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Telling our Stories: feminist debates and the use of oral history

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ABSTRACT This paper examines some of the current methodological and theoretical debates encountered by feminist historians utilising oral history, with illustrations from oral history research on wage-earning women in a small Canadian manufacturing city. After reviewing some of the literature which has indicated how we might use oral history as a means of exploring the construction of historical memory, the article examines some of the ethical questions involved in using oral sources, and emphasises the need for historians to take full account of issues of longstanding concern to other social scientists. It then examines some of the current theoretical debates surrounding historians’ use of interviews, particularly the difficult concept of ‘experience’ and the current emphasis on deconstructing the oral text with the use of post-structuralist theories. Using women’s stories of a major textile strike in 1937 as an illustration, the article argues for a feminist oral history which is enlightened by post-structuralist insights, but firmly grounded in a materialist feminist context.

When people talk about their lives, people lie sometimes, forget a little, exaggerate, become confused, get things wrong. Yet they are revealing truths ... the guiding principle for [life histories] could be that all autobiographical memory is true: it is up to the interpreter to discover in which sense, where, and for what purpose [1].

For almost two decades, feminist historians have played an important role within the profession stimulating new interest in, and debate surrounding, oral history.[2] The feminist embrace of oral history emerged from a recognition that traditional sources have often neglected the lives of women, and that oral history offered a means of integrating women into historical scholarship, even contesting the reigning definitions of social, economic and political importance that obscured women’s lives. The topics potentially
addressed through oral history; the possibilities of putting women’s voices at
the centre of history and highlighting gender as a category of analysis; and
the prospect that women interviewed will shape the research agenda by
articulating what is of importance to them; all offer challenges to the
dominant ethos of the discipline. Moreover, oral history not only redirects
our gaze to overlooked topics, but it is also a methodology directly informed
by interdisciplinary feminist debates about our research objectives,
questions, and use of the interview material.[3]

Although both popular and scholarly historical works have increasingly
embraced oral history as a methodology able to expose ignored topics and
present diversified perspectives on the past, there lingers some suspicion
that oral sources may be inappropriate for the discipline. As one labour
historian recently pointed out, it would be unthinkable for historians to host
a conference session asking “written sources: what is their use?”.[4] Yet one
still finds that question posed for oral history. Consideration of whether oral
sources are ‘objective’, it appears, still worries the profession – even for
those using oral history.[5]

While the biases and problems of oral history need to be examined – as
do the limitations of other sources – my intention is not to retrace these
older debates, but rather to examine some of the current theoretical
dilemmas encountered by feminist historians employing oral history. Rather
than seeing the creation of oral sources as biased or problematic, this
creative process can become a central focus for our research: we need to
explore the construction of women’s historical memory. Asking why and
how women explain, rationalise and make sense of their past offers insight
into the social and material framework within which they operated, the
perceived choices and cultural patterns they faced, and the complex
relationship between individual consciousness and culture.[6]

For feminist historians, two other questions are pressing: what are the
ethical issues involved in interpreting other women’s lives through oral
history, and what theoretical approaches are most effective in
conceptualising this methodology? The latter question is especially timely in
the light of recent poststructuralist scepticism that we can locate and
describe a concrete and definable women’s experience, separate from the
cultural discourses constructing that experience.[7]

I wish to explore these three interrelated issues using examples from
my own oral history research on the lives of wage-earning women in the
large factories of Peterborough, Canada, from 1920 to the end of the
Second World War. By exploring in some detail a concrete example –
women’s memories of a major textile strike in 1937 – I hope to highlight
our current theoretical dilemmas and argue for an oral history enhanced by
post-structuralist insights, but firmly situated in a materialist and feminist
context.
Oral History and the Construction of Women’s Memories

If we are to make “memory itself the subject of study”,[8] our interviews must be carefully contextualised, with attention to who is speaking, what their personal and social agenda is, and what kind of event they are describing. We need to unearth the underlying assumptions or ‘problematic’ of the interview, and to analyse the subtexts and silences, as well as the explicit descriptions in the interview.[9] We need to avoid the tendency, still evident in historical works, of treating oral history only as a panacea designed to fill in the blanks in women’s or traditional history, providing ‘more’ history, compensating where we have no other sources, or ‘better’ history, a ‘purer’ version of the past coming, unadulterated, from the very people who experienced it.[10] The latter approach erroneously presents oral histories as essentially unmediated, ignoring the process by which the researcher and the informant create the source together; it may also obscure the complicated questions of how memory is constructed, to what extent oral sources can ever reveal the objective experience of people, and whether oral histories should be seen as expressions of ideologies – whether dominant, submerged, oppositional – given to us in the form of personal testimony.

It is also crucial that we ask how gender, race and class, as structural and ideological relations, have shaped the construction of historical memory. The exploration of oral history must incorporate gender as a defining category of analysis, for women often remember the past in different ways in comparison with men. Some studies, Gwen Ettler-Lewis points out, have found that “women’s narratives” are more liable to be characterised by “understatements, avoidance of the first person point of view, rare mention of personal accomplishments and disguised statements of personal power”. [11] Similarly, a French oral historian noted that the women she interviewed were less likely than men to place themselves at the centre of public events; they downplayed their own activities, emphasising the role of other family members in their recollections.[12] Furthermore, women’s “embeddedness in familial life” may also shape their view of the world, and even their very consciousness of historical time.[13] In my study, for instance, many women reconstructed the past using the benchmarks of their family’s life-cycle – as does Amelia, described below, whose recollections of a major textile strike are woven around, and indeed are crucially influenced by, her memory of her wedding.

