

---

# *Some thoughts on the life story method in labour history and research on rural women*

---

Jean Stubbs

## **Introduction**

Many of the papers presented at the IDS methodology workshop and in this *Bulletin* examine the use of quantitative social science methods to generate data and advance our understanding of the situation of Third World women (Croll, Léal, B. White). As a historian I feel compelled to say that a certain feel for the unquantifiable and a historical perspective are all-important, especially when looking at a sector that has been well and truly hidden from history and when the investigation is cross-cultural. Constructs or concepts used for the present depend largely on our understanding of the past; the life story method can be invaluable in deciphering constructs used consciously or unconsciously by those conducting a study and those being studied. The dynamic two-way process of eliciting/telling/recording a life story not only helps clarify conceptual issues: it can pinpoint factual as well as attitudinal questions that need to be asked, and indicate what information is relevant, and what conditions would be conducive to obtaining reliable information. In short, it can shed light on both the quantifiable and the unquantifiable, substantive and normative, in often unsuspected ways. As such, I would argue, this method, which has been used most extensively by historians, would also be a useful tool even for quantitatively-oriented social scientists.

## **Social History and Women's History**

Social historians have always been faced with the problem of constructing the history of people who never had any, at least in the traditional sense of the term. This history has had to be pieced together from scant records, all too often written from diametrically opposed viewpoints. Labour historians have had the advantage of written labour records but these, too, have tended to refer more to the regularly employed, better-paid and better-organised sectors and, therefore, have had a definitely male, urban bias.

These limitations in written records generated recent interest in using the tools of oral history to further

explore contemporary social history. The growing field of women's history has also relied largely on the oral history method and produced some excellent biographical work. This in turn has opened new vistas for an approach that sees gender as an integral part of any historical analysis of the way in which societies and social norms and values are reproduced, and also for the ways in which social sciences and the humanities define and study that reproductive process.

Certain of the dynamics of this process can be seen in my historical research on tobacco workers in Cuba. There have been two marked tendencies in Latin American labour history: to chart the growth of formal labour organisations and ideology much along classical European models, and to treat the working class as a whole, integrated into and identified with the process of industrialisation and urbanisation in what are otherwise predominantly agricultural societies. Only recently have there been any real attempts to look at the complexities of either labour organisation and ideology or the making of the working class as such — going beyond the more regular, paid, unionised labour to the casual, informal labour market and attempting to relate both in and out of work activities, family life and labour into a coherent whole — in the context of colonial and neocolonial states.

My research began as a study of the formal labour sector in the Cuba tobacco processing industry. As in any research project certain priorities had to be set. Thus, considerable time in Cuba went into doing basic ground work on the industry and conditions of workers, and on the growth and nature of workers' struggles and organisation in a dependent economy and society.

This, in itself, was not always easy. Given the lack of a strong historical tradition and the course of events in post-independence pre-revolutionary Cuba, many documents, especially those relating to the twentieth century, had not been kept, had disappeared or been

destroyed (especially over the insurrection period); many more were unclassified and hence difficult to work with. As it turned out, this had its advantages as well as its disadvantages. Although it necessitated the laborious task of ploughing through documentation when never sure of its relevance, there was often an unsuspected wealth of information to be obtained from unlikely sources.

The very process of confronting various sources of information, such as archival documents, mainstream press or worker publications, and that of culling obscure pamphlets written over the years on the fate of the industry and its workers, proved particularly edifying. So also was careful cross-checking of statistics, which were at first sight poor and treacherous to handle. Finally, it was the many open-ended interviews with tobacco workers and their families, building up both a wider oral history and individual life stories, that proved most useful in filling many gaps and directing research along new paths. In effect, the research came to demand a certain resourcefulness and flexibility, taking cues and leads from the written to the oral sources and vice versa.

Initially conceived as a labour history project looking at cigar makers over the period 1914-58, the research soon extended in both time and scope. Questions about particular forms of labour struggles, organisation and ideology of these workers raised more enigmatic questions about the historical forces shaping their life experience. Thus the research developed into a more comprehensive study of the tobacco sector, linking the history of urban industrial workers to that of the rural and semi-rural proletariat and peasantry, and to that of tobacco growing and manufacture in the wider national and international context.

The focus was still on socio-economic and political aspects of formal labour history. This meant a heavy bias toward the better-unionised, better-documented, largely male sector of cigar makers, the largest single industrial grouping. Nonetheless, the wider research approach adopted and the wide variety of source materials used, including the use of life stories, led to quite radical re-interpretations of certain key facets of their history. More specifically to our purposes here, pointers were raised as to less documented sectors involving large numbers of women and children and to the particular interaction of gender, race and class in industry and agriculture.

While this is not the place to go into major findings along these lines, some are relevant. Symbolically, it was the myth and legend surrounding the once prestigious cigar export industry and the largely white, male master cigar maker that had gone down in

history. And yet the industry as a whole stood out in terms of the high percentage of non-whites and women employed; and there was a vast small shop and outwork sector catering to the domestic market which, if not unionised, was a source of constant sporadic unrest, often constituting a challenge to existing union structures.

Women were employed particularly in stemming, which consists in taking the central stem out of the leaf, either as part of the factory manufacturing process or in special stemmeries in the cities or in the small tobacco towns, since the tobacco is stemmed both for home manufacturing and for export as leaf. Straddling the industrial and rural proletariat, the stemmers were numerically stronger and less unionised than cigar makers, but seemed every bit as militant as the twentieth century wore on, as I learned through interviews. On probing further I discovered that there had been great fluidity between sectors and not a few women told me that they had been taught by their fathers to roll cigars in the home. On occasion, the women had also worked in small local shops. Conversely, I found written reference to male stemmers. This caused me to re-investigate the historical process whereby both statistics and conventional wisdom had come to define cigar making as exclusively male, and stemming as exclusively female.

