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Living with other women's lives: 'research resonance' in the context of life history interviewing

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the ways researchers are affected by their engagement with the stories they encounter in research. It proposes the notion of 'research resonance' to capture the experience of living with research participants' stories, and by extension, their lives. The article draws on data collected for the 'Girlhood and Later Life' project, which investigated youth experiences and transitions to adulthood of women born between 1939 and 1952 in Britain. Reflecting on examples from a music elicitation exercise and life history narratives, the researchers on this project explore and conceptualise their experience of living with 'sociological memories'. Their accounts address how life history researchers may be challenged or affected on a personal level through their professional practice. The article concludes by outlining the key implications of 'research resonance' for the craft of analysing life-course interviews.

Introduction: Penny Tinkler

If you were a fly on the wall when Laura, Luciana and I meet up, you would be forgiven for thinking we were part of a large network of acquaintances and friends outside our shared work context of the university. Even when we are not meeting to talk about the 'Girlhood and Later Life' project, we still refer to the experiences of many of the women we have come to 'know' through it. This is not surprising. The 'Girlhood and Later Life' project, on which I was Principal Investigator, had a substantial interview component. Sociologist, Laura Fenton, was Research Associate on the project 2018–2021 and interviewed 46 of the 70 participants in the study while Luciana Lang, an anthropologist by training, joined the project in 2020 initially to code the full set of 70 interviews.[1] The legacies of a project such as this are not only the academic publications, the skills learnt and honed, the 'impacts' of public engagement initiatives. They also include how researchers are transformed in a myriad of small ways as fragments of

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interviewees' stories become part of their knowledge base but also, as Luciana and Laura describe, deeply embedded in, and entwined with, the researcher's personal experiences and memories, sometimes becoming a counterpoint through which to assess their own life experience.

Feminist oral historians have transformed how we understand the dynamic between researcher and interviewee in the context of the oral history interview with refined insights into intersubjectivity that now inform mainstream approaches to historical interviews.[2] As Lynn Abrams explains of oral history interviews, 'there can be no pretence at neutrality or objectivity'.[3] The longer-term implications for interviewers are, however, less often considered. And, of course, a researcher's engagement with interviewees' accounts can extend beyond the interview and include reading and coding transcripts. It was the potency of these different sorts of engagements with interviewees that led Luciana and Laura to want to write reflexively about their experiences – the 'after affects' – and, in doing this, to better understand the ways they had been moved and changed by working on the project.

The ESRC-funded 'Girlhood and Later Life' project aimed to investigate key experiences and transitions to adulthood of young women, aged 15–24, in Britain 1954–1976 and to explore the relationship between the youth of these women and their later-life experiences and identities in the twenty-first century. The study was interdisciplinary, addressing both historical and sociological agendas. Interviews with 70 women recruited from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) were a key feature; other components included archival research, quantitative analysis of ELSA data, and exploration, using both quantitative and qualitative methods, of Britain's first national birth cohort study established in 1946.[4] Our sample included women from across the social classes, and from a diverse range of work and family circumstances, who grew up in urban and rural localities in England, Wales and Scotland. From 2018 until early 2020 we conducted two interviews with each participant on their youth and later life; these took place across a day, typically lasting around five hours in total. These interviews were interspersed with various creative elicitation techniques.[5] One – a music elicitation – involved asking participants in advance of meeting us to identify two or three pieces of music that they listened to in their youth. We played these music choices at the beginning of the youth interview and explored the moments that they brought to mind. Through the combination of interview and elicitation methods, we sought to explore, but also go beyond, well-rehearsed narratives about youth and later life. The blend of techniques proved successful in generating rich data and maintaining the engagement of our interviewees.

Describing how they are affected and 'transformed' by reading and listening to accounts of these women's lives, Luciana and Laura draw inspiration from *The Craft of Knowledge*, particularly Carol Smart's reflections on 'living with other people's lives'.[6] Drawing on Eva Hoffman's concept of a 'cargo of knowledge' – insights gleaned from the lives of others – Smart argues that interviewees' voices create 'layers … which sediment in memory': these form 'sociological memories' that can be a resource for analysing social and personal life.[7] Sociological memories, it could be argued, are not the preserve of 'sociologists' but, more broadly, the personal analytic sensibilities that all who work closely with accounts of the lives of others can nurture and value. Of course, this only happens if researchers are mindful of how their own experiences become entangled with, and inflected by, those of interviewees.