Class, race and ethnicity, other writers have shown, create significant differences in how we remember and tell our lives. In some instances, these influences overshadow gender in the construction of memory. Cultural values shape our very ordering and prioritising of events, indeed our notions of what is myth, history, fact or fiction.[14]
In my study, class shaped people's recollections in stark, as well as subtle, ways. Not surprisingly, managers remember history differently than workers; a manager in one factory described the period when the company explored relocation to other cities in search of lower wages as "an interesting" [15] time of travel and experimentation as he knew his job would be salvaged. But workers in the plant who faced job loss remember that same period as "stressful" [16] and uncertain. On a more subtle level, in this workplace, many women's reticence to speak forcefully as critics of, or experts on, their workplace contrasted markedly to managers' strong sense of pre-eminence on these issues; these contrasting styles reflected the confidence shaped by both class and gender inequalities.

One's past and current political ideology also shapes the construction of memory. Women who were more class conscious, militant trade unionists did not hesitate to criticize managers and they presented workplace conditions in a more critical light than other workers. Interviewees' knowledge of my ideological sympathies, combined with their own, could also shape the interview. A male trade union official I interviewed tended to remember his life story around the theme of himself as a progressive socialist, battling more conservative unionists. Suspecting I was a feminist, his role vis à vis the defence of women's rights in the union became exaggerated in his interview, beyond my own reading of the written record.

The influences of class, gender, culture or political worldview on memory may reveal themselves through both content and the narrative form of the interview. While recent writing on oral history draws heavily on post-structuralist theory to explore narrative form and the way in which subjectivity is created, similar themes have preoccupied oral history theorists for some time. Almost 20 years ago, Ronald Grele suggested we uncover the theme which suffuses the life history, the 'script' around which an informant shapes the presentation of their life. Amelia, for instance, though now comfortable, grew up in the 1930s in a poor farming family; at 15 she was forced to leave school to work in a textile mill. Throughout the interview, she criticized current social values, often by contrasting her youth - characterised by hard work and selfless dedication to her family - to the current selfish, affluent youth. Whether or not she was influenced by a conservative philosophy that distrusted modern trends, or whether she wished to understand her relative success as a result of hard work, or whether she was hurt by the seeming neglect by the younger members of her family - or all of the above - the point is that this critical worldview came to colour her description of the working conditions she had seen in the textile factory.

Oral history may also illuminate the collective scripts of a social group, revealing, for instance, how and why peoples' memories of their workplaces or communities are created.[17] Many workers I interviewed who were employed at a factory which embraced paternalism as a labour relations
strategy, emphasised the ‘family-like’ [18] atmosphere at the plant, and the way in which the patriarchal and charismatic company head saw himself as a father figure. Their descriptions of the rise and decline of the firm were recounted in the form of an epic family drama, with the eventual economic decline of the factory actually compared to a family breakup. Their way of remembering indicates the assimilation, at some level, of the familial metaphors employed by the company to promote its paternalism.

Other ingredients of the narrative form, such as expression, intonation and metaphors also offer clues to the construction of historical memory. When I asked one woman how her family survived during the time she and her father were on strike in 1937, she could not remember. It is possible, first, that the family went on welfare but that she has forgotten because it was a humiliating experience for some people. Later in the interview, however, she made a casual aside, noting her mother “sewed at home for extra money”. [19] Her mother may have supported the family during the strike, but her work in the informal economy (like that of many women) was undervalued, remembered as an afterthought, indeed almost forgotten.

Revelations may also come from silences and omissions in women’s stories. [20] The realisation that discrimination based on religion is not socially desirable led many women I interviewed initially to deny any religious rivalry in their workplaces; yet one such woman, when describing a different issue – the foreman intervening in a bitter dispute on the line – admitted that severe Catholic and Protestant taunting had initiated the disagreement. One of the most telling examples of silences is the way in which women reacted to the subject of violence. In response to questions about sexual harassment at work (often I did not begin by using that modern term) or about women’s freedom on the streets after work, women seldom spoke of women’s vulnerability to violence. Others purposely contrasted the absence of violence when they were younger to contemporary times: in their youth, they claimed, women could walk home alone at night, they were not bothered at work, and violence against women was rare.

Yet, from other sources and research, I knew that violence in the streets, and in women’s homes, was very much a part of daily life. I came to understand women’s silence in a number of ways: for one thing, a few women’s veiled and uncomfortable references to harassment indicated that some working women, especially in the 1930s, saw harassment as an unfortunate but sometimes obligatory part of the workplace that one could not change and did not talk about. Secondly, it is not only that feminism has made us more aware of harassment and thus provided us with a vocabulary to describe it, but also that similar experiences were labelled differently in the past, often with the term ‘favouritism’. Third, a denial of violence was sometimes an externalisation of women’s ongoing painful fears about violence, and a comforting means of idealising a chivalrous past in contrast to the more visible violence of today.
Finally, in order to contextualise oral histories, we also need to survey the dominant ideologies shaping women's worlds; listening to women's words, in turn, will help us to see how women understood, negotiated and sometimes challenged these dominant ideals. For example, perceptions of what was proper work for young women are revealed as women explain the images, ideas and examples upon which they constructed their ambition and work choices. Ideas of female domesticity and motherhood, reproduced in early home life, the school and the workplace, and notions of innate physical differences, for instance, were both factors moulding young women's sense of their limited occupational choices in both blue and white collar work in the 1930s.[21] Interviews may also indicate when women questioned these dominant ideals, as a few notable women described how and why they made the unusual decision not to marry, to work after marriage, or to attempt a non-traditional job.