Initial stages of the research had led me to tie in the overall backwardness of the twentieth-century Cuban tobacco industry with the growth of large tobacco monopolies in Europe and the United States and a changing world tobacco economy. I had noted in passing how these tobacco monopolies had beaten down skilled male labour, substituting it with cheaper female labour, especially with the advent of the machine, first in cigarette and then in cigar manufacturing. I found it curious that this same process had not taken place in Cuba and began to re-appraise skill and technology in gender and race terms. The results were quite striking in terms of historical specificity and again helped explain certain anomalies in worker organisation and ideology.

### **The Tools of Oral History**

In this particular piece of research, I had initially used life stories to elicit information for which I had otherwise found few or no documentary sources. In the process, the life stories themselves caused me to reconsider certain crucial areas of study, especially where women were concerned. There are other ways in which life stories can be used in research. An obvious one is the way in which a single life story or collection of life stories can be used imaginatively to convey wider societal phenomena and change. Life stories

offer a depth and flexibility, richness and vitality, a feel for the unquantifiable that is often lacking in other research methods. They open up new, more personalised vistas, but they also throw up new challenges of which the researcher should be aware.

While a key advantage of the life story method is precisely its depth and flexibility, the chance to pin down detailed evidence when needed, and to work with informants demands of the researcher a certain feel for human relationships and sharing of experience. A life story is as much about social perception as it is about reality. As told, it can be assumed to lie somewhere between actual social behaviour and social expectations, with possible added distortions over time through subsequently changing values and norms that may consciously or unconsciously alter perception. The memory process itself is organised to discard and select according to perception and is, therefore, part of an active social process.

To understand the forms and conventions which shape stories and communication between people the researcher has to disentangle this process. When stories are altered, the changes in themselves can be evidence. Stories not literally true may be socially important because people may or may not believe them. Suppression and distortion in themselves may provide important clues. 'False' stories, then, may nevertheless be significant. The more that is known about the form and context in which memories are reconstructed, the better the different kinds of meaning conveyed within them can be discerned.

Most sources are retrospective: not even contemporary evidence is a direct reflection of facts or behaviour. A life story simply introduces retrospective over a longer time span. As a social variable, memory varies according to time and place, from culture to culture, and with age, gender and class. Non-literate societies and groups have a rich collective memory which may be creative rather than accurate. African oral tradition would be a case in point. Studies in the West have shown that age is important regarding memory type: 0-4 year olds have very little long-term memory; 5-11 year olds have a photographic and learning memory; from 12 on, and especially after the age of 30, there is an immediate memory decline but increased total memory store; and old people find their recent recall impaired first but often enter a phase of life review, with an increased desire to remember and diminished concern for remembering according to prescribed norms. Adults tend to possess a short photographic memory, such that an initial discarding process affects even contemporary witness. After this initial discarding process, there can be surprisingly few differences in memory over a six-month or six-year or even 20-year

span. Individuals differ in their ability to remember, although may remember more when prompted or when they have a definite willingness or social interest in doing so.

Every biographical account inevitably uses memory in relation to the present. To tell one's story is not only to talk and remember but to reconstruct the meaning of the past from the viewpoint of the present and give meaning to the past in a way that has meaning for the present. Memory is then employed as a function of people's differing and changing relation to life. Different classes, races, sexes and age groups — and individuals within those groups — who already have different stories to tell, may also reconstruct different ways of telling them according to a changing underlying social logic. Successful migrants may feel able to talk about past miseries whereas unsuccessful ones need to stress recaptured moments of happiness. White trade union leaders may remember achieving racial desegregation on the job while black workers remember being made redundant by technological change. Men tend to tell their lives as a series of self-conscious acts using the 'I' form, while women, as keepers of the family memory, talk about 'we'. Some informants may be reluctant to talk at all about certain subjects, but their socially constructed silence or non-memory may in itself be very revealing (for further discussion see Thompson [1982]).

In short, subjectivity or bias in a life story — what the informant chooses to remember and tell, or not tell, what she believes and why — can be as significant as the facts elicited. Most important of all, when it comes to discerning fact from fiction, is for the researcher to be aware of potential sources of bias and the means of countering them, to check for internal consistency, and to cross check as far as possible one story against another and against other source material.

As in all investigative work, certain prior decisions have to be made. If the full scope and potential of the life story method is to be realised, it is important to choose representative informants. This means not only a cross-section of the community but also personality types. There is the danger of recording only the more confident and articulate who may well be a distinct stratum within a particular grouping. More accustomed as they are to presenting a public image, such informants can be less candid on personal recall.

Choice of interviewer, interviewing style and place are all factors that have to be taken into account in creating the conditions conducive to the informant going beyond the stereotyped generalisation of what the researcher may be perceived to want to hear, or beyond the collective myth to detailed memory. The

class, sex, race and age of the interviewer *vis-à-vis* the informant can affect the story being told, although in no predictable way. Married women may be best interviewing married informants, but a close similarity in social situation may lead to less inhibition but increased social conformity. An ideal, perhaps, is that of being close enough to understand and elicit information but not so close as not to be able to step back. A tape recording is by far the best record of oral testimony, but there may be situations in which a tape recorder acts as a barrier. Aids to memory, such as old photos, newspaper cuttings or music may prove invaluable, