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Interpreting food and family within life stories: a dialogical approach

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Abstract

Since its inception, literature on oral history has yielded more material on the collection of interviews than their interpretation¹. This paper moves towards redressing that imbalance by demonstrating two contrasting approaches to analysis in relation to three life stories from the *100 Families* archive. One approach draws on semiotics and post-structuralist theory to interpret extracts, on a specific area of interest (in this case, memories of food within family structures), in isolation from their context within the life story. The other approach facilitates a dialogic between the extracts and their life story context, resulting in layers of meaning being built up. I contend that this dialogic approach be taken up and explored further by oral historians; not least because of the richness of the interpretations produced, but also because of the respect for the interviewee demonstrated through contextual readings of their story.

Introduction

The temptation to pick a few tasty sound bites on an interesting subject is a strong, seductive one when (re)using life stories. These extracts may then be analysed to produce various readings. For researchers, such as myself, using life stories to study food and its associated technologies, Livingstone and Lunt's assertion that material culture, including food, 'infiltrates everyday life not only at the levels of economic processes, social activities and household structures, but also at the level of meaningful psychological experience- affecting the construction of identities' (1992: 24) appears to anticipate multiple readings: economic, social, domestic. However, it is also disturbingly positivist in suggesting that another's meaningful psychological experience can be objectively identified; that an essential or 'full' understanding of the life story can be reached. Even with life stories, there are limits to what the

interview can capture, created by a variety of factors including the time available for the interview; the interview schedule or thematic guide; and the readiness of the interviewee to co-operate. A life story cannot bottle a person's essence. This paper does, however, propose that using life stories contextually, coding within and across entire interviews rather than abstracting isolated extracts, rewards us with more dimensional understandings. Moreover, I will argue that this method, which (re)places an interviewee's words in the context of the story they tell, demonstrates greater respect for that individual, for the time and effort they have dedicated to the research. I will demonstrate the above with reference to three life stories and the diverse interpretations which I generated from them, working with Dr Peter Jackson and Dr Graham Smith, as a researcher on the 'Families Remembering Foods' project. Part of the 'Changing Families, Changing Food' programme², our work aims to document changes in family structures and relationships as well as changing patterns of food consumption, based on the re-use of interviews from archived oral history collections including *100 Families* (featured here), *The Edwardians* and *The Millennium Memory Bank*. Before sharing my analysis of people's memories of food and family, however, I will examine some ways in which the telling and interpretation of stories have been theorised, over the last century, and the challenges such theories pose for oral historians.

Theorising the speaking of our stories

Drawing on the work of the linguist Saussure, Barthes proposes that the meaning of all forms of communication (literature, speech etc.) resides within language itself. Meaning is to be obtained by decoding language through its own organizing principles and internal structures, rather than by studying the author's intentions and

life context: the author is not in control of these meanings. Hence, wrote Barthes, the author³ is redundant, irrelevant, 'dead' (1977). Post-structuralists have similarly argued that 'language is not the result of one's individuality' (Richardson and St. Pierre 961) despite challenging the notion that texts can be studied without heeding the *context* of their production. They instead contend that language constructs (our attempts to tell) our stories in socially and historically specific ways; that individuals are 'dependent on the discourses available to them' (Richardson and St. Pierre 961). In spite of their differences, both approaches can be seen to uphold Heidegger's assertion that 'Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man' (1971). For the purposes of oral history, I will paraphrase this as 'We do not speak our stories, in fact, our stories speak us'.

Where these theories are particularly problematic is that for oral history to advocate for and empower interviewees, as many authors contributing to Perks and Thomson do (1998, 2006), we must believe that interviewees have agency in creating and telling us their life story. The theorisation of language outlined above, however, is that it positions the individual as not in control of their own story: they do not know what they mean, say what they mean, mean what they say and so forth. Furthermore, the individual is presented as unconscious of the socio-historical interests, discourses and situations which both enable and constrain their story⁴. The end result of these theories is to privilege the researcher as the 'expert': the only person able to fully understand and make meaning from the story. In terms of analysing life stories, such concepts offer little respect to interviewees. Indeed, they may even be misconstrued, accidentally or wilfully, as justification for researchers to raid interviews, abstracting meaning from the interviewee's words without placing them in the context of the story as a whole⁵. I want to problematise this approach further by positing

interpretations reached through an extract-based approach alongside those reached by contextualising extracts within the life story. As I am dealing with oral history material, and not the literary texts to which post-structuralist concepts of analysis were originally applied, it is important to first consider oral history's own attitudes to interpretation.