Understanding the ideological context may help to unravel the apparently contradictory effects of ideology and experience. Why, for example, when I interview women who worked during the Second World War, do they assume that the war had a liberating effect on women's role in the workplace, even when they offer few concrete examples to substantiate this? As Ruth Pierson points out, sex segregation and gender hierarchy persisted in the Canadian wartime workforce, despite rhetoric to the contrary. Why this contradiction between women's positive memory of new opportunities during the war, and the reality of persisting discrimination?[22] One answer may be the powerful and hegemonic influence of a popular and mystifying ideology of 'the people's war' – the notion that women were breaking down gender roles – on the very construction of women's memory.[23] Secondly, oral history may reveal women's own definitions of liberation, which actually diverge from those utilised by historians. In this small city, women saw the wartime abandonment of the marriage bar in local factories as a small revolution for working women. Historians, on the other hand, have based their assessments of continuing inequality on the maintenance of a gendered division of labour during and after the war.

In using oral history as a means of exploring memory construction, then, careful attention to the processes of class and gender construction is needed, as is an understanding of ideological context shaping women's actions. In order to understand the formation of women's gendered consciousness and memory, however, we must also acknowledge our own influence on the shape of the interview.

Ethical Dilemmas: for historians too

It is important to acknowledge how our own culture, class position and political worldview shapes the oral histories we collect, for the interview is a historical document created by the agency of both the interviewer and the
interviewee. Many of us originally turned to oral history as a methodology with the radical and democratic potential to reclaim the history of ordinary people and raise working-class and women's consciousness. As feminists, we hoped to use oral history to empower women by creating a revised history “for women”, [24] emerging from the actual lived experiences of women. Feminist oral history has often implicitly adopted (though perhaps not critically theorised about) some elements of feminist standpoint theory in its assumption that the distinct material and social position of women produces, in a complex way, a unique epistemological vision which might be slowly unveiled by the narrator and the historian.[25]

'Representing the world from the standpoint of women', while a laudable feminist aim, may still be difficult to accomplish. As well as the thorny theoretical question of our ability to adequately locate women’s experience (discussed below) there are two other concerns. Are we exaggerating the radical potential of oral history, especially the likelihood of academic work changing popular attitudes? Even more important, are we ignoring the uncomfortable ethical issues involved in using living people as a source for our research?

Some years ago, feminist social scientists mounted a critique of interview relationships based on supposed ‘detachment’ and objectivity, but in reality on unequal power and control over outcome. As a solution, sociologists like Ann Oakley proposed the laudable aim of equalising the interview, making it a more cooperative venture[26] Yet, in attempting this, we may be simply masking our own privilege. While a detached objectivity may be impossible, a false claim to sisterhood is also unrealistic. As Janet Finch has argued, a romantisation of oral history research that ignores the fact that we are often “trading on our identity – as a woman, a professional”[27] – to obtain information is unacceptable. Judith Stacey also points out that feminist research is inevitably enmeshed in 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[28] I agree. Nor will renaming these relationships with terms implying a sharing of power completely erase our privilege[29] 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.

These ethical issues are visibly highlighted through the conflicting interpretations which may be embraced by my informants and myself. By necessity, historians analyse and judge, and in the process, we may presume to understand the consciousness of our interviewees. Yet our analysis may contradict women’s self-image, and our feminist perspective may be rejected by our interviewees. Would women who worked in the paternalist factory I studied agree to the very word paternalist as a description of their
relationship to management? Would workers in low-paid textile work accept language like subordination or exploitation to describe their status in the family or workplace? The answer to the latter two questions may be no.

While I had every intention of allowing women to speak about their own perceptions, if my interpretation and theirs diverged, mine would assume precedence in my writing. We can honour feminist ethical obligations to make our material accessible to the women interviewed, never to reveal confidences spoken out of the interview, never to purposely distort or ridicule their lives, but in the last resort, it is our privilege that allows us to interpret, and it is our responsibility as historians to convey their insights using our own – as the opening quotation to this article indicated. Even feminists like Judith Stacey and Daphne Patai, who offer trenchant critiques of the unequal interview relationship, do not recommend abandoning this methodology; in the last resort, they see the potential for feminist awareness and understanding outweighing the humbling recognition that it is currently impossible to create an ideal feminist methodology which negates power differences.

These debates have usually taken place between sociologists and anthropologists, less often with historians’ participation. Why? Is it related to the fact that, as Ruth Pierson argues, until recently, we have undertheorised our work?[30] Is it possible that our traditional disciplinary training – especially an emphasis on empirical methods and a tendency to objectify our sources, but also the preference of the discipline not to work with living subjects – has obscured these questions from our view? We might be less concerned about imposing our interpretations on women’s voices if we were dealing with a written source; we are particularly sensitive about judging women because of the personal relationship – however brief – established between ourselves and our interviewees. But this is not necessarily positive for it may lead us to shy away from critical conclusions about their lives.

Other limitations in our historical training may also obscure these ethical questions. Is the study of people of different time periods, cultures and classes so taken for granted that we have not questioned the power inherent in writing across these boundaries? As Pierson notes on the current, troubling question of who has the ‘right’ to write whose history, if historians cannot study women of different backgrounds who have less power, we may be reduced to writing autobiography.[31] Perhaps the mere fact of historical time – again, inherent in the discipline – helps to distance us, if only in an illusory way, from the issue of unequal relationships. When I interview wage-earning women about their experience in the 1930s, the age gulf allows both of us detachment from the subject we are discussing, which then sanctions the licence to interpret and judge.

In the last resort, I wonder how much soul searching is useful: is endless debate self-indulgent, sometimes an *ex post facto* justification of our
work and does our concern with interviewing women from other backgrounds sometimes take on a condescending tone? [32] Perhaps it is important not to definitely answer, but rather to be ever aware of these questions: we need to continually analyse the interview as an interactive process, examine the context of the interview, especially inherent power imbalances, and always evaluate our own ethical obligations as feminists to the women we interview.