Reflecting on, and unravelling, their personal experiences of research encounters, Laura and Luciana identify some of the distinctive characteristics of working closely with life histories and the insights that emerge from using music elicitation in an oral history context. They eloquently describe intimate and immersive experiences that are sometimes prompted unexpectedly by a detail that reverberates with them, akin to what Roland Barthes calls a punctum – a detail that 'pricks' us and is poignant.[8] They illustrate how particular research encounters animate and inflect their personal memories. Teasing out, and conceptualising, the temporal complexities that characterise the potency of their experiences they offer ways of explaining the almost magical affects; for Luciana the concept of 'engram' proves fruitful while Laura turns to the phenomenon of 'déjà vu'. In the 'Girlhood and Later Life' project we developed the concept of 'resonance' to convey how aspects of an interviewee's youth were *lived with* in later life; resonances are not simply remembered or articulated accounts of the past but 'how aspects of youth seemingly create ripples across biographical and historical time that are reconstructed, animated, experienced, felt, interpreted, imagined and mobilised in the present' of later life.[9] The experiences Laura and Luciana delve into can productively be conceptualised as 'research resonance';[10] this occurs when the past experiences of interviewees are *lived with* in the present by the researcher. There are challenges involved in working closely with women's life histories as other feminist researchers from across the disciplines have noted.[11] There are times when Laura and Luciana find it difficult to maintain empathic neutrality. At other times when their boundaries feel porous, they wonder whose experiences are the source of their personal feelings and thoughts and are intensely aware of what they have in common with the women who participated in the project.

Sharing their personal experiences and perspectives, Luciana and Laura contribute insights into the dynamics of working closely with women's life stories and stimulate reflection on the lesser discussed ways that life history researchers grow through their practice. While there is an expanding methodological literature on the ethical, relational and affective dimensions of 'leaving the field' in ethnographic and longitudinal research contexts, including more recent reflections on 'staying', what we have termed 'research resonance' in oral history and qualitative interview research contexts remains relatively under-theorised.[12] Yet, like the topic of leaving the field, research resonance matters for our practice in historical, sociological and anthropological contexts and for our lives beyond research. It also has important implications for how we teach our craft, support and supervise our students, and mentor research associates. With this article, then, we hope to lay the groundwork for wider consideration and reflection on how researchers develop and live with 'sociological memories' and, more broadly, the resonances of other people's lives. In what follows we look first at Luciana's reflections before turning to Laura's. In this way, we foreground how each researcher has worked through their experiences of research resonance. In the conclusion, I reflect on the broad implications of their reflections for research analysis in the future.

Reflections I: Luciana Lang

I came into the 'Girlhood and Later Life' project towards its final stages to do a thematic coding of the interviews. It took me an average of six hours to code each woman's life

story, but as I was involved with this project part-time, the job was spread over five months. The process turned out to be an intimate and immersive journey, which at times felt like a rollercoaster as I dived in and out of all those unique and incredible lives. My responses to this intimate sharing were undoubtedly coloured by the intersecting characteristics related to my positionality: an older female researcher, born and raised in Brazil, who practices empathy as an intrinsic part of social research training. Having spent half of my sixty years in England, my life experiences are evenly divided between the two countries. That means that I perceive Britishness and its cultural markers as both familiar and strange. This allowed me to grasp the excitement of witnessing fast cultural and technological transformations; but also to distance myself enough to appreciate the singularity of being a young woman in 1960s Britain with all the contextual particularities it entailed, including the National Health Service's free healthcare, changing gender roles, and new ways of dressing up.

In this reflective piece, I describe how at times the effect of these stories could only be described as 'overwhelming', as though those strangers had touched an affective part of my being. As I started talking to and hearing from peer researchers working with life-course interviews, I realised I was not alone. Carol Smart observes how some fragments of stories 'haunt' the researcher while others lie dormant until they may re-emerge unexpectedly. She refers to this kind of memory baggage left by the accumulated data about the lives of others as a 'cargo of knowledge' and lingering of the past. Smart also notes how the researcher 'amalgamates' fragments of life stories following a subjective reasoning, however inseparable they are from the contexts that bore them.[13]

The chronotope and the engram

Two related concepts, albeit from different disciplinary areas, helped me process the effect those narratives had on me: the chronotope, as used by the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin; and the engram, as used by the English novelist Alan Garner. Interested as he was in how time and space appear in discourse, Bakhtin[14] used the concept of the chronotope to refer to a spatio-temporal whole in his analysis of literary genres. While Bakhtin's definition of the concept is elusive, it suffices to say for the purpose of this analysis, that space and time are interconnected and that space becomes 'responsive to the movements of time, plot and history'.[15] In the literary genre, time and space are embedded in the concrete experiences of the characters, rather than being abstract concepts rooted in physics. As a unit of analysis, the chronotope emerges from Bakhtin's broader exploration of how meaning is created in the dialogical process that encompasses the author, the story and the reader/listener, and which is inseparable from the cultural context that informs the way language is used. For Bakhtin, the ways that space responds to time in a narrative helps to define the literary genre, for example, a historical novel or a biography. Filmmakers have applied the concept to characterise films according to genre but I am making an argument that the chronotope can be used as an analytical lens to explore the way participants assessed their lives in life-course interviews. Interviewees, who are the authors of their stories, systematically observed the benefits of hindsight, sensing the present as a place/time unit of privileged observation that enables life assessment and grants meaning to the random ways their life trajectories were sketched out. Through attentive listening, a core part of our training, the researcher also enters this

spatio-temporal whole. Moreover, the concept of the chronotope applied to memory helps me to understand the relationship between context and emotion, researcher and researched, and the features of social research as a genre.

