

Mr Paterson's rounded testimony: ethics, intersubjectivity and the interview

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Abstract

As the interview as a method of data gathering has gained in popularity in the disciplines of art and design, templates of consent letters are generated in their hundreds, and the absence of a duly signed document — in a research output using humans as a source of data — usually renders the undertaking unethical and invalid. However, in the rush to protect the institution and its agents against litigation, it is perhaps forgotten that the signing of the obligatory letter is only a first, technical, step in a personal encounter between individuals.

An important function of the interview is its role in life-story research, that despite the need to record the experiences of designers that constructed and shaped the country's design culture, is not yet a wide-spread methodology in design research in South Africa. However, the term 'interview', if it is associated with 'history', loses its journalistic intent; when the purpose is to collect memories and personal commentaries of historical significance, the interview is escalated to the level of oral history.

Oral historian Lyn Abrams notes that participants in an interview interact to produce an effect called intersubjectivity, a three-way conversation: the interviewee with himself/herself, with the interviewer and with culture. Therefore, after the obligatory letter of consent has been signed, subtle — and even unmentionable — relations of power come into play that can empower, but also disempower and disturb.

My paper identifies and reflects upon three aspects of intersubjectivity that are likely to be absent from an institution's ethical clearance form but that are important to acknowledge and address with regard to the potential experiences of novice interviewers, namely

- *the effects (and opportunities) of gender differences on interpersonal relations in an interview*
- *the challenges of interviewing individuals whose political agendas are 'unsavoury, dangerous, or deliberately deceptive', and*
- *academic hubris and the pursuit of truth and factuality in an interview.*

Drawing on my own experience, and that of other researchers such as Hilary Young, Daniel James, Kathleen Blee and Kate Altork, I argue that the occurrence of intersubjectivity in a research undertaking is itself an intriguing, but elusive, area of investigation in the discipline of design.

Keywords: *interviews; oral history; intersubjectivity; gender; factuality; ethics*

Introduction

In 2013 I embarked upon a project that has as its aim the documentation of the construction of visual identity in South Africa in the period 1948-1990, and specifically in the formative role of a prominent design studio during this period. At the start of the project, the recorded evidence deemed necessary to supplement an analysis of graphic design artefacts was tabled as a discreet set of five business-like interviews with the erstwhile director of this studio. The interviews were ring-fenced by an ethically-

approved list of questions, and scheduled to take place every fortnight; the encounter between questioner and respondent would be videotaped to ensure a transparent record of the proceedings.

However, this bold plan disintegrated from the very first interview as the interchange drifted into uncharted regions: information was redirected, rationed, repeated or deliberately withheld. When the planned two-month process had not reached an end point after a year, it became clear that, as an aspirant design historian, I had to think in a more 'distinctive' way about oral evidence.

Several aspects of the interview situation presented challenges. The interviews were conducted in the subject's home, and were preceded with the conviviality of tea and cake; while this arrangement made for an amicable atmosphere, it was, from the start, difficult to manage the moment when small talk became interview, or factual answer intimate confession. The subject is an energetic and natural showman; he would set the stage beforehand, preparing artefacts and even donning attire that funneled the topic of conversation. This performativity was delightful, but time-consuming, and difficult to control.

In addition, while certain experiences had been crystallised into well-honed anecdotes, dates never featured in these narratives. The interviews, once they got underway, therefore served a limited purpose with regard to empirical information-gathering, a complication I had not anticipated. The presence of the subject's partner inserted an additional layer of complexity, as did the presence of dogs, cats, pigeons and a hysterical cockatoo. Very soon, familiarity with the respondent and his household eroded, if not scholarly objectivity, at least neutrality; I migrated from *interviewer* to *confidante*, a position both useful and precarious.

However, due to the timeframe under investigation, the real elephant in the room was the subject's implied complicity with the ruling order in South Africa in the years 1958-1990. There were questions too awkward to ask, and statements too difficult to challenge. Throughout, the need to retain trust outweighed the imperative to confront the subject with the possibility that he had accepted commissions that tacitly supported an unequal society. The respondent's understandable wariness of being judged as the accomplice of an oppressive regime required a non-judgmental and patient interviewer. But, merely by engaging with this history — or perhaps by *avoiding* aspects of it — I felt that I, too, might be morally compromised. Yet, because it is precisely this dilemma that has discouraged researchers from engaging with individuals who contributed to the 'official' landscape of design in South Africa prior to 1994, the need to persevere seemed that much greater.