Theoretical Dilemmas

While it is important to explore the interview as a mediated source, moulded by the political and social worldview of the author and subject, I think we should beware of recent trends to see oral history embodying innumerable contingencies and interpretations. When more traditional historians questioned the reliability of oral sources, suggesting that interviews are more fiction than fact, they may not have realised that they were echoing the tenets of some post-structuralist analyses which explore the relationship between language, subjectivity, and the construction of cultural meanings and social organisation.

While linguistic theories are far from new in the interdisciplinary field of oral history, the more recent turn to poststructuralism suggests a more intensive concern with both linguistic structure and cultural discourses determining oral narratives, as well as a scepticism about any direct relationship between experience and representation. This theorising has enriched our understanding of oral history, but it may also pose the danger of overstating the ultimate contingency, variability and ‘fictionality’ of oral histories and the impossibility of using them to locate a women’s past which is “real and knowable” [33].

Since the mid-1980s, oral historians have increasingly examined language “as the invisible force that shapes oral texts and gives meaning to historical events” [34]. This approach is evident in the recent Women’s Words, whose editors urge us to consider “the interview as a linguistic, as well as a social and psychological event” [35]. While the book’s contributions range widely in their perspective, substantial attention is paid to narrative form and language; one author urges the embrace of ‘deconstruction’ rather than mere ‘interpretation’ of the text [36]. In other works, the emphasis on language has been taken to more extreme conclusions, resulting in the denigration of historical agency: one such writer claims that the “narrative discourses available in our culture ... structure perceptual experience, organize memory ... and purpose-build the very events of a life”. Our life stories then come to “reflect the cultural models available to us”, so much so that we become mere “variants on the culture’s canonical forms” [37].

Practitioners of oral history have been more visibly influenced by the post-structuralist turn in anthropology and by some literary theory than by similar historical debates. In anthropology, life histories are being
re-evaluated as post-structuralist voices emphasise the power-laden, complex process of constructing the oral narratives; one author suggests that life histories “provide us with a conventionalized gloss on a social reality that ... we cannot know ... We may be discussing the dynamics of narration rather than the dynamics of society”[38] Similarly, works like Writing Culture have stressed the creation of an indeterminate reality by the observed and the observer, well summed up by the conclusion that we can only hope for “a constructed understanding of the constructed native’s constructed point of view”.[39]

Of course, post-structuralism has also stimulated debate in historical circles, with feminists apparently sympathetic or at least divided, and some working-class historians more critical.[40] Feminist historians have been understandably attracted to the challenge to androcentric epistemologies, critiques of essentialism, concerns with language and representation, and the analysis of power suggested by some post-structuralist writing.[41] Nonetheless, critics have cautioned against the inherent idealism in some post-structuralist theory and the abandonment of the search for historical causality and agency, not to mention a sense of political despair when the very notions of exploitation and oppression are deconstructed so completely as to be abandoned.[42]

These debates - which cannot be explored in detail here - have important implications for the way in which we interpret our interviews, confront the ethical questions of the power-laden interview and consider the concept of experience. New attention to language and the way in which gender is itself shaped through the discourses available to us can offer insight as we analyse the underlying form and structure of our interviews. Reading our interviews on many levels will encourage us to look for more than one discursive theme and for multiple relations of power based on age, class and culture as well as gender.

On the ethical question of the inherent inequality of this methodology, however, post-structuralist writing is less useful. As Judith Stacey persuasively argues, the post-modern strategy of dealing with ethical question in ethnography is inadequate because it highlights power imbalances we knew to exist, but does not suggest any way of acting to ameliorate them. Post-structuralist anthropologists, for instance, suggest the process of ‘evoking’ rather than describing narratives through ‘cooperative’ dialogue, fragmentary or polyphonic discourse[43] as an alternative to their own power of authorship. As critics point out, however, these tactics can also veil and deny power: they can involve “self reflection, perhaps self preoccupation, but not self criticism”.[44] Privilege is not negated simply by inclusion of other voices, or by denial of our ultimate authorship and control. Solutions that disguise power are not helpful to the historical profession in particular, which still needs to face and debate the question of power inherent in historical writing.
Finally, there is also the troubling and seemingly unsolvable problem of ‘experience’. Exploring and revaluing women’s experience has been a cornerstone of feminist oral history, but the current emphasis on differences between women – in part encouraged by poststructuralist writing – has posed the dilemma of whether we can write across the divides of race, class and gender about other women’s experiences, past or present. In the case of oral history, Ruth Pierson implies that we should be “as close as possible” to the oppressed group being studied, preferably a member of that group. If we are not, we should concentrate on the exterior context of women but avoid with ‘epistemic humility’ a presumptuous to know women’s interiority.[45]

This raises troubling questions for me: just how close should we be to the subjects we are interviewing? Across the boundaries of sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, disability, class and age, can we score two out of six and still explore subjectivity? Where are the boundaries and under what circumstances can they shift? Secondly, separating exterior context from inner lives is extremely difficult. Does my assertion that women’s ambition was socially constructed not emerge from precisely that presumptuous supposition about the relationship between context and interior life? Will we not impoverish our historical writing if we shy away from attempts to empathetically link women’s inner and outer lives?

Also, is experience itself a construction of the narratives available to us in our culture? The concept of experience is not without its problems in history and feminist theory; it has been used to justify essentialism and to create a homogeneous ‘woman’ whose existence is enigmatic.[46] But what are the consequences of ignoring a concept which allows women to “name their own lives” [47] and struggles, and thus validates a notion of real, lived oppression which was understood and felt by women in the past?