As for the engram, I first came across the term while reading *Inner Time*, an essay by Alan Garner, where he narrates how a particular episode in his adult life triggered the replay of a trauma.[16] The engram also appeared in his novel *The Owl Service*, where he shows, without telling, the emotional power of such cognitive imprint. In the story, different people in different temporalities share personal experiences that are weaved through the tales of the *Mabinogion*, a compilation of Welsh stories transmitted through oral tradition dating back to the 12th–13th centuries.[17] The Welsh legend of Blodeuwedd, a mythical woman created from flowers, is awakened by three teenagers in the late 1960s. The trigger for this 'awakening' is what Garner describes as an engram, a kind of imprint of trauma that can be potentially reactivated in a transpersonal manner. Life experiences are thus shared across time and between unconnected actors. The implication for Garner, is that material and sensory signs, like the image of an owl in his novel, can trigger an emotional experience in someone unrelated. Music is a particularly powerful conduit for activating an engram: 'We reconstitute whole events from a line of Mozart', he suggests.[18] Thus, the replay of an engram can trigger a disappointment, a joyful moment, or a traumatic family episode. I suggest that fragments of the accounts I read over the course of five months had the effect of engrams: they made me laugh, cry, wonder, and worry. I could not help but make constant and unsettling comparisons between the lives of those women and mine. While time and space separated me from the women whose stories I was reading, given that my adolescence was in Brazil a decade after most interviewees (I was born in 1962 rather than in the 1950s), I did feel the ripple effects of 1960s cultural revolution when I was a teenager. The political context of Brazil, locked into a military dictatorship that put an end to a progressive government two years after I was born, also meant that Brazilian music had to use encoded language to speak about the atrocities being committed against the revolutionary youth. In that scenario, music from the United States of America that openly opposed the Vietnam War, and from the United Kingdom, which celebrated the psychedelic experience of heightened perception, was voraciously consumed by Brazilian teenagers in the 1970s. So, I knew many of the songs that had been carefully selected by our interviewees as the soundtrack of their youth.

Music and embodied memories

As I sat down in front of my computer to read the transcripts of approximately 350 hours of interviews, the songs selected by the women opened a window into the life of each of our 70 interviewees. Anthropologists are trained to walk in the shoes of their research participants, but early books of the discipline stress that we must never become 'native' because that would jeopardise research findings. Yet upon reflection, I felt that these strangers' memories reverberated through my real-time and place-based experience and informed my own life assessment. This was particularly true during the music elicitation exercise as the women drew on the benefits of hindsight to evaluate their lives. The youngest of the women chosen for the sample, those born in 1952, were only ten years older than myself, which prompted me to reflect on how I would soon share their 'privileged' point

of view when most of one's life is inevitably behind. Interviewees were asked in advance to choose three favourite songs that chimed with their experiences of being a young woman. The interview started with a conversation on why they chose these three songs. The interviewer's strategy of playing the song on their mobile phone prompted me to also listen to the songs whilst reading the women's descriptions that flowed from that exchange, a technique that enabled me to 'get into their shoes' more easily.

It soon became clear that the music elicitation exercise triggered a reflective and reflexive mechanism in the interviewee, tapping directly into the sensory mode and apparently bypassing the conscious level. As can be seen in the following extracts, quite a few women talked about the clothes they were wearing when asked to explain why they had chosen a certain song. Descriptions were of a sensory nature, for example, describing the type of skirts they wore, as though the songs awakened in their memories the experience of being in their younger bodies, not unlike the engram from Alan Garner's stories. This embodied experience was probably enhanced by the fact that most young women made their own clothes, so that they were both creators of that second skin whilst also having the memory of wearing that creation with their young bodies. Born in 1941, Petunia spent her early childhood in a large northern city, moving to a village when she started secondary school. As she listened to her chosen track, Bill Haley's 'Rock around the clock', she described how her skirts were cut from a big circle of material:

> You got a big circle, and you cut a hole in, and you put a waistband on, and that was your circular skirt for your rock and roll.

Petunia remembers making sugar water starch to put on petticoats before going on holiday to Mallorca to then find her sugar-coated underskirts crawling with ants. Her rock and roll skirts also featured in a memorable date:

> It was in the days when you put all these skirts, all these net things under your skirts. And he had this Lambretta, and he's not changed much, he's a mucky old thing, he never cleaned this Lambretta. So, I used to sit on the back, with my big skirt, and then had a ride, and it was going all black inside, because it was so dirty.

In the excerpts above, Petunia describes her memories of youth as embodied experiences of cutting cloth, sensing dust, and being stunned by the vision of ants consuming her hand-made sugar-sweet petticoat. Vanessa also remembers her petticoats in an evocative account of her Saturday nights, and had also picked Bill Haley's 'Rock around the clock'. Born in 1941 and the only child in a lower middle-class family, Vanessa attended a girls' grammar but she 'wasn't very academic' and left at 16:

> It was great, it was great. I loved those frilly petticoats. I mean we had them for years, and I remember when I was at college, and I had to live in a YWCA hostel, my dad insisted on it. And, I climbed out of a window one night, and these petticoats were about six feet you know, in diameter around the bottom, and the ribbon caught on the little hook on the window and it pulled, and it pulled and it pulled. Do you know how many hours it took me to sew it back? A long time. So, all the ribbon had come off the bottom of my petticoat, and I had to sew it all back.

The accounts above made me smile, but many others made me acutely aware that the imprint of personal and historical experiences can linger far beyond one's comfort

zone: the turning point decisions we all make, and the life-time realisations that regrets about what we did or failed to do are both inevitable and pointless. At the start of every interview I felt a sudden rush of excitement to listen to yet another life lesson by a wiser-because-older woman as though I could also take some of those words of wisdom into my approaching later life.

Whilst doing my job of coding the interviews I was constantly thinking back to my girlhood experiences: the excitement of dancing and meeting boys, the first boyfriend, the first sexual experience, my position in relation to other schoolgirls, being aware of my social class, as though I inhabited a parallel level of consciousness. I was taken aback by how unpredictable and contradictory people are: a shy woman with unadventurous spirit who suddenly decides to travel cross-country on a moped at the age of 16; another who attended church religiously and who went on to have a string of affairs while married; idyllic childhoods leading to feelings of inferiority; privileged upbringings hindering mature decision-making because life is 'too easy'. Each time, I was thrown into a life that geographically and temporally differed completely from my own, but the song worked as an engram triggering a collective and affective dimension that surpassed idiosyncrasies. The women's description of their embodied experiences made an imprint in my psychic, triggering my own memories. While every life seemed to be underlined with contradictions, listening to the selected songs helped me enter a psychic empathy zone, a chronotope-like place/time unit which, I suggest characterises the social research genre.

The creative methods used in the 'Girlhood and Later Life' project and the semi-structured day-long interviews, helped create a common ground between researcher and researched. The exercise of music elicitation unveiled feelings that participants were sometimes unable to verbalise. Too close to see what was distinctive about their generation, they revealed through their sensory memory what was not expressed at the conscious level. Thus, the way they were dressed connoted having fun; noticing the dirty petticoat reminded them of feeling free. The youth culture they struggled to articulate was there in a highly descriptive manner when they allowed their senses to speak. That was the effect those snippets of songs associated with the women's youth had on them; as for me, the researcher, music elicitation had a double effect: it worked as a direct gateway into the women's sensory memory, and it tapped into my own sensory experience. In brief, the analysis of life-course interviews has the potential of producing a particular genre within social research. Each narrative opened a new chronotope – elicited in the dialogical encounter between interviewee, researcher, and the story being told – a temporal–spatial unit that turned story-teller and listener/reader into decades-long accomplices.

Reflections II: Laura Fenton

Research participants' stories can become layers of consciousness in the minds of researchers.[19] Whether in the archive, listening to stories in interviews, or conducting ethnography, the images, words, and sensations of fieldwork become woven into our consciousness, flickering in and out, filtering how we sense the world. I can't walk down certain streets in London without remembering a young Welsh trainee nurse who lived there for a time in the 1960s. The matron at the nurses' home who threw water from a watering can on her balcony onto unsuspecting courting couples as they kissed goodnight below. The visits to Regent Street with a wealthy relative to buy clothes. The greasy burger bar

in Piccadilly Circus. Nor can I forget the story about a nurse on duty when a shy, light-haired 18-year-old gave birth to a baby she would only know for a short time before the arranged adoption took place. Hungry and nearing the end of a long shift, the nurse asked if she could eat the bacon sandwich that the 18 year-old didn't want. The nurse looked both ways and then scoffed the sandwich quickly before anyone could see – a simple, unassuming act that led the 18 year-old to train as a nurse herself.

When your job is to study the lives of others, their stories become layers of your own story, refracting light on your own experiences and adding voices – be they footnotes, digressions, or imperatives – to the chorus of your internal monologue. In the course of listening to 46 women recount their life histories for the 'Girlhood and Later Life' project, their stories became part of my collection of memories, and thus a part of me. In what follows, I reflect on some of the specific characteristics of life history interviewing, including the temporal and affective dimensions of the method, its relationship to déjà vu and hindsight, and then turn to moments of discomposure, humour and empathy. I focus on some of the stories and scenes from research encounters that have left a mark on me, that have changed me as a person in some way, in the hope that others will understand what it is like to live with women's stories long after the audio-recorder is switched off. But before all of that, a brief introduction to who I am is in order.

The interviewer

An interview is a 'conversation with a purpose'.[20] The identity and subjectivity of the interviewer matter. What follows inevitably only captures fragments, but here goes: I was born in Canada to an American mother and a British father. I spent some of my childhood and teenage years living in Latin America, before moving to United Kingdom at 19, where I have spent most of the past twenty-five years. In certain respects, I came to the interviews as an 'outsider': I was two to three decades younger than participants, and from a different country. I was difficult to locate in terms of social class on the basis of accent alone. However, there were limits to my outsider status: I'm White, from an English-speaking province of a White settler-colonial country, with a set of British grandparents. Like Luciana, I perceive Britishness and its cultural markers as both familiar and strange. I tried to position myself as a polite visitor, one who was gently curious to learn about their lives. Among the mothers in the sample, I often felt myself gently ushered into the position of one of their children's peers, one who they didn't know too well, with a slightly obscure background. When a participant and I went to a café in her village for lunch half-way through the interview and bumped into one of her son's friends, I felt an uncanny sense of identification with him. With hindsight, this was because we occupied a similar position in relation to the participant.

Above all else, as an interviewer I sought to listen and to understand. Sometimes this meant minimising my own presence, while at other times – as I explore further later on below – this wasn't possible.

Déjà vu and hindsight in the research encounter

The culminative and recursive nature of life history interviewing is a defining feature of the method. Familiarity and intimacy build up over time between the interviewee and

interviewer, as people, places, and moments encountered at one point in the life story re-emerge later in a different form, often with an altered significance and stronger affective reverberations. Here, I draw on Wetherell's[21] understanding of affect as a 'hit' to the senses, one that lies just beyond the edges of recognisable and classifiable emotions. Freeman's work on 'time binds', summarised eloquently in a recent blog by Rachel Thomson,[22] also helps us to understand the 'hit' of déjà vu in the research encounter. As Thomson explains, time binds are 'connections between past and present that facilitate antinarrative leaps across time'. They 'involve mimetic connections with affective resonance', leading to a sense of 'belated understanding', an imaginary reliving of the potentialities of the past.

The experience of déjà vu is embedded in the fabric of the method. The life history interview is spiral shaped. In this sense, the method mimes the feel of life itself. Let me illustrate with an example. Suzanne's dry, self-deprecating sense of humour had me laughing for much of the five hours we spent together in her seaside town on a grey November day in 2019. Suzanne's mother died when Suzanne was twelve. Asked toward the end of the interview if there was anything important in her life we hadn't yet discussed, Suzanne reflects:

> People dying […] has a big emotional impact not just [in terms of] the person that's just died, but it also brings up the feelings you had about other people that have died previously. It kind of seems to, I don't know, revisit old wounds or whatever somehow. It's kind of cumulative […] the emotion becomes cumulative. I hate funerals. […] I can remember all too vividly having to go to my mother's funeral when I was 12. And that was just awful. It was just your worst nightmare.

While Suzanne focusses on the potent experience of living through the deaths of others, her words also characterise the recursive and additive nature of other life experiences. Experiences in the present carry with them traces of previous iterations of similar moments, like a fresh layer of sediment on a known patch of land. Déjà vu is a familiar sensation for a reason. You *have* been here before, only last time the staircase you were climbing felt a little broader.

If déjà vu is an eery feeling, or hit, of connection across two or more points in time, hindsight is a form of temporal disconnection, or dissonance. In other words, if déjà vu involves identification with past selves anchored in distinct moments in time, hindsight fosters alterity, albeit a form of alterity that is often laced with sympathy for a naïve past self. Hindsight is experienced as 'out of time', but it is in time. The women often judged themselves by standards of academic achievement and career success that were not within the reach of many working- and middle-class young women of their generation. 'A bad workman blames his tools', Jane replied when I suggested that the post-war education system had let her down. Regrets can be painful, unbearable even. Regrets were often pushed away, deflected onto faceless monoliths like 'Fate'.

Discomposure

Composure has a double meaning in oral history: it refers to the composition of narratives about the past, and a feeling of ease and comfort that can arise in the process of composition.[23] Composure is not always possible to maintain. As Summerfield explains, a 'particular terrain of memory or line of enquiry, or an uncomprehending and

unsympathetic response from an audience, may produce discomposure, that is personal disequilibrium, manifest in confusion, anger, self-contradiction, discomfort and difficulties of sustaining a narrative'.[24] While Summerfield focuses on interviewees' experiences of discomposure, feelings of unease, frustration, and so forth may emerge in interviewers as well, as they go about the business of listening and responding sensitively to the stories they are told.

Like many women today, lots of women growing up in the 1950s and '60s experienced sexual violence. One of my earliest interviews was with a woman called Daisy. Daisy grew up in working-class family in a village in southern England, moving in her late twenties to the Midlands town in which the interview took place. Other than the short-lived marriage that had brought her to the Midlands town, Daisy had spent much of her life as a single woman. Owning a car meant that she could enjoy a busy social life, including sexual encounters with men she met at pubs and dance halls. Toward the end of the interview, she raised the issue of the 'Me Too' movement.[25] She said she thought women ought not to re-open old wounds. There was no point. In her words:

> I can't really understand what the women are saying now when they're talking about 30 odd years ago/40 years ago this happened, and I'm thinking 'well why do you let that play on your mind and be a problem to you all these years?', because it hasn't to me, so is it to do with my confidence, independence, I don't know.