In *Recording Oral History*, Valerie Yow dedicates one chapter to interpretation with the majority being given over to considering various types of data collection. While she explicitly identifies the book as primarily a guide for collecting interviews, its contents nonetheless represent an imbalance which can be seen across oral history (223). Yow's 'possibilities for analysis' (220) range from the broad (applicable to various texts and research disciplines) to the specific. On one hand, she suggests tracing the recurrence of themes; the use of symbols and original imagery; as well as the use of rhetorical devices (223). On the other she draws heavily from specific academic disciplines such as psychology, anthropology, sociology, history and science: the danger here is of attempting (and failing) to isolate tools for oral history interpretation from their original disciplinary and epistemological contexts. A good example of this is the way in which oral history, along with much humanities and social science research, continues to be informed by scientific methods and principles. Yow urges oral historians to corroborate their interviews with other sources (triangulation), to look for inconsistencies within the interview (internal validity), to 'point out testimony that is not first hand' (reliability) and to identify bias (objectivity). Other oral historians who have addressed these issues include Roseman, Allison, Shope, Lummis and Schragar (all contributors to Perks and Thomson, 1998 and/or 2006). In doing so, these authors demonstrate their awareness that much of their audience are concerned with oral history as reality remembered. More recently,

however, the introduction to the third section of *The Oral History Reader*, 'Interpreting memories', suggests that oral history has become much more concerned with memory and its workings as a subject of research and less obsessed with its validity as a source, its ability to evidence truth claims (211). While any idea of straightforward progression is troubled by the range of approaches to memory displayed, several contributors to the section explicitly distance themselves from research values originating in science and maintained, within social science, by the positivist tradition. Instead, they revel in researching and writing the individual; the particular; and the local. Detailing his interviews with the trade unionist Edmund Kord, Friedlander's introduction to *The Emergence of a UAW Local, 1936-1939: a Study of Class and Culture* is extracted for the anthology. Katherine Borland explores the process of interpreting her grandmother's memories. Resisting the lure of larger samples and external validity, Friedlander and Borland nonetheless seek to establish internal validity for their interpretations by facilitating a dialogic between interviewer and interviewee: an 'exchange of understandings' (Borland 270) through which the interpretative dialogue 'react[s] back on the original source, [the interviewee's] memory' (Friedlander 315). Another dialogic applicable to oral history includes Denzin's interpretative approach (1989). His method centres on the 'meaning of that life as it has been lived by the subject' while facilitating a dialogic between the individual life history and other life histories in the same collection. It is the dialogic models and their potential (including the generation of layers of meaning and the demonstration of respect for the interviewee) which I will explore as alternative methods of interpretation.

Practising an interviewee/oral historian dialogic

The life-stories sampled in this paper are drawn from those Scottish families interviewed as part of Paul Thompson's 1980s project *100 Families*, also known as 'Families, Social Mobility and Ageing, an Intergenerational Approach'. While questions directly pertaining to food and eating habits formed only a small part of the interviews, they provide a lens on and are contextualised by, other areas of the interviews including family background, childhood, working life, marriage and parenthood. Through a process of analysing each of the 48 interviews individually and against other interviews, the three members of the 'Families Remembering Food' project identified a number of over-arching themes which interested us, including the rejection of modern commodities (especially convenience foods and technologies of food production) in favour of youthful food experiences.