Related concerns were voiced over a decade ago by Louise Tilley, in her critique of oral history shaped by literary theory and used to study subjectivity, and her counter-endorsement of a materialist oral history, used to study social relations.[48] But can these two aims be so easily separated? Can the interview not be interpreted with a keen materialist and feminist eye to context, and also informed by poststructuralist insights into language? The cultural construction of memory would still be a focus of inquiry, posed within a framework of social and economic relations and imperatives. While it is important to analyse how someone constructs an explanation for their life, ultimately there are patterns, structures, systemic reasons for those constructions which must be identified to understand historical causality.[49] Polarities between subjectivity and social relations, or between a dated ‘older’ generation of women doing oral history who supposedly naively accepted the ‘transparency’ of their interviewees’ accounts and the new, ‘complex’ approach influenced by theory [50] may not be justified – and ironically creates precisely the kind of “conceptual hierarchy which post-structuralism is supposed to decentre”.[51]
It has been suggested that historians may be able to extract techniques and insights from post-structuralist writing, yet still critique other premises of post-structuralist theory. One way to explore some of the current theoretical dilemmas of feminist historians utilising oral history, and indicate a useful reconciliation of these debates, is to take a in-depth look at the process and outcome of my interviews with working women who participated in a major strike at Peterborough's largest textile mill in 1937.

Five Strike Stories

In this small city, a variety of factories offered women employment, but one of the largest was a textile mill, the Bonnerworth, owned by a large absentee corporation, Dominion Woolens. In 1937 men working at another local Dominion Woolens mill initiated unionisation and strike action in pursuit of better wages, and the Bonnerworth women immediately joined the strike. Part of a larger Canadian pattern of revolt in the textile industry at this time, the Bonnerworth strike was characterised by anger and violence on the picket line, which came to dominate press coverage as well as governmental concern and action. In the city's labour history, this textile strike has been portrayed within two dominant themes: as the first, and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to organise industrial unions, which then had a negative effect on organising for some time; and as a rare example of violent class conflict polarising the community.

By the time I interviewed former Bonnerworth workers, I had already presumed the themes listed above to be historically significant - a fact that did shape the interview process. As Susan Geiger notes, our preconceived notions of what is important or marginal privileges certain voices and obscures unexplored themes.[52] One of my first aims, for instance, was to find Edith, a well-known leader in the strike and union. Yet other women had very different memories than Edith, downplaying, or even forgetting (what I had considered) important parts of the strike, such as union organising or picket line violence.

Women's strike stories varied significantly, despite similarities in their biographies: the five women described below all came from working-class families; by the age of 15, they were working in the mills, usually as spinners and twisters; they contributed their pay to the household economy; and they all left the mill by the early 1940s for married life. Their stories highlight a long-standing problem for historians: how do we reconcile different interpretations of the past, in this case, all seemingly based on first-person experience. As their diverse accounts emerged, I reassessed my a priori assumptions about the strike and began to question the existence of an identifiable, common experience or class consciousness on the part of women. Would I be reduced to emphasising 'individual' experience - surely a pluralist retreat with little explanatory force? Perhaps the post-structuralists were right: there could be no 'truth' or 'reality' outside of
our multitudinous constructions of them! What then were women's strike stories? Five short samples taken from a much larger study follow.

Rosa was a second generation Italian immigrant who had to leave school at 13, despite the fact that she was very clever. She went to work at the Bonneworth mill, and became a trusted, versatile employee, a talented machine operator often moved around to difficult jobs throughout the plant. When the strike began, she stayed out for a day or two, but she was soon back at work, crossing the picket line. "It wasn't very nice going to work ... I tried to find different ways of going, but you were always called a scab", she remembers. "The police were always there ... you couldn't go home for lunch". Extremely revealing is Rosa's claim that her close friend also continued to work; yet other glaring evidence (her friend's arrest notice in the paper, confirmed by a family member) says otherwise.

Initially guarded and defensive when talking to me about the strike, she slowly explained that her parents had influenced her stand, telling her to ignore the strikers and "mind my own business". Moreover, the demand for more money was not a compelling enough reason to walk out; though acknowledging "the money wasn't good" she also felt she was "getting by" and that she owed her boss, whom she liked, some loyalty. Overall, Rosa played down the strike in the history of her work life, de-emphasised its importance and conflictual nature, was critical of strikers' tactics, and spent more time describing work dynamics in the mill, in particular her encounter with a woman who "wanted the [better] job" Rosa was on, and tried to convince the foreman she "could do it better".[53]

I believe that her memory of the strike was influenced by her need to justify her decision to cross the line and deal with the discomfort of this difficult event - being denounced as a scab is not something we all want imprinted in our memories for the rest of our lives. Her memory lapse about her friend probably reflects precisely this process of self-justification. Her loyalty to her boss becomes more understandable in the larger context of her life history. Living in a dominantly British city, which was often ambivalent to immigrants, and coming from an unskilled working-class family, she was understandably pleased to have the managers recognise and respect her intelligence and talents. She felt pride in this recognition and was not willing to throw it away just to join others on the picket line, especially the same woman who "wanted her job".[54] While many other Italian workers supported the strike, Rosa did not: her memory reveals her very particular and individual efforts to cope with structures of economic and ethnic discrimination.

A second strike story told by June downplayed the strike even more dramatically. This young woman, from an English working-class background, had been working at Bonneworth for a year, since she was 14, when the strike began. She described the strike as an abrupt, puzzling event, which the women in the mill did not create: she simply went to work one day and
found a picket line set up. Along with a group of friends, she became
involved in strike aid, making sandwiches for the night picketers, collecting
funds, and helping at the union office. But her attitude towards the union
was less than dedicated; when fellow workers elected her shop steward after
the strike, she said, laughing, “I was [so surprised] ... I nearly flipped”. 
Drawing on her father’s advice “not to become involved” she declined and
never attended a union meeting.