It emerged that some of these sexual encounters had turned violent. Daisy saw this as one of the risks she had taken. No one had punched her, she reasoned. When situations had gotten sticky, she had, in her words, 'wilily' found a way out. What was all the fuss about?

What was at stake in allowing someone who could no longer change the past the luxury of maintaining a script in which she was heroine rather than survivor? In a sense, nothing. The danger lies, however, in the regressive views expressed toward women who are currently seeking redress for past injustices. Bearing witness to such accounts builds up tension over time, a weight felt in the pit of the stomach. Nearly a year later I was back in the Midlands to interview another woman. Unlike Daisy, Marie had never experienced sexual violence, or at least never discussed this. As a 16-year-old she worked in an office attached to a factory, a job she enjoyed. Asked if men in her workplace ever made sexual advances, she replies:

> Marie: Oh yeah, yeah. Course they did. That was part of the … part of life. I'll tell you what they used to do, because I worked, as I say, it was in the factory, the office was. Well you had to walk through the factory to get to the other end. And these lads were making these hoses. And they used this acid stuff to do the hoses with. And if you walked through and you weren't quick enough, they used to run their hand up your leg and disintegrate your stockings.
>
> Laura: Oh jeez! [said with surprise] So just basically come up to you and rub your leg like that.
>
> Marie: Yeah, well it was nothing was it. You just had to be quick.
>
> Laura: So you had to run through … but that must have been – as a 16 year old girl, that must have been quite intimidating. […]
>
> Marie: I never felt intimidated. No. They would never go any, you know, it wasn't a … What can I say. It wasn't anything sexual, or intimidating, or … It was just a prank. […]

Laura: I just thought, I don't think I'd like men touching my legs. I don't know. But you just sort of took it.

Marie: It's nothing. It's nothing. It was nothing.

Marie's interview came after quite a few interviews in which acts that over more recent decades have become redefined as forms of sexual harassment were discussed and shrugged off. As time went on, a knot tightened in my stomach and when Marie relayed her story above I discomposed in momentary frustration.

Into the funhouse: humour, empathy and the story-teller as clown

Discomposure was a rare response in interviews; curiosity, laughter and joy were far more common. Returning to the theme of déjà vu, some stories had a familiar ring to them, drawing as they did on well-worn tropes and narrative structures. Here, I explore how humour is not only key to the affective character of life history interviewing, but also how it is deeply tied to its ethics.

Resembling the actor Goldie Hawn in both appearance and demeanour, Beverly featured as the clown figure in most of her stories. The odd one out in her family, when she and her sisters held their mother's favourite flower at her mother's funeral – a carefully staged symbolic gesture designed to be poignant – Beverly's flower drooped and fell off the stem. She laughed about this and wore her outsider status in the family like a shiny pendant. Clumsy by nature, she had many stories about getting things wrong in the workplace. As a dinner lady, she was once told that the roast beef dinners had to 'go out'. She took this to mean outside and into the bin. When it transpired that it meant 'out' to the children, she had to rescue the mangled roast beef and Yorkshire puddings, dust them off, and serve them to the waiting children.

In her book on mothers in the fiction of Alice Munro, Magdalene Redekop[26] argues that the mother-as-clown figure mediates the tension between compassion and irony. Drawing on Redekop's argument, we can see how speaking from a place of compassion feels irksome in an age intensely aware of how compassion is used to evoke emotion. Compassion is molasses: syrupy sweet. Irony, on the other hand, is a cave of mirrors. Irony is the mocking buzz-cut bully in tight jeans and a letterman jacket in American films. While Redekop is writing specifically about Munro's stories, the idea bears fruit when we look at women's clowning around in their own stories, whether this is as mothers or not. Like Munro's miming, juggling clown-mothers, who try to calm children by mirroring back amusing versions of unhappy realities, Beverly's antics draw the listener into a position of knowing empathy. Her vulnerabilities are exposed and we laugh along. She tells the joke rather than letting herself be the joke. The would-be bully in anyone sits back and listens. In listening to comical stories in research encounters, the interviewer is momentarily ushered into the role of child: listening, dutifully, while smiling.

Composing oneself as a clown can be an act of mercy performed by the teller for the listener. The nurse who scoffed the bacon sandwich performs a similar function to Munro's mothering clowns in the story told by the woman who was once a shy, light-haired 18–year-old. Alone in a hospital that was miles from her parents' home, she had stayed with an uncle and his erratic wife in the months preceding the birth so that people known to the family wouldn't find out about the pregnancy. The nurse hastily devouring the bacon sandwich in her strict, Victorian workplace was more

than a moment of comic relief. By eating in front of our protagonist she not only took her into her confidence but in so doing treated her like a human being. Such treatment was in short supply at that moment.

Déjà vu or déjà you?