Table 1: Simplified coding table

Code	Interviews	Coded sections
Convenience food	Rupert	"What's in the freezer?" or "Let's get a couple of hamburgers," and chuck them in.
	Bill	Thir was nane o' this tinned puddin' and tinned tatties and tinned soup an' a' this, everything was hame made, everything.
	Moira	No' bought in a little packet, made Thir wis nae boxes o' frozen stuff

One member of the group, Graham Smith, had collected these interviews. He was able to recall, and share with us, the circumstances of the interviews, anecdotes about the interviewees and other information which had escaped the physical recordings. Whereas Graham was (re)using his own recordings made twenty years previously⁶, Peter and myself were re-using another researcher's material, but were in constant

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contact with him. None of us could, therefore, be clearly defined as enmeshed in or estranged from the original data collection; none of us claims to be privileged over the others as having a more or less ‘authentic’ or ‘objective’ relation to the recordings. Rather, we brought a *range* of intersubjectivities to enrich our analysis; a collective of past, present and retrospective responses to the data. Moving on from our group analysis of the interviews to pursue this paper myself, my initial approach to theorising from the interviews we had coded involved collating isolated extracts thematically. This analysis, however, made little use of the vast life story available to me. In my second phase of analysis, I considered three of the interviews in their entirety, which complicated my interpretation of the chosen excerpts. Contextualising the extracts which had caught my interest involved relating them to biographical details of interviewee’s families and childhoods as well as influences, such as social class, religion, regionality and gender, throughout the life-story. (Re)placing my interpretation of specific food behaviours and experiences into the interviewees’ broader life stories, I facilitated a dialogic. The life story spoken by the interviewee and the story which I had abstracted from it informed each other: correcting, elaborating, answering, and sometimes even silencing one another⁷. This process somewhat resembles member checking (the practice of feeding back transcripts, and sometimes research findings, to interviewees for their corrections and additions), which was rendered impracticable in my situation by the fact that our project re-uses interviews collected two decades ago. Unlike member checking, moreover, I did not use the dialogue to produce and verify a definitive, unified account of any interviewee’s life. Rather, I sought to work with the seemingly irreconcilable tensions and discrepancies between their story and my analysis. In addition to the interviewee/researcher dialogic, my analysis was informed by the dialogical

relationships between the interviewees' past and present; their individual experiences and the wider social/historical context; their food-related and non-food related experiences. Thus, while remaining ultimately responsible for the final interpretation of the stories, I found that this dialogical approach avoided positioning me, the researcher, as 'knowing best'. By refusing to glorify the researcher as 'expert', this approach also allows scope to acknowledge that although interviewees cannot be completely aware of the discourses in which their life stories will be embedded, nor are they completely unconscious of them.

Applying the dialogic to three Scottish interviews

For the remainder of this paper, I will demonstrate the impact of the interviewee/researcher dialogic on my interpretations of three life stories. I will first explore the interpretations I reached from analysing de-contextualised excerpts. I will then posit the way in which the readings I had created were modified by their combination with interviewees' life story contexts. Rupert (aged 41) was the first interviewee I encountered, from the Scottish transcripts, to grab my attention by consciously contrasting the home-made foods he ate as a child with the processed foods available in his middle-age. Born in 1946 and raised in post-war Aberdeen, Rupert's father was a petrol transport driver and his mother a cleaner. The demands of working life on their time meant that meal preparation was distributed between family members:

Graham: What were meals like in those days, what was the main meal of the day?

Rupert: It would've been tea I think. We always had lunch. No, I think father came home, mother didn't and *we rustled up something* that probably had been prepared already. *Unlike today*, we tended to have *three square meals* a day sort of thing. Which was totally *unhealthy* ehm but I suspect healthy in another sense, in that there was a lot more meat potatoes and vegetables. Rather than "What's in the freezer?" or "Let's get a couple of hamburgers,"

and *chuck them in*. Ehm so it would've all been probably fresh meat cooked, eh or cold meat at a lunch time, then eh generally speaking, as I remember father would come home to what he would consider his tuck in for the day. You know a *decent plate*. I suspect a casserole and mince was a favourite, as I remember it. In summer time, *throwing up* more salad and cold meat. Fish I seem to remember *getting thrown at me*, when I hated fish at that time. Which seems sad for a city like Aberdeen, at that time the place was producing fish by the trawler boat. I now like fish as it happens. I seem to remember fish was quite popular, herring particularly (my italics).