Beset by these concerns, and as a researcher straying from artefact analysis into history writing, I undertook to investigate my position, and the validity of my study, as it articulated with the theory of interviews as a primary source of data. I also realised that, as a teacher, I encouraged students to utilise interviews as a means to extend artefact analyses but that these novice researchers (much like myself) were largely ignorant about both the process and the interpersonal dynamics between parties that inhabit different subject positions.

What is more, life-story research is not yet a wide-spread methodology in design research in South Africa; a certain urgency therefore exists to record the experiences of designers that shaped the country's current design culture. Consequently, my aim — within the limitations of this paper — is to open a window onto selected aspects of the process and provide students with a taste of the literature in the field.

To this purpose I address the following points:

- Oral history as a source of data
- Intersubjectivity, and
- Empathy and ethics in oral history interviews.

Oral history as a source of data

Applying myself to the literature, the first point that struck me was that the term ‘interview’, if it is associated with ‘history’, loses its journalistic intent.¹ When the purpose is to collect “memories and personal commentaries of historical significance” (Ritchie 2003, p.19), the interview is escalated to the level of *oral history*. Thus Anthony Seldon and Joanna Pappworth (1983, p.4) define oral history as “information transmitted orally, in a personal exchange, of a kind likely to be of historical or long-term value”.

‘Oral history’, therefore, presents itself as an appropriate methodological framework for that portion of design-based research that gathers ‘information transmitted orally’ and transforms it into a ‘history’ (for example, of graphic design). However, while it is absent from most definitions, what soon came to light is that, from the 1970s onwards, a key aspect of ‘oral history’ was its concern with ‘history from below’. This approach articulated well with the feminist aim of conducting an egalitarian research process since it enabled the perspectives of “the poor, the under-privileged and disenfranchised” (Abrams 2010, p.156) to be activated for social change. During the last decades of the twentieth century, historians also had to address the concern that archival documentation “reflected a discredited government rather than the resistance against it” (Ritchie 2003, p.23).

Consequently, as one text after the other stressed this “socialist perspective” (Thompson’s 2000 [1978], p.vi;xii), the legitimacy of my project appeared increasingly at risk. Interviewing an individual that had, 50 years ago, risen to the top of his profession was accorded the pejorative descriptor of ‘elite’ oral history, which endeavour was made distinct from and inferior to ‘oral history’ proper. Moreover, not only was my informant not one of the ‘underprivileged’, but his voice, many might argue, represented the archetypical ‘discredited government’. My purpose was to rescue a marginalised life from oblivion, but in doing so I was, seemingly, going against the grain. However, in choosing this route, I was also acting upon personal imperatives, that might be open to question.

In this regard, oral historian Lyn Abrams (2010, pp.54-55) points out that,

The interviewer as well as the narrator is present in the creation of the oral history; there can be no pretense at neutrality or objectivity [...] memory stories are manufactured in an interview environment pulsating with influences ...

However, Abrams (2010, p.9) observes that few historians write candidly about interview experiences, yet the interview is a communicative event, and deserves theoretical reflection. In the following sections, I summarise selected studies of researchers in the field as these relate to my own experiences. Although I provide some reflection, the reader must conclude how these texts answered to the challenges outlined in the introduction to this paper.

On being elite

The first organised oral history project was that of Allan Nevins at Columbia University in 1948 (Ritchie 2003, p.22); notably, Nevins’s interest was in living Americans who had led “significant lives”. According to Michael Frisch (2005, p.32), Nevins’s work profoundly shaped interest in oral history in the 1970s, but in a “largely negative and reactive way”. However, despite this agitated response, historian Paul Thompson (2000 [1978], p.vi), after stating his own belief in a socially conscious oral history, agreed that “a telling case could equally be made, from a conservative position, for the use of oral history in perserving [*sic*] the full richness and value of tradition”.

¹ Not all historians agree: Robert Dallek, when asked why he relied more on manuscripts than interviews, retorted: “I am not a journalist” (in Ritchie 2003, p. 25).

More recently, Abrams (2010, p.161) has argued that power does not reside solely amongst the people *en masse*; it is also located amongst elite groups in positions of authority and therefore “oral history research must engage with these groups”. Three texts that specifically address the topic are Seldon and Pappworth’s *By word of mouth: elite oral history* (1983), Eva McMahan’s *Elite oral history discourse: a study of cooperation and coherence* (1989) and Charles Morrissey’s ‘On oral history interviewing’ (2005 [1970]).

