When Your Sources Talk Back: Toward a Multimodal Approach to Scientific Biography

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Abstract. Interviewing offers the biographer unique opportunities for gathering data. I offer three examples. The emphatic bacterial geneticist Norton Zinder confronted me with an interpretation of Barbara McClintock’s science that was as surprising as it proved to be robust. The relaxed setting of the human geneticist Walter Nance’s rural summer home contributed to an unusually improvisational oral history that produced insights into his experimental and thinking style. And “embedding” myself with the biochemical geneticist Charles Scriver in his home, workplace, and city enabled me to experience the social networks that drive the practical events of his career, which in turn helped me explain the theoretical basis of his science. Face-to-face interaction and multisensory experience will shape each biographer’s experience uniquely. Recent developments in sensory physiology suggest that the experience of integrating sense data encourages different patterns of observation and reflection. It is reasonable, then, to think that biography based on face-to-face interviews will, for a given author, have a different character than one based entirely on documents. I reflect on how interviewing shapes my own writing and I encourage the reader to do the same.

Keywords: oral history, interviewing, biography, Barbara McClintock, Norton Zinder, Walter Nance, Charles Scriver

Context as Primary Source

Of course, it is possible to research a biography in silence. Mute documents and introspection are ample sources for an insightful, clarifying life story. But those of us who write the lives of contemporaries potentially have access to noisy, rich, complex sources unavailable to biographers of the long-dead: the subject herself and those who have
known her. Their heads are filled with memories of several kinds. Many could be written down but aren’t. Some of these, lightly bound, are easily skimmed off consciousness’s surface – all that keeps them unwritten is the effort required to narrate them. Others are so impacted they must be tweezed out by a skilled practitioner, armed with a sharp set of questions. But there are other historical data that are not simply left out of the written record by accident. There are data that do not exist until you, the interviewer, come along. Some are memories, some are observations. They do not sit, waiting to be discovered and interpreted, like a letter in a box in an archive. They are made, through the interaction of researcher and interview subject. This is risky territory. To think about interviewing and biography, then, is to reflect on the relation of speaking and listening to writing, and about the observation of the present as a clue to the meanings of the past.¹

A couple of things make face-to-face presence special. First, there is the orality of the process. As different as reading someone’s letters is from reading her memoir, in neither case did your source know that you were going to read that document. When I talk to someone face to face, he addresses me personally – even though he may be aware that he is speaking for posterity. My questions, vocalizations, facial expressions, and posture shape the story – and do so differently for each person I interview. If I show interest, the story becomes embellished with detail; if my eyes flick to the clock, the narrative diffuses and dies. I may prompt him toward one interpretation of the story, or trigger details of the story he would not otherwise have remembered. Such influences may be deliberate or not. Without question, this kind of intimacy with one’s sources poses risks – foremost being the hazard of sympathy, “feeling with” the subject and thereby losing the disinterest crucial to good scholarship. Yet these are risks, not fatal flaws. As contemporary oral historians recognize, far from making interview material impossible to interpret, this complexity is where the interpretive meat falls from the bone.²

And then, this rich source sits in the midst of meaning. The folklorist Alessandro Portelli makes much of the etymology of “interview” (Portelli, 1990, pp. 31–32). He takes it literally, as a “mutual sighting” – an exchange, not a unidirectional downloading of statements from

¹ For a more systematic treatment of the functions of scientific biography, with an emphasis on scientists currently or recently alive, see Söderqvist, 2006.

² For an introduction, see the excellent collection Perks and Thomson, 2006. Of particular interest are Thompson, “The voice of the past: oral history” (pp. 25–31); Portelli, “What makes oral history different?” (pp. 32–42; also in Portelli, 1990); and Yow, “Do I like them too much”: effects of the oral history interview on the interviewer and vice versa” (pp. 54–72).