This excerpt begins with a description of how Rupert and his father ate when his mother was out, contrasting the food, pre-prepared but homemade, with the perceived reliance of younger generations on frozen and fast foods. He portrays his childhood as one in which food was sufficiently abundant— he talks of his father having ‘a decent plate’ of dinner and of having fish ‘thrown at me’. The language he uses implies a carefree availability of food, in direct opposition to those interviewees who had to pinch pennies to afford their daily bread. On a literal level, this may be explained by Rupert’s status as an only child: not having any siblings to share with meant that he was well-fed (even, as he puts it, ‘spoilt’) despite his parents’ modest wages. A psychological approach might enrich this interpretation by adding that although food is plentiful, Rupert’s language implies, on another level, a rejection of and revulsion towards food: his mother is described as ‘throwing up’ (rather than the more usual ‘throwing together’) food for the family; modern families ‘chuck’ together a meal from convenience foods; and he concludes this section of the interview with anecdotes about having to eat foods which ‘turned his stomach’. Yet another way to analyse this extract would be to explore the past/present dialogic Rupert enacts using phrases such as ‘unlike today’, ‘at the time’ and ‘I seem to remember’ which indicate a nostalgia, if not for the foods of his childhood, perhaps for the strong emotions they roused in him as a child (for example, the fish he ‘hated’ but now eats).

Considering Rupert's life-story in its entirety, it becomes clear that his predilection for marking transitions between tradition and modernity is not limited to his descriptions of food: his interview is littered with phrases such as 'latterly', to refer to changes in household routines, and 'in his/her latter years' to mark alterations in his ageing parents' lifestyles. Reading the extract from a health or nutrition viewpoint, Rupert can be seen to associate home-cooking with wholesomeness and healthy-eating, deploying morally-loaded terms such as 'fresh' and 'decent'. He also displays his awareness of diverse definitions of a healthy meal, balancing the pitfalls of large portions against the merits of covering the main food groups: 'unlike today, we tended to have three square meals a day sort of thing. Which was totally unhealthy ehm but I suspect healthy in another sense, in that there was a lot more meat, potatoes and vegetables'. His analysis of what constitutes a healthy meal, from this extract alone, does not seem particularly striking to us today: it is, after all, a narrative which health professionals, the NHS and the government have attempted to drill into the public consciousness. Working through his life story, however, a far more personal narrative of health is constructed:

I was a fairly gross child. By the time I was eight I was quite fat ehm and ehh I was fairly big.

I...remember being embarrassed because ehh I was really quite fat, fairly heavy thighed, big belly all round and ehh breast, you know. I mean I was huge and I do remember being uncomfortable, you know, taking the shirt off on the beach.

Reflecting on the causes of his corpulence, Rupert and Graham discuss personal factors such as eating while watching television; a fondness for sugary and fatty foods; parental weight and eating behaviours; as well as engaging with a public narrative of obesity as the 'Scottish disease':

Graham: When did you start losing weight?

Rupert: Ehm, oh dear, I would have been twenty one thereabouts. And that was mainly through my then fiancée's influence. Which was put fairly bluntly, 'You're not marrying me like that'.

Graham: So d'you think it was just over-eating then?

Rupert: Oh, no question. I still have the same problem and that ehh it's certainly one regret in life. I think I followed what is certainly a Scottish disease and that is an enjoyment of sweets and sweet stuff, bakery goods, cakes, biscuits ehm and ehh I was a glutton purely and simply. Ehm unashamed, I am ashamed now, but ehh at the time totally unashamed. I remember coming home from school, particularly senior school ehh again there would be nobody in, switching on the television, even as a seventeen year old, to watch children's television, just you know as the break before starting homework ehm and a pint of milk and a packet of biscuits and that would be before tea. I would then have tea at quarter past five an hour later you know. Ehm so it's not surprising and I mean after tea I always had cakes. Ehh my mother was probably guilty of that as well, because she was distinctly over-weight and ehm enjoyed the luxury of cream cakes and fancy biscuits. And I took that from her. My father wasn't ehh at all like that, he was quite slim, very stocky but not very fat until his later years, when he became a bit gluttonous as well. Before that he was very much a meat and potato and veg. man and ehh bread and jam, but biscuits and cakes didn't interest him.