As she told her story to me, I was struck by June’s deprecation of the
seriousness of this event, and by her denial of any leadership role in the
strike. She distanced herself from a woman union leader whom she saw as
both politically and morally ‘radical’; alternatively, she presented her own
role as a social diversion for the summer. “During the strike, it was an
opportunity for us to go downtown together ... the girls I chummed with
weren’t bitter about it ... it was almost a heyday ... we had street dances. I
don’t remember any tear gas. Us kids didn’t know what strike was about”.[55]

Portraying a strike, which included tear gas, arrests and violence, as a
heyday was not something I had expected. Her memory, however, was
influenced by her youth at the time, her position in the household, and her
later, more conservative political views, which became apparent during the
interview. Because of the latter, she had no desire to assume the persona of
a working-class militant. Secondly, for the young women workers – mere
teenagers – the strike could have been ‘a lark’, a rest from the long, hot
hours in the factory. If the family had other wage earners (as hers did) and
could scrimp by, then why not enjoy this unexpected vacation? Because
these young women did not have a strong say in the union, they
understandably downplayed their agency in creating the strike. The tear gas
is forgotten either because June missed those picketing days or because
overall, these details do not fit in with her narrative script of the strike as a
‘heyday’.

The third story is told by Amelia, a farm girl who began work at 15.
Like many other farm families, hers saw high school as an unattainable
luxury, and so she dutifully followed her sister into the textile mill. When
she moved into an inspector’s position, she had a slightly less arduous job.
This, along with a strong feeling that she owed her employer honest, hard
work led to her ambivalence about the strike. Though Amelia recognised her
pay “was very low”, she did not want to be seen as a complainer by
management. She did not openly oppose her striking workmates, though
their rejection of authority seemed outrageous and “brazen” to her; instead,
she simply avoided picket duty. She told the union she lived too far from the
mill, but to me she noted her choice was also political: “I wasn’t much of a
politician then, and so I just went with them [the strikers] because I didn’t
want to be seen against the strike”.

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What was more memorable for Amelia, however, was the relationship between the strike and a more important event in her life: her wedding. She was disturbed about being off work because she was “saving up for [my] wedding and I wasn’t saving anything on strike”. Indeed, strike events become lost amidst her remembered concern with her trousseau and her wedding: “I remember being fretful about going on strike ... there was a settlement suggested in August when I was getting ready for my wedding ... Yes, I knew it ended before I got married because I [used my] back pay to buy new curtains for my home ... I guess I missed the violence, but I was really preoccupied with my upcoming plans”.[56]

A fourth story moves closer to the images of class conflict portrayed in the press and government reports. Margaret also started in the mill at 13, but by 1937, she had been there 10 years. She was not involved in the union or strike planning but she was forthright in her support for the strike. Arrested for assaulting a police officer, she both denied the charge and later joked about her respectable family’s horror at her notoriety.

Margaret, despite this upsetting incident, tried to assess the strike from a number of perspectives, even offering a sympathetic interpretation of strikebreakers: “maybe they ... needed the money more than we did”. Never concentrating only on her own story, she related the strike and its consequences to the lives of her workmates, friends and family – a common characteristic of women’s narratives. Margaret also avoided a depiction of her role as heroic or militant. She spoke of her horror at being arrested, but in retrospect couches the episode in humour, characterising her day as a “jailbird” as an aberration in an otherwise law-abiding life. While embracing an interpretation of the strike as a just cause precipitated by exploitative working conditions, she avoided placing the many actors, including herself, into polarised or one-dimensional roles.

Finally, Edith, a leader in the strike, did remember it as a tragic struggle between an unethical employer, aided by the police, and exploited workers. What was the strike about, I asked? “Wages, the whole thing was wages ... they paid starvation wages, and everybody knew that” was her response. Edith came from an extremely large working-class family, many of whom had worked at the mill at some time. She was determined to create a better life for herself and her children, indicating to me that she purposely had fewer children than her mother. She had worked at the plant for some time, even after her marriage, and this longevity, along with a streak of rebelliousness, earned her a reputation for ‘talking back’ to managers and standing up for other workers. She took some pride in her prominent role in the strike and saw it as just cause waged between the forces of greed and the right to basic decency and survival.[57] In Edith’s words, I had finally found a voice which replicated the official version of the strike as unmitigated class conflict. As a labour historian I could readily identify with Edith’s method of presentation as it approximated a long tradition of strike
histories' in the discipline! But other women's voices, in all their diversity, also had to be explained. One possibility was to abandon the attempt to write "one true story" [58], looking instead at the structure of each narrative, uncovering the script being played out, contradictions in the narrative and the cultural discourses disclosed. Post-structuralist writing on oral history is useful in thinking through the deconstruction of these interviews. A close examination of narrative form helps to uncover layers of meanings in women's words, the simultaneous stories that were being played out, and the script around which the interview was moulded. Even the metaphors, tone and silences of women were significant: June's repeated laughter denoting her depredation of the strike; Edith's use of resolute, cut-and-dried juxtapositions to convey images of class conflict; Rosa's significant silences on the question of her strike breaking.