In another story with a similar plot structure to that of the light-haired 18-year-old, it wasn't a nurse who displayed something bordering on kindness but a cleaner, relaying a message: 'I'm not supposed to tell you but your dad's rung to see if you're alright.' Despite the cleaner's measured act of kindness, I couldn't compose myself after hearing of how the nurses and other mothers had treated this protagonist, Jade, a 17-year-old working-class girl who had spent the preceding months in one of her region's last operating mother and baby homes. My strong response to Jade's story occurred for at least two reasons. Firstly, her account of how she was treated in hospital built on her earlier account of how she had nearly managed to tell her boyfriend, the baby's father, about the pregnancy, but a delayed train meant that this never occurred. The emotions from the drama of that story, the 'what if's?' it had raised, plus her account of her time in the mother's home, mopping the floors like a heavily pregnant Cinderella figure, percolated beneath the surface of our dialogue. When she then relayed how the nurses and other mothers had never spoken to her, it all became too much. I was transported back to my own memories of the fear of being treated that way, as an 'unwed mother' myself, and I snapped. Before I knew what was happening, my chin was wobbling and hot tears were sliding down my face. I sobbed uncontrollably for a minute or so – something I've never done in an interview before or since. This was despite considerable differences in both historical and personal context.

It became apparent that it is not only in walking down certain streets in London that the lives and stories of interviewees are reanimated; their stories also become a lens for re-encountering one's own past, a basis to evaluate one's experiences. It gave me a glimpse of how my experience of pregnancy and childbirth could have gone if it had been set four decades earlier. As the story and its attendant emotions grew over time, this was not so much a cognitive understanding, but an understanding from the inside out; an understanding from a position of strong identification with the story-teller. And perhaps that is another defining feature of the life history interview: we not only see the past in some of the colour in which it was lived, we feel like we lived parts of it too.

Concluding thoughts: the implications of research resonance for research analysis

This article explores the 'after-affects' of research encounters that occurred in the 'Girlhood and Later Life' project: the sociological memories and research resonances. But what are the broader implications for research analysis?

Research diaries, field notes, post-interview reflections: these are the usual ways that we document and reflect on the context and experience of doing life history research. The purpose of this is to allow the interviewer to situate herself in the research and to inform analysis of the interviews they have undertaken. Attuned to intersubjectivity in interview analysis, Natasha Mauthner and Andrea Doucet outline a strategy to 'lay

down evidence of our responses for others to see' because 'intellectual and emotional reactions to other people constitute sources of knowledge'.[27] Similarly, we look to our responses for insight and to develop strategies for research analysis.

Luciana and Laura's reflections suggest that we need to expand how we think about analysis. The implications of their experiences are that in working with familiar stories we need to be mindful of how sociological memories and resonances focus our attentions, shape or skew our priorities, and inform and inflect analysis including our interpretations. Reflexivity is relevant in diverse aspects of how we work with research materials, including how the original interviewer and other members of a research team revisit, navigate and work with the data archive.[28] We also need to extend the duration of our reflections. Building on Carol Smart's insights, this article illustrates that relationships with data about other people's lives can inform ongoing and future analysis within a particular project not least because research resonance is dynamic and fluid. The after-affects of these relationships can also colour how we respond to, and make sense of, lives and stories encountered in parallel and subsequent research contexts, as well as how we engage with experiences in our own lives.

Research resonance is not exclusive to women interviewing women, although shared gendered experiences – in this instance of growing up, ageing and becoming mothers – amplified possibilities for it to occur. Reflecting on experiences of resonance suggests that gender differences, indeed other social differences between interviewees and researchers, will be significant for how resonance is experienced: the forms it takes; the specific details that resonate; how, if at all, it becomes a lens for the researcher to review their own life and to become aware of aspects that transcend gender specificities. Empathy underpins most of the relationships that Laura and Luciana describe, but we also see moments where this is challenged, as in Laura's frustrated response to Daisy's seemingly casual dismissal of sexual violence. Women's stories can linger, but not all resonances are comfortable or welcome. Researchers do not choose what aspects of an interviewees' story resonates and what this feels like; a point that will undoubtedly be familiar to those who research personal testimonies of trauma[29] and who encounter stories coloured by discriminatory and hate-based thinking and behaviour.[30]

There is something cathartic in writing, and talking, about how we are affected by the stories of other women's lives. Research encounters are, however, also an opportunity for analytical development (cf. Mauthner and Doucet). Laura and Luciana do not simply describe what has marked them but attempt to make sense of how they have been affected, and how particular research methods and techniques create conditions for affects to flow. They seek to understand what this suggests about the dynamics of working closely with other people's lives. They identify distinctive temporal and affective features of life history interviewing which can lead to different sorts of affect during research encounters (doing interviews, reading and coding transcripts) and often long after. Collectively, our reflections will hopefully sensitize others to the after-affects of research encounters and their potential as a tool for going forward.

Notes

1. Resto Cruz was RA on the project 2018–2019 and interviewed 24 women.
2. Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Routledge, 2010).