Throughout the interview, Rupert describes with self-deprecating humour (he labels his childhood self 'an amorphous blob') his 'unashamed' youthful obesity; his contrite attempts to lose weight in adulthood; and his continuing struggle to resist the impulse to over-eat. This element of his story can be read to explain his ambivalent attitude, of simultaneous nostalgia and disgust, to childhood meals in the original extract. In this instance, using the life story to contextualise an extract on family meals offered an understanding of Robert's relation to food which resolved my seemingly contradictory early interpretations.

My second case-study, Bill (aged 75), was born in 1912, in Bonnyrigg (Midlothian): a mining community in which he has continued to live. One of seven children, he followed his father into the pits, where he worked for thirty-two years. Like Rupert, Bill notes the difference between modern convenience foods, in this case, tinned goods and the home-made food of his childhood:

Mah granny and grandfether made damn sure that we didna go hungry. If there wasn't a meal in the house, you could bet yer boots you went up there and thir was a meal for ye up there. And it was a' hame made stuff, athin'. Thir was nane o' this tinned puddin' and tinned tatties and tinned soup an' a' this, everything was hame made, everything.

The way in which Bill structures his description of food in this extract alone creates a dichotomy which associates home-made food with the past, with goodness ('it was a'home made stuff, athin') while tinned foods are dismissed as modern and inferior ('nane o' this tinned puddin'). His life story is strewn with other typically Primitivist⁸ complaints. These include expressing regret at physical changes in the landscape:

Oh thirs an awful difference t'Bonnyrigg, fae what it was when I was a kid at the school. Oh terrible. Oh yes. I mean the whole top side of Bonnyrigg has been completely altered. Thir was a public park up there. Thir was eh cattle grazin' in the parks up there. Thir was a dairy up the street, but that's all been built over, it's all houses now.

In addition, goods are perceived to be more expensive 'nowadays' (rising wages and the effects of inflation are ignored):

Actually, yer grocery bill, at that time, and that included cigarettes, and mah wife was a smoker, came to roughly about sixteen or seventeen shillin's a week. Aye that's right. I could get fifty Capstan, a fifty box, two and five pence. That was the price.

In this light, his negative view of tinned foods can be seen as part of a larger narrative, railing against modernity. Unusually, in this interpretation, taking the extract and contextualising it within Bill's life story has the effect of depersonalising his implicit dislike of convenience foods. His complaints are not unique but clichéd: we have heard them rehearsed many times by our own grandparents. They are evidence of his engagement with a Primitivist public narrative through which older generations' yearnings for a lost golden-age are expressed. They add little to our picture of Bill as an individual.

In an alternative reading, however, his rejection of canning technology can be seen to occur within a life story depicting his close relationship with his grandparents ('you couldn't have got two better people'): a relationship demonstrated through their readiness to nurture himself and his siblings with food. For example, in another extract he talks about them providing him with an endless supply of hard-boiled eggs for Easter games—which he contrasts to today's showpieces, describing them being gobbled up whatever their state of survival. In addition, he later denies that his mother had any interests outside the home: 'as far as mother was concerned it was all the home'. In doing so, he portrays her as a willing slave to her family's domestic comfort. In addition to paying homage to a Primitivist public narrative, his life story suggests that his nostalgic memories of food are far more deeply rooted in a personal narrative than is evident in the first extract above. His nostalgia for the home-made food of times past is inextricably linked with memories of, especially female, relations' domestic labour; with the demonstration of affection through physical nourishment. Moreover, his rejection of canning can also be read as a symbolic rejection of ready-made, mass-produced foods as emotionally sterile easy-options, rather than as a practical objection to the technology itself. Indeed, such a suggestion gains force by contextualising it with his life-story wherein he demonstrates a keen work ethic (he followed three decades' work in the mines with a job as a hospital porter into his late sixties) — a standard which he applies to others as well as himself. For example, he praises his grandparents for leading a 'full life', for being 'always that active' that they continued working (for the community and at pastimes such as gardening) 'practically til the day [they] died'. In Bill's case, each of my early interpretations was strengthened by following it through with data from his life story.

Born into a mining community in 1922, Moira (aged 65) was brought up in her grandmother's household alongside her grandfather and aunt. She describes the components of a typical weekday meal of several courses, drawing attention to the fact that the puddings were homemade: a gesture which is significant, perhaps, because of the extra time and effort needed for their preparation. The same sentiment is echoed when Moira later describes how, in bringing up her own family, all their food was home-made rather than frozen and packaged, ready to heat etc.

