2018/ (accessed 7 January 2023).
7 Sean Field, 'Beyond "healing": oral history, trauma, and regeneration', *Oral History*, 34:1 (2006); Liz H. Strong, 'Shifting focus: interviewers share advice on protecting themselves from harm', *Oral History Review*, 48:2 (2021).
8 Loughran, Mahoney, and Payling, 'Reflections on remote interviewing'.
9 Michael Roper, 'The unconscious work of history', *Cultural and Social History*, 11:2 (2014), 170; Katie Barclay, 'The practice and ethics of the history of emotions', in Katie Barclay, Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, and Peter N. Stearns (eds), *Sources for the History of Emotions: A Guide* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021); Jessica Meyer and Alexia Moncrieff, 'Family not to be informed? The ethical use of historical

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medical documentation', in Anne Hanley and Jessica Meyer (eds), *Patient Voices in Britain, 1840–1948: Historical and Policy Perspectives* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021); David Wright and Renée Saucier, 'Madness in the archives: anonymity, ethics, and mental health history research', *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association/ Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 23:2 (2012).

10 Antoinette Burton, 'Introduction: archive fever, archive stories', in Antoinette Burton (ed.), *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2005).

11 Thompson with Bornat, *The Voice of the Past*, pp. 23–70.

12 Ronald J. Grele, 'Oral history as evidence', in Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless (eds), *Handbook of Oral History* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2008).

13 Joanna Bornat, 'Remembering and reworking emotions: the reanalysis of emotion in an interview', *Oral History*, 38:2 (2010); Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, pp. 54–129.

14 April Gallwey, 'The rewards of using archived oral histories in research: the case of the Millennium Memory Bank', *Oral History*, 41:1 (Spring 2013), 38.

15 Raphael Samuel, 'Perils of the transcript', *History Workshop Journal*, 1:2 (1972); Alessandro Portelli, 'The peculiarities of oral history', *History Workshop Journal*, 12 (1981).

16 Oral History Society, 'Are you legal and ethical?'; Oral History Association, 'OHA principles and best practices'. The sixteen respondents to an e-survey on conducting, reusing, and archiving oral history interviews that Kate Mahoney and I conducted in mid-2020 almost all believed that interviews *should* be archived, but for different reasons (often practical, sometimes ethical) most had not consistently deposited recordings from their own projects.

17 Because copyright in words spoken lasts seventy years after the speaker dies, it is very difficult for archives and libraries to administer requests for permissions to cite from an interview (usually required for broadcast or republication of more than a paragraph or two), not least because contact details may change. The time and resource needed to recontact interviewees for permission significantly reduces the chances of the material being used in the future. We felt that if participants retained copyright, it could in practice severely restrict access to the interviews and therefore undermine the purpose of archiving them as a publicly available resource. Thanks to Mary Stewart for correspondence on this point.

18 For explorations of intersubjectivity in oral history interviews, see Carrie Hamilton, 'Sex, "silence," and audiotape: listening for female same-sex desire in Cuba', in Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque

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Ramírez (eds), *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Amy Tooth Murphy, 'Listening in, listening out: intersubjectivity and the impact of insider and outsider status in oral history interviews', *Oral History*, 48:1 (2020); Alan Wong, 'Listen and learn: familiarity and feeling in the oral history interview', in Sheftel and Zembrzycki (eds), *Oral History Off the Record*.

19 Alistair Thomson describes an intense and lengthy collaboration with four women 'in the making of our book' and their pleasure at 'my suggestion that their contributing role be acknowledged on the title page' – but the front cover, and so every online catalogue and bookseller, lists his name alone. Alistair Thomson, 'Moving stories, women's lives: sharing authority in oral history', *Oral History*, 39:2 (Autumn 2011), 90.

20 Kristina Minister, 'A feminist frame for the oral history interview', in Gluck and Patai (eds), *Women's Words*; for an overview of this scholarship, see Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, pp. 71–4.

21 Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. xx.