Seldon and Pappworth’s treatise surveys “an area of oral history hitherto neglected”, namely accounts of “those who rose to the top of their chosen occupation” (Seldon & Pappworth 1983, p.6). The authors present several case studies and, notably, examine “some ways in which oral evidence can illuminate understanding of artists and their work” (Seldon & Pappworth 1983, p.181). McMahan, on the other hand, presents a technical treatise that focuses exclusively on interviews with American male elites. At the core of her analysis is the ‘transactional’ nature of the interview; McMahan (1989, p.81) demonstrates a set of previously agreed-upon constraints that interviewer and interviewee adhere to as a consequence of their ‘shared vision’ and the goal-related nature of the interview: the implication is that these ‘performances’ can be measured.

In contrast to the scholarly tone of McMahan’s text, Morrissey’s paper, first published in 1970, presents a down-to-earth account of interviewing American male elites as part of the John F Kennedy project, for example:

When there were tough questions to be asked, we learned to postpone the tough ones until the interview was well under way ... Also, if you chicken out in an interview and don’t ask the tough questions you can always ask them when you send the transcript back to be edited (Morrissey 2005 [1970], p.112).

Of course, in McMahan’s paradigm, ‘chickening out’ never occurs since everyone agrees beforehand to play nicely, yet the ‘tough question’ is often at the heart of oral history. Donald Ritchie (2003, p.96) refers to ‘embarrassing’ lines of enquiry: he recommends quoting a public source that has issued a statement about the interviewee, and then asking the latter to comment upon the reportage. However, this strategy presupposes that the interviewee is celebrated enough to warrant mention in the media. With regard to ‘the poor and underprivileged’, Ritchie (2003, p.96) provides an example in which “gentle and persistent prodding” cajoled interviewees to talk about difficult topics.

Although the “remorseless detective” (Butterfield, cited in Seldon & Pappworth 1983, p.81) appears to be the domain of the elite oral historian, Ritchie (2003, pp.23-24) points out that the fierce debate about the respective merits of ‘elite’ versus ‘non-elite’ interviewing has tapered off. More recent texts play down the distinction between the two approaches. As Abrams’s (2010, p.162) argues:

Though there is a distinct literature on elite oral history interviewing, it is important to also consider how undifferentiated is the act of interviewing supposedly ‘powerful’ people. The assertion of power is equally possible from an elderly widow from a working-class home as it is from a politician or banker.

In summary, what one can take from the literature is a sense that interview situations differ, but that the difference is not necessarily that of ‘elite’ versus ‘non-elite’ interviewing. One point on which most theorists agree is that the story told is a *product of communication between two individuals*, and that these participants interact to produce an effect called *intersubjectivity*. The next section explores the nature and effect of this idea.

Intersubjectivity

Intersubjectivity refers to “the interpersonal dynamics between ... two parties and the process by which they cooperate to create a shared narrative” (Abrams 2014, p.97); Abrams posits that “a three-way conversation takes place in the interview: the interviewee with himself/herself, with the interviewer and with culture”. The individual internalises the structures of the external world, and

these structures form a *habitus* — a “disposition” (Abrams 2010, p.57) that conforms to the boundaries of these structures. This *habitus* is never fixed, neither for historian nor interviewee.

Thus, since the 1990s, oral historians encouraged self-reflection on the interviewer’s own identity starting with an awareness, of the historian, of her/his own subject position (Abrams 2010, p.58). Similarly, individuals can only narrate their ‘experience’ of the past by using existing discourses and linguistic formulations (Abrams 2010, p.57). Memory stories are therefore not intended to be repositories of an objective truth; they are “creative narratives shaped in part by the personal relationship that facilitates the telling” (Abrams 2010, p.58).

Abrams provides several instances of how intersubjectivity may influence a narrative; her examples focus on the role of the female academic in an interview situation. On the one hand, she demonstrates that a female interviewer can liberate women’s voices from patriarchal discourses, but points out that the approach is “not without its problems” (Abrams 2014, p.98). Abrams (2015, p.96) has, for example, found that when female respondents assume she is a feminist they tailor narratives to fit “neatly with the emancipatory discourse of modern feminism”, and falter when their story cannot conform to this agenda.

Women interviewing men present a different scenario.² Abrams (2014, p.98) offers only one example, that of Hilary Young’s interviews with elderly Glaswegian men, and suggests that here the intersubjectivity is likely to be unsympathetic, and even belligerent, due to the interviewer being female, “modern, [and] liberated”. Abrams, to make a point, notes that one of Young’s interviewees refers deprecatingly to her research and blames educated women for undermining the traditional role and machismo image of the working-class male; the impression is created that female academics might face a difficult time interviewing older, non-elite males.