Secondly, attention to the construction of the text by myself and the women interviewed was also valuable. How did I help to shape the interview? It is possible that by appearing with newspaper clippings of strike battles, I actually encouraged Edith and Margaret to remember it as a conflictual event? And did my assumption that the important story was one of unionisation lead me to ignore the effect of the strike on young women marginalised from the union? Finally, the attempts of recent feminist (including post-structuralist) writing to challenge class reductionism encouraged me to contemplate how a woman's gendered and class identity is created within a number of discourses, possibly producing a contradictory and fragmented consciousness: women's understandings of the strike was shaped by more complex influences than predetermined notions of class conflict I had previously read into the event. Indeed, these strike stories evocatively point to the variability of working-class women's experiences, and the way in which - even in the crucible of conflict - working-class consciousness may be oppositional, accommodating, and even a mixture of both.

While these insights are useful, the narrative form and the construction of these women's identities must still be related to evidence from other historical sources. Some women's denial of conflict and violence, for instance, might have led me to conclude that the strike was less conflictual than subsequent history claimed; but I could not ignore the stark pictures of violence presented in the newspaper. Secondly, women's diverse understandings of the strike must be situated within the economic, social and political context of women's lives at this time.

The material structures of class and the dominant gender ideals, as well as women's struggles to deal with these realities, must also be used as interpretative frameworks. The social relations of power in the family and society, the economic limits and possibilities of women's lives, and their own reactions to those possibilities were all significant. All these women were expected to contribute to the family economy for basic survival; many were
subject to parental authority or lose the roof over their heads; and they were influenced by dominant political ideology which feared communism and radical union activity. Even their individual negotiations of these realities can be partly understood by looking at the possibilities that emerged from existing social constraints: some young women did not entirely agree with parents’ admonitions not to become involved, but they felt they had few choices as “there was none of this leaving home like there is today”. [59]

If we examine the power relations of age, gender, ethnicity and class, as well as the dominant gender ideals of the time, these apparently diverse stories assume more discernible patterns. Rosa, who crossed the picket line and has suppressed her recollections of her best friend’s different position, and in fact has constructed a life script stressing acceptance and achievement, is telling us something about her difficult status as a member of an ethnic minority in a WASP (white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant) city and her purposeful memory of her hard-won battle to achieve respectability in the workplace. Like other women interviewed, Rosa is also telling us how difficult it was for young women to contradict the power of parental authority.

Amelia’s preoccupation with her wedding reveals much about dominant gender ideals of the time which stressed women’s private, marital and family lives. The expectation that women would marry as a natural part of their life course was firmly embedded in Canadian culture at this time; [60] Amelia’s memories reflect the priority given to the ritual of marriage and investment in an ideal of domesticity as a fitting end to women’s time in the labour force. This is understood in many other interviews, including one where a woman remembered the “bittemess” [61] after the strike in only one way: she was denied the ritual wedding present by her fellow workers because she had crossed the picket line.

Perhaps the strength of these gender ideals helps to explain in part why some of the younger women like June did not remain interested in the union. At the same time, though, June’s testimony also speaks to the male-dominated, exclusive power relations of union politics. Younger women were not adequately integrated into the union, seldom informed of strategy or considered potential leaders; the result was their disinterest in the union. June’s story also made me aware of my tendency to view the motivations of women strikers through presentist glasses, and the need for a historical view of age differences and their meaning in different material and social contexts. The strikers were often teenagers: they were not women with immediately dependent families, older, with more workforce experience (except, significantly, the female leader) like those often visible in recent strikes. [62] I had to ask myself if I was ready for serious political commitment, or just out for a ‘heyday’ at 16? My answer made me cognisant of the importance of June’s age and position in the household in shaping her role in the strike.
Finally, the role of political ideology in shaping memory is also important: given June’s later emphasis on respect for authority and loyalty to mainstream political parties, apparent in her interview, her early union militancy might be more embarrassing than heroic. In a city where radicalism remains a fringe, not a respectable ideology, her dismissal of her early activism becomes quite comprehensible.

While June’s deprecation of the strike is thus understandable, Edith’s public support for the strike becomes all the more exceptional and interesting. Edith played an extraordinarily vocal and militant role in the conflict; she was often the only visible female leader in bargaining meetings dominated by men. Edith’s radical persona led to criticisms that she was ignoring her family and not acting with enough feminine decorum. This did not seem to deter her. Her assumption of a vocal and public role in the strike indicates that dominant gender ideals, though certainly influential, have also been challenged by some women. Those challenges emerge not only from the material and social context, but also from the exceptional character, courage and intellectual bravery of individual women. Though most clearly evidenced in Edith’s response, this courage was also a small part of many women’s willingness to take a public stand on the picket line.

Conclusion

My conclusions are shaped by both the moral stance of Denise Riley’s assertion that, in the interests of a feminist praxis, we must lay political claim to women’s experience of oppression,[63] and secondly, by a belief that poststructuralist insights must be situated in a feminist materialist context. While an emphasis on language and narrative form has enhanced our understanding of oral history, I worry about the dangers of emphasizing form over context, of stressing deconstruction of individual narratives over analysis of social patterns, of disclaiming our duty as historians to analyse and interpret women’s stories. Nor do we want to totally abandon the concept of experience, moving towards a notion of a depoliticised and ‘unknowable’ past. We do not want to return to a history which either obscures power relationships or marginalises women’s voices. Without a firm grounding of oral narratives in their material and social context, and a probing analysis of the relation between the two, insights on narrative form and on representation may remain unconnected to any useful critique of oppression and inequality.

A glimpse of the workplace after the strike brings us back to questions of social relations, power, and its effects. There was one reality that all the women agreed on: their working conditions did not improve after the strike. The union lost; industrial unions were defeated for some time in the city; and the status quo in labour/capital relations was reasserted. Women at the Bonnerworth were still earning less than the minimum wage for a 12-hour day; moreover, they immediately experienced a work speed up. I cannot
present such an ending without recourse to value judgements, moral outrage, and with a clear characterisation of class power and fixed notions of exploitation that some post-structuralist writing has rejected along with other elements of Marxism.

Women’s strike stories must be situated within social relations and structures of power which are real and “knowable”. We need to ask how these narratives reflect as well as shape women’s social and economic lives; why certain narratives emerge and take precedence; and who these particular scripts benefit. The experience of these women workers was not created out of many possible discourses, but out of a limited range of discourses which are the product of the power relations of class, ethnicity and gender, as well as people’s resistance to those relations. Moreover, women’s narratives do reflect certain knowable experiences, always mediated by cultural codes, which may in turn come to shape their interpretation of experience in a dialectical sense.

How we, as feminist oral historians, define experience and whether we think it is even a useful concept is central to this discussion. Locating experience, however difficult that project, however many dangers it encompasses, should remain one of our utopian goals. Otherwise, our feminist project of understanding and challenging inequality will always be one in which we gaze longingly through a distorted mirror, never able to make women whole again, but more important, never attempting to. Negating an understanding of experience as a ‘lived reality’ for women carries with it the danger of marginalising and trivialising women’s historical voices and their experiences (however varied) of oppression – a trivialisation which practising oral historians have heard only too often. If, as Joan Scott argues, we cannot really locate women’s experience because it lies within constructions of language and if women’s agency “is more wish than reality”, then will we not come to discount women’s agency as a force in history? While Margaret’s understanding of her resistance during the strike is couched in narrative of humour and disparagement, this does not negate her momentary courage in the face of many structural constraints: her attempt to remake her own and other women’s history should not be diminished in any way.

So, it is true that women’s stories of the strike appear dissimilar. Women have forgotten their role in the strike. Women tried to hide their role in it. Women only remember how it related to their wedding day. Women explained their role by saying they were young and frivolous. Women denied that there was any violence, and women remembered violence. But these narratives, rather than being simply contradictory and ambiguous, or individual representations of memory, are reflections of, and active rejections to women’s work and family experiences, dominant ideals of femininity, the existing power structures of capitalism and patriarchy, and sometimes even women’s resistance to those structures.
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Notes


[7] The term post-structuralist is an umbrella expression, actually referring to a number of theoretical positions. In this article I deal primarily with theories shaped by linguistic and deconstructive approaches, which explore the construction of subjectivity and cultural meaning through language. As Chris Weedon argues, these positions generally argue that "experience has no inherent essential meaning". See Chris Weedon (1987) Feminist Practice and Post-structuralist Theory, p. 34 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell).


[9] These warnings come from Grele, Envelopes of Sound.


[21] This conclusion, which is detailed elsewhere, is supported in an article on women teachers of this period which also uses oral histories. See Cecelia Reynolds (1990) Hegemony and hierarchy: becoming a teacher in Toronto, 1930-80, Historical Studies in Education, 2(1).

[22] Ruth Roach Pierson (1986) They’re Still Women After All: the second World War and Canadian womanhood (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart). For a popular Canadian book which stresses women’s positive memories see Jean
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Bruce (1985) Back the Attack! Canadian Women during the Second World War, at Home and Abroad (Toronto: Macmillan). For a scholarly discussion of women’s memories and how “women were changed by war work in subtle and private ways”, S. Gluck (1987) Rosie the Riveter Revisited: women, the war and social change, p. 269 (Boston: Twayne Publishers).

[23] See Grele, Envelopes of Sound, for a discussion of how notions of hegemony and ideology may be useful in analysing oral histories. On the use of hegemony see also Jackson Lears (1985) American Historical Review, 90(3).


[29] See Personal Narrative Group, Interpreting Women's Lives, p. 201, for the recommendation we replace “researcher-subject” with “life historian-producer”.


[31] Ibid.

[32] For example in Karen Olsen & Linda Shopes (1991) Crossing boundaries, building bridges: doing oral history with working-class women and men, in Gluck & Patai (Eds) Women’s Words, one author notes that she puts her working-class interviewees ‘at ease’ with a measure of self-disclosure: yet, the example she selects leaves me somewhat unsettled: “informants are more willing to reveal their own experience when they learn that I have shared many of the family problems that plague them - a father who was chronically unemployed, a son whose adolescent acting-out included run-ins with juvenile services, a trouble marriage that ended in divorce” (p. 194). Are there certain ‘assumptions’ about working-class life inherent in this statement? For a critique of proceedings from such assumptions about ‘representativeness’ see Geiger, What's so feminist about women's oral history?


[41] Indeed, some of these insights have been inspired by feminist writing. See Jane Flax (1987) Post modernism and gender relations in feminist theory, *Signs*; Linda Alcoff (1988) Cultural feminism versus poststructuralism, *Signs*, 13(3); Linda Gordon also points to way in which some 'new' insights of poststructuralism are not really very new in her review of Scott in (1990) *Signs*, 15(4). Her conclusion applies to the field of oral history.


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[44] Mascia-Lees et al (1989) The post-modernist turn in anthropology, *Signs*, 15(1). These authors are understandably sceptical of some post-modern theories implying that “verbal constructs (voices) do not relate to reality, that truth and knowledge are contingent, that no one subject position is possible” (p. 15) developed by Western, white academic men at precisely the moment these men are being challenged by women’s and Third World voices.


[52] Geiger (1990) What’s so feminist about women’s oral history?

[53] All quotes from Interview with Rosa, 2 August 1989.

[54] Ibid.


[56] Interview with Amelia, 29 August 1989.

[57] Interview with Edith, 26 June 1989.


[61] Interview with H.L., 29 August 1989.


[63] Riley (1988) *Am I That Name?*

[64] Louise Tilly (1989) Gender, women’s history, social history and deconstruction, p. 463.