On a Wednesday we had, what the' cried a range, it wisna this, a big range right, an' ye had yer oven an' athin' combined, now on the top wis what ye'd call, that wis fir the soup, an' on a Wednesday ye had, thir wis Scotch broth an' then ye had a roast in the oven and you'd roast tatties an' mashed tatties an' ye always had yer *hame made puddin'*, *no bought* in a little packet, *made*. Apple tart, rhubarb tart, custard, we always had a three course meal and ehh yer veg. an' athin'.

Well that wis mah main thingy, when the family wis a' wee, the' got thir meals, *everything wis hame made, thir wis nae boxes o' frozen stuff, it wis all hame cookin' the' got*. An' they always had a three course meal, *the' never had a lot o' praise t' show*. (my italics)

Notably, her recollection of preparing home-made food for her family is linked to her assertion that making meals was a thankless task— her work was never acknowledged. Working initially from these extracts alone, I generated a multitude of explanations of Moira's attitudes towards cooking. Firstly, I believed they could be interpreted as a source of pride. This was belied, however, by her yoking together home-made meals and unpleasant, unappreciated domestic labour which rendered her memories of such meals devoid of the nostalgia and idealism present in the life stories of Rupert and Bill. Secondly, I attempted to understand her comments as part of a power struggle between herself and her husband, the intended respondent, whose interview she hijacks by answering for him, leading and even correcting his answers⁹:

Moira: Ye used t' read a lot did ye no?

Husband: Quite possibly aye, Ah can't remember

Moria: Well what wis it yer dad used t'say t'ye? Get a book in yer hand, he wis always on about wantin' ye t' get a book in yer hand an' dae something sensible

Graham: How did you meet, tell me how you met [your wife]?

Moria: Well Ah'll tell ye how we met cause he disna ken the right story

Graham: Was she the partner of your dreams? That's what it says here, it's ridiculous question, Ah've got t'ask it.

Moirira: (to husband) now watch what ye say here, be careful

Graham: D'you want me to wait til she goes oot ha ha?

Husband: No, Ah would say yes

However, a contextual consideration of the interview revealed that her husband shared the household duties with her, to the extent that, since his retirement, he prepares all the family meals. It therefore seemed unlikely that a sense of gender inequality could explain her unsentimental recollections of home-made food. I reached a more complex explanation for her rejection of convenience foods by delving into the earliest moments of her life history. In the course of the interview, it emerged that she was an illegitimate child, raised by a puritanical grandmother who characterised her as slatternly and worthless on the basis of her mother's 'mistake': 'she kept nigglin' on "Ah brought ye up, ye werena mine and Ah brought ye up" sort o' thing'. Moira describes how she was made to do all the housework from the age of ten, preparing the family's meals, being denied the chance to go out to work and excluded from family outings. Even her husband, quiet through much of the interview, refers to her being treated as 'a house slave'. After marriage, on returning from a day's factory work, she visited her grandma daily to do the housework, laundry and cooking:

That's the daft thing about it, no, when Ah moved up here, Ah still went doon every day an' did her work, Ah never missed a day o' goin' doon t' clean her hoose, an' she had a daughter stayed next door, an' she wouldna even take a hand in the washin' an' hing it oot, her ain daughter next door wouldna even take it in, Ah had t' go back doon at night an' take it in, an' Ah had two bairns.

Rejecting the convenience foods available to her daughter's generation, Moira can be understood to foreground the previously unacknowledged time and labour which she has sunk into hard domestic labour for over half a century.