However, if one takes the trouble to engage with Young’s (2007) text itself, ‘Hard man, new man: re/composing masculinities in Glasgow: c1950-2000’, several things come to light. Young — who was a student at the time — did not only interview men, but rather two married couples and one divorced man. It is the latter who refers to Young’s study of “sissies” (Abrams 2014, p.98), but the conversation is more nuanced than Abrams implies. The respondent in question, Mr. Paterson, was, in fact, very cooperative and only registered “some regret and loss at changing masculinities” (Young 2007, p.77), which he ascribes to a “growing electronic and technological job market that required an education that perhaps [many men] did not have”.³

What is of interest in Young’s article (but ignored by Abrams) is how the responses of the married couples differ when interviewed together, and then alone. In the case of the Irwins, married in 1951, Mrs Irwin, although uninvited, was determined to construct a ‘manly’ subjectivity for her husband; when he was later interviewed alone, Mr Irwin attempted to realign the discourse on gender. The point that Young (2007, p.80) makes is that “[p]ersonal subjectivities of the narrator, interviewer and whoever else may be present can shape any particular interview”. So far so good; what is absent from both Abrams’s and Young’s accounts is a consideration of the sexual tensions that may exist when a woman interviews a man.

In referring to Young’s study, Abrams (2010, p.62) advises that, “The intersubjective dynamics within the interview situation should always be acknowledged honestly”. But how ‘honest’ can, or should, the interviewer really be? Within the context of the title of her article, how does Young interpret Mrs Irwin’s eagerness to reiterate (to a young, attractive female interviewer)⁴ that her husband was

² The dynamics of lesbian and gay intersubjectivity is addressed in Kulick and Wilson (eds)(1995); for the sake of brevity, I restrict the signification of ‘male’ and ‘female’ to fixed heterosexual categories, although I acknowledge the problematics of these terms.

³ Abrams thus distorts Young’s findings, suggesting a bias with regard to male informants to which aspiring interviewers should be alert. Notably, oral historian Valerie Yow (2005, pp.173;174) reports that in her own experiences most male narrators have “genuinely wanted to be helpful”, and were open with their feelings.

⁴ Judgments of physical beauty are, of course, value-laden; see Hilary Young (2015).

never 'soft'? Conversely, when left alone with the interviewer, why does Mr Irvin confide his commitment to 'the role as a father' to the younger woman? Young (2007, p.75) guesses that her assumed feminist views enabled the man to feel less shame about preferring child care to repairing guttering, but is this all that is going on here?

The Irvins were known to Young; Mr. Paterson, on the other hand, contacted Young after reading about her project — and seeing her photograph — in a newspaper (Young 2007, p.81).⁵ As an active trade unionist in the printing industry, he had knowledge of employment issues that had an effect on gender roles, and seemingly Paterson approached Young as a man who knew he had something to offer. Whereas the married couples talked to Young in their homes, Paterson met Young in a pub: the interview therefore took on the quality of an assignation. From the outset Paterson, who at 62 was "a confident, larger-than-life man" (Young 2007, p.77), seemed to be showing Young what she, as a 'new' woman, was missing, namely a 'hard' man, who could take charge, and leave her well satisfied. Young (2007, p.78;79), who might (or not) be aware of the erotic tenor of her account, describes her experience with Paterson:

Mr Paterson's testimony as a whole was rounded. It has an introduction, middle and conclusion ... The respondent tied up everything ... and left no loose ends [...] [I], a younger female, who was less experienced in the 'ways of the world', was passive within the traditional discourse ... The narrator achieved subjective composure when he acknowledged at the end of the interview 'that should get you passed'. This emphasized his pride in the value and authority of his testimony.

Young (2007, p.79), despite stating that Paterson "dominated the interview", remains curiously neutral in her response to the encounter, so that the 'honesty' goes so far, and no further.

Ritchie (2003, p.100) only briefly acknowledges that differences in age and gender may influence both questions and answers. However, Valerie Yow (2005) reflects in some detail on the effect of gender differences on interpersonal relations in an interview. Yow (2005, p.171-175) first outlines standard theories on how men respond to female interviewers; she then deals with the topic of 'sexual attraction' (Yow 2005, p.175). Male narrators that are pleased to have a younger woman show interest in them appear, for Yow, to be the most typical of these situations;⁶ Yow points out that merely by being a good listener a female interviewer may arouse sexual interest in male interviewees, but speculates that the same is probably true for female narrators. Yow (2005, p. 175) asks: "Does this affect the course of the interview? Probably. But the ways that this sexual 'chemistry' is manifested vary with the individual".