3. Ibid., 54.
4. For more information see Penny Tinkler, Laura Fenton, and Resto Cruz, 'Introducing 'Resonance': Revisioning the Relationship Between Youth and Later Life in Women born 1939-52', *Sociological Review* (2022). doi: 10.1177/00380261221140247; Penny Tinkler, Resto Cruz, and Laura Fenton, 'Recomposing Persons: Scavenging and Storytelling in a Birth Cohort Archive', *History of the Human Sciences* 34, no. 3–4 (2021): 266–29; Baowen Xue, Penny Tinkler, Paula Zaninotto, and Anne McMunn, 'Girls' Transition to Adulthood and Their Later Life Socioeconomic Attainment: Findings from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing', *Advances in Life Course Research* 46 (2020): 100352. See also the project website https://sites.manchester.ac.uk/girlhood-and-later-life/about/.
5. For more details about the creative methods see: Tinkler et al. 'Introducing Resonance', 6–7; Penny Tinkler, Laura Fenton, and Amy Barron, 'Biographical Mapping', in *Methods for Change: Impactful Social Science Methodologies for 21st Century Problems* (Manchester: ASPECT and The University of Manchester, 2021). Available at: https://aspect.ac.uk/resources/research-method-biographical-mapping/.
6. Carol Smart, 'Fragments: Living with Other People's Lives as Analytic Practice', in *The Craft of Knowledge: Experiences of Living with Data*, ed. C. Smart, J. Hockey, and A. James (London: Palgrave, 2014).
7. Smart, 'Fragments', 133, citing Eva Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005).
8. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (London: Vintage, 2000), 27.
9. Tinkler et al., 'Introducing Resonance'.
10. Our aim is not to catalogue the range of possible ways that research resonance can be explained. Laura and Luciana present explanations that speak to their experiences and preferences. They could have mobilised psychoanalytic concepts and explanations to help them understand the dynamics of research encounters, but they were drawn to different conceptual tools. Other researchers may wish to explore the potential of other analytical frameworks for making sense of their experiences of research resonance.
11. See for example, Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jacks, 'Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analysis', in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, ed. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (London: Routledge, 1991), 11–26.
12. On leaving the field, see for example: Elaine Batty, 'Sorry to Say Goodbye: The Dilemmas of Letting Go in Longitudinal Research', *Qualitative Research* 20, no. 6 (2020): 784–99; Martina Angela Caretta and Florence Jemutai Cheptum, 'Leaving the Field: (De-)linked Lives of the Researcher and Research Assistant', *Area* 49(4) (2017): 415–20. On staying, see Will Mason, 'On Staying: Extended Temporalities, Relationships and Practices in Community Engaged Scholarship', *Qualitative Research* 23, no. 3 (2023): 706–26.
13. Smart, 'Fragments', 141.
14. Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Towards a Historical Poetics', in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. M. Holquist [translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist] (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008 [1981]), 84–258.
15. Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time', 84.
16. Alan Garner, 'Inner Time', in *The Voice That Thunders: Essay and Lectures* (London: Harvill Press, 1997), 106–25.
17. Alan Garner, *The Owl Service* (London: Collins, 1979).
18. Garner, 'Inner Time', 113.
19. Smart, 'Fragments'.
20. Robert Burgess, *In the Field: An Introduction to Field Research* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984).
21. Margaret Wetherell, *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding* (London: Sage, 2012).
22. Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Duke and London: Duke University Press, 2010). Described by Rachel Thomson, 'What Do We Mean by

Reanimating? Locating the Methodology', Reanimating data: experiments with people, places & archives (8 June 2022), https://reanimatingdata.co.uk/2022/06/ (accessed August 10, 2023).

23. Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994), 25; Penny Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interviews', *Cultural and Social History* 1, no. 1 (2004): 69.

24. Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure', 69–70.

25. Laura Fenton and Penny Tinkler, 'Me Too? Re-encountering Youth Experiences of Sexual Violence in Post-War England from the Vantage Point of Later Life', *Contemporary British History* (2023). doi: 10.1080/13619462.2023.2216143.

26. Magdelene Redekop, *Mothers and Other Clowns: The Stories of Alice Munro* (London: Routledge, 1992).

27. Natasha Mauthner and Andrea Doucet, 'Reflections on a Voice Centre Relational Method', in *Feminist Dilemmas in Qualitative Research: Public Knowledge and Private Lives*, ed. Jane Ribbens and Rosalind Edwards (London: Sage, 1998), 12.

28. While we should note where resonance occurs, it is not the researcher's role to foster this in interviews. Interviewers need to be open to the interviewee's story and explanations, i.e. hear what is said, but researchers are not therapists and life history interviews are not intended to be therapeutic encounters.

29. Veena Das, 'Trauma and Testimony: Implications for Political Community', *Anthropological Theory* 3, no. 3 (2003): 293–307.

30. Ariadna Matamoros-Fernández and Johan Farkas, 'Racism, Hate Speech, and Social Media: A Systematic Review and Critique', *Television & New Media* 22, no. 2 (2021): 205–24.

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