Conclusion

I began this paper by considering arguments within semiotics and post-structuralism which advocate the analysis of texts divorced from their *context*, arguing that knowledge of the author/narrator is irrelevant since 'we do not speak our stories, in fact, our stories speak us'. After explicating the origins of this paper in a research group re-using life stories from *100 Families* (in which the researchers' divergent contexts in relation to the collection of the interviews was a key consideration), I turned to three life stories to demonstrate two diverse approaches to analysis. One of these methods focussed on specific extracts, with myself as arbiter of interpretation; the other worked with an interviewee/researcher dialogic to explore the influence of (recollections of) family life on their attitudes to food. Both methods produced different readings, contributed different layers of meaning, which occasionally checked or supported a particular interpretation. As researchers in diverse disciplines have noted, contextual readings of interviews are important because all 'talk is oriented to what came before, and sets up an environment for what comes next' (Hepburn and Potter 190)¹⁰. As such, I propose that an approach which enables a dialogue between extract and context, researcher and interviewee, is one direction which oral historians might pursue. Dialogical interpretations, however, need not be limited to these relations. Other angles could explore the relationship between the interviewee's past and present experiences, attitudes and behaviours; or between interviewee's own experiences and those of their peers and/or other generations (see Olive, Jackson and Smith, forthcoming). In arguing for dialogic approaches to

analysis, I do not claim that they can produce an essential or ‘full’ understanding of the interviewees’ lives. They do, however, attempt to respect interviewees through a contextual treatment of their interviews, acknowledging the importance that telling their life story has for them (in terms of the confessional and/or affirmative element of the experience). Moreover, a dialogic, contextualising technique, unlike the use of isolated extracts to generate interpretations, enabled a process through which the interviewees ‘spoke’ back to me, challenging and complicating my interpretations.

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¹ This can be confirmed by a glance at the contents page of many guides to ‘doing’ oral history, where the majority of chapters are dedicated the process of data collection. Nonetheless, more recent works, such as *The Oral History Reader* (Perks and Thomson), have dedicated more space to issues of analysis.

² ‘Changing Families, Changing Food’ is an interdisciplinary research programme funded by the Leverhulme Trust.

³ I use the term in its broadest sense, throughout this paper, to include ‘speaker’.

⁴ This understanding has, for me, been challenged by interviews from Paul Thompson’s *The Edwardians* project. Asked whether they received meat from poaching, several interviewees demonstrate awareness that their answer is constrained by traditional notions of morality and criminality using caveats such as ‘off the record’ and ‘it can’t do any harm now’, while others show they are conscious that what was socially unacceptable (indeed criminal) in their youth generates little revulsion among younger generations, saying ‘I’m not ashamed to tell you’.

⁵ A strong and continuing tradition of studying individuals in their social and historical context exists in several research disciplines close to oral history. Writing on narrative inquiry, Susan E. Chase traces such work from Thomas and Znaniecki’s *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918/1927) to the present day. She argues that context is fundamental to our understanding of individuals because life-stories are ‘both enabled and constrained by a range of social resources and circumstances’ (657). Further afield, in cultural studies, Paula Saukko posits a two-way relationship between ‘local [e.g. personal] realities’ and ‘social realities’. This model could be applied to oral history research to argue for a dialogic between particular details in a life story and their broader context: contextualising elements of a story enables researches to attend to similarities and differences within and across

(our interpretation of) life stories. In addition, these elements can be used to critique the life story, ‘drawing attention to complexities and incongruencies that do not fit’ the story as a whole or our theorisation of it (348).

⁶ I have used brackets here to indicate the debate over whether or not an oral historian’s return to her/his own data constitutes re-use or not: some argue that re-use occurs only when researchers use data collected by another. I continue to hyphenate the term elsewhere.

⁷ In terms of imagining interpretation as the result of a cyclical relationship between researcher/researched, data/interpretation, Bakhtin’s exploration of dialogism (1981) argues that all language, thought etc. is understood as a response or as stimulating response (all speech, writing etc. therefore exists in a state of persistent and ongoing intertextuality).

⁸ Primitivism as a philosophical tradition, ‘defined as a nostalgia for an earlier, simpler, and better time...can be traced back to ancient Greece and Rome’ (Knight 43). Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, for example, describe a utopian earth where nature is entirely capable of provisioning humankind with wild food (Knight 43).

⁹ For a more detailed consideration of such behaviours, family dynamics and the workings of transactive memory in group interviews see Smith (forthcoming).

¹⁰ My citation, supporting contextualisation, from a piece on discursive psychology appears ironic given the ongoing debate in such fields as to ‘whether analysis should start from an existing idea of the context of a particular interaction or should start from material available in the interaction itself’ (Hepburn 172). It does, however, offer evidence that arguments for contextualisation exist in many disciplines.

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