Yow (2005, p.176) cautions that if aspects of the encounter become physical, "don't linger", but concedes that in a confidential, one-on-one situation such as in-depth interviewing it would be naïve not to acknowledge the potential for "sexual action" (Yow 2005, p. 137). However, until the 1990s, the erotic interest between interviewer and informant either did not exist, or could not be mentioned (Yow 2005, p.138); more recently, though, Yow notes, there has been "a lot of discussion" around the topic and refers to Amanda Coffey (1999, p.78), who points out that,

There is a long tradition of describing the sexual availability, erotic pleasures and sexual lives of other people ... By contrast it is far more unusual to represent fieldwork ... as sexual, erotic, pleased or desiring. And yet the fieldworker ... cannot help but have a sexual positionality.

Coffey (1999, p.78) sets out to demonstrate how "a contemplation of the sexual and the erotic is epistemologically productive", but in Yow's opinion (2005, p.138) an interviewer must exercise restraint: "Make the boundaries clear and respect them: this is a professional relationship".

⁵ Young makes a point of the fact that Paterson knew what she looked like before the interview took place.

⁶ Yow (2005, p.175) relates how she was 'felt up' by a ninety-two-year-old man, who asked her, "You're not married are you?".

Not everyone agrees: a passionate (if not altogether mainstream) argument exists for the complete immersion of the fieldworker in her/his subject's life, and for the acknowledgment of this sexual intimacy in anthropological texts.⁷ Yow (2005, p.138) alerts her readers to this "different slant", but also offers Kate Altork's (1995, pp.81-105) study of Californian firefighters as a way to "integrate emotions and intellect"⁸ while maintaining boundaries. It is not, therefore, merely a question of 'having sex in the field', but rather the recognition of an erotic intersubjectivity that is always/already present in much in-depth interviewing.

Sexual tension may very well be triggered by the *habitus* of academia as it intersects with the disposition of the subjects of research. In the case of anthropology, the exoticism of the other exercises a powerful mystique, but even where participants share a national culture, researchers are unlikely to embrace the 'disposition' of their non-academic interviewees. Young and Altork encountered paternalism and sexism in their informants, but this otherness is not limited to working-class respondents: as Morrissey (2005 [1970], p.109) points out, "Many people in Washington don't like academic people". Often, this alternative perspective may be the primary reason for a study, but it also poses a challenge.

Empathy & ethics

In the rush to defend oral history — as opposed to consulting lifeless documents— it is perhaps forgotten that, occasionally, the historian may feel that it would be preferable if her subjects, too, were dead. Choosing to write up the biography of a deceased narcissist, bigot or legendary womaniser presents challenges, but finding oneself in an intimate, face-to-face conversation with such an individual raises even more flags.

Kathleen Blee (2005, p.333) remarks that "romantic assumptions" about history presuppose that members of the elite are, by definition, wielders of unequal power and should be treated with caution, whereas non-elite interviews should be authentic and reciprocal. However, these perceptions are difficult to sustain when studying ordinary people who are intolerant and bigoted; consequently, historians have tended to avoid life stories of the non-elite whose political agendas they find "unsavoury" (Blee 2005, p.333). Yet, Blee (2005, p.341) argues, a need exists to understand the historical attraction of ordinary people to such politics. To this purpose, Blee interviewed former female members of the 1920s Klu Klux Klan.

Firstly, although Richie (2003, p.105) warns that an interviewer should never be too quick to presume that an interviewee is lying, Blee (2005, p.334) asserts that right-wing extremists have a "desire ... to distort their own political pasts"; not only are narratives biased by the narrators' need to appear acceptable to an oral historian, but informants' memories have also been shaped by subsequent public censure. Secondly, Blee (2005, p.336) found that many interviewees held complicated attitudes toward gender, race, and nationalism, blending occasional progressive views with unquestioning adherence to dogmas of nationalism, and racial hierarchies. Blee's informants felt little need to obscure their political beliefs: "[N]one expressed any consciousness of having done wrong" (Blee 2005, p.337).