22 Lorraine Sitzia, 'Shared authority: an impossible goal', *Oral History Review*, 30:1 (2003).

23 Judith Stacey, 'Can there be a feminist ethnography?', in Gluck and Patai (eds), *Women's Words*.

24 See, for example, the chapters in 'Section 4: Feminists in the field: performance, political activism, and community engagement', in Katrina Srigley, Stacey Zembryzycki, and France Iavocovetta (eds), *Beyond Women's Words: Feminisms and the Practice of Oral History in the Twenty-First Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 217–76; 'Part 4: Negotiating identity: sharing authority in creative practice', in Clare Summerskill, Amy Tooth Murphy, and Emma Vickers (eds), *New Directions in Queer Oral History: Archives of Disruption* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), pp. 173–213.

25 For a short overview of alternative approaches, see Linda Shopes, 'Legal and ethical issues in oral history', in Charlton, Myers, and Sharpless (eds), *Handbook of Oral History*, p. 164. Our participants did not voice any interest in 'sharing authority' – most saw the interview as a positive but time-limited encounter.

26 Sherna Berger Gluck, 'From California to Kufr Nameh and back', in Sheftel and Zembrzycki (eds), *Oral History Off the Record,* p. 40.

27 On subjectivity, reflexivity, and women's/feminist history, see Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005), pp. 155–81.

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28 Tracey Loughran and Dawn Mannay, 'Introduction: why emotion matters', in Tracey Loughran and Dawn Mannay (eds), *Emotion and the Researcher: Sites, Subjectivities and Relationships* (Bingley: Emerald, 2018).
29 Richard Vinen, 'The poisoned madeleine: the autobiographical turn in historical writing', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 46:3 (2011), 537.
30 Penny Summerfield, 'Dis/composing the subject: intersubjectivities in oral history', in Tess Coslett, Celia Lury, and Penny Summerfield (eds), *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods* (London: Routledge, 2000); Juliette Pattinson, '"The thing that made me hesitate …": re-examining gendered intersubjectivities in interviews with British secret war veterans', *Women's History Review*, 20 (2011).
31 Franca Iacovetta, 'Post-modern ethnography, historical materialism, and decentring the (male) authorial voice: a feminist conversation', *Histoire sociale/Social History*, 32:64 (November 1999); Joan Sangster, 'Politics and praxis in Canadian working-class oral history', in Sheftel and Zembrzycki (eds), *Oral History Off the Record*.
32 Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996), pp. 1–33.
33 Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer*, pp. 13, 21.
34 See 'Part II: Encounters in vulnerability, familiarity, and friendship', in Sheftel and Zembrzycki (eds), *Oral History Off the Record*. Quotation Hourig Attarian, p. 78.
35 Karike Ashworth and Courtney Pedersen, 'The feminine bravery construct: the crisis of neoliberal feminine bravery in the #MeToo moment', *Feminist Media Studies*, 23:5 (2023); Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 1–32.
36 Jessica Hammett, Ellie Harrison, and Laura King, 'Art, collaboration and multi-sensory approaches in public microhistory: Journey with Absent Friends', *History Workshop Journal*, 89 (2020), 265.
37 As an interim step, I was interviewed by Veronica Heney as part of her doctoral research in early 2020. This provided valuable experience of sitting on the other side of the recorder. Veronica Heney, 'Our Stories, Our Selves: Fictional Representations of Self-Harm' (PhD thesis, University of Exeter, 2022).
38 Diane E. Hoffman and Anita J. Tarzian, 'The girl who cried pain: a bias against women in the treatment of pain', *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics*, 29 (2001).
39 This may mean undertaking something like a simpler version of Carol Gilligan's method. See Carol Gilligan, Renée Spencer, M. Katherine Weinberg, and Tatiana Bertsch, 'On the Listening Guide: a voice-centred

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relational method', in Paul M. Camic, Jean E. Rhodes, and Lucy Yardley (eds), *Qualitative Research in Psychology: Expanding Perspectives in Methodology and Design* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003).

40 Thanks to Louise Hide for helping to clarify my thoughts on this point.

41 Sheftel and Zembryzycki, 'Introduction', p. 15.

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