The lack of reflectivity in these interviews, Blee (2005, p.338) maintains, is a result of both the acceptability of white supremacist beliefs at a specific time and of a "conscious effort by partisans to deny the consequences of their political efforts". Blee (2005, p.339) therefore suggests that, contrary to the general rule, encouraging empathy in oral histories of ordinary people can be problematic. Blee made few efforts to avoid the 'tough question': she expected her informants to be wary of her, but this was not the case: "These elderly informants found it impossible to imagine that I ... would not agree, at least secretly, with their racist and bigoted world views" (Blee 2005, p.339).

⁷ In addition to Coffey, see Don Kulick and Margaret Wilson (eds) 1995.

⁸ Yow is being a bit coy: Altork's affective response was not 'emotional'; it was powerfully sexual.

But Blee's preconceived ideas about her interviewees were also distorted: far from being the abhorrent characters of popular portrayals of Klan members, many of the people she interviewed were "interesting, intelligent, and well informed" (Blee 2005, p.339). Blee (2005, p.341) concludes that the trajectory of institutionalised racism is not propelled by pathological individuals; rather, it lies deep within educated, mainstream communities. But, whereas oral historians often have to rely on the use of pauses and silences to construct meaning (Abrams 2010, p.128), it was the lack of silence and the ease of communication that revealed the views of these women (Blee 2005, p.340). Although fraudulent, this type of empathy, Blee cautions, can be "surprisingly, and disturbingly, easy to achieve in oral history interviews".

The point that Blee (2005, p.340) makes is that although feminist ethics require that researchers level the inequality between researcher and subject, the hazards of empowering a political vision of racial and religious bigotry are clear. An analogy therefore exists between the dangers (and opportunities) of intellectual and sexual empathy; although it is unlikely that Blee felt erotic desire for her elderly informants,⁹ her experience is not that different from that of Altork (1995, p.86), who confesses that even as she struggled to analyse her male subjects' 'fire language', and to situate it as a language of power and appropriation, she felt herself "seduced" by it — an experience both "uncomfortable and intriguing".

While Altork and Blee were beguiled by their informants, Daniel James's experience of interviewing a militant Peronist in Argentina is devoid of empathy. Abrams (2010, p.10) cites James as "one of the few historians who has written candidly about his own sometimes difficult experiences as an interviewer"; his description of the Argentinian encounter reveals the "symbolic violence that [can] result from the insistence on the professional ideology of the historian" (James 2003, p.136). The bitterly cold, gloomy house and haunted wife of the informant set the scene for what James (2003, pp.130, 132) repeatedly refers to as a "deeply disturbing" experience: James, craving empirical information, found himself overwhelmed by an agitated informant who transformed the fact-finding interview into an emotional confessional of personal disillusion, error, and redemption.

James (2003, pp.131-132) finds that he cannot enter into this "bargain", and leaves. The reasons for his inability to show empathy are not clear to James, who reasons that the simplest answer might be that the man's right-wing Peronism repulsed him. However, James (2003, p.133) also confides his distress at his role of voyeur; he concludes that in pursuing the Western requirements of "truth and factuality", an oral historian may intrude upon intimate human dramas in a manner that can be equated to an act of physical violence.

Thus, like the erotic, violence is always/already present in the 'unequal power' present in the interview situation, although whether the interviewer or interviewee holds the balance is not always clear. James (2003, p.129) is unusually honest in that he confesses that he took it for granted that he was "smarter" than his informant, discovering, too late, his error; this is perhaps an unspoken assumption of all researchers, even when interviewing prominent individuals — both Altork and Blee remark upon the 'intelligence' of their informants, as if this quality surprised them. James thus highlights academic hubris as another always/already inter-subjectivity present in the interview situation.

Conclusion

Read together, Young, Altork, Blee and James present thoughtful reflections with regard to interviewing individuals that inhabit different subject positions; their texts also ask questions about what should be perceived to be more useful: a 'successful' interview — one that produces a 'nice

⁹ But not impossible. Gloria Wekker (2006) writes about her sexual relationship with an eighty-four-year old woman who was Wekker's main informant in her study of women's sexual culture in Suriname.

coherent and fluent narrative' (Abrams 2010, p.11) — or the 'difficult' interview, in which information is secondary to the personal relationships that intertwine with the telling of stories.

While none of the scenarios reviewed in this paper duplicate my own study, what emerged was that many of my concerns were not without their counterparts in other scholars' work. However, neither were there ready answers. While heeding the warnings and directives in the literature, perhaps the most salient observation that one can communicate to young design researchers is that the oral history interview is not a quick-fix-for-facts, but rather a methodology that explores the nature of memory and its recall as the latter is constructed within the 'pulsating influences' generated by the three-way conversation between researcher, human subject and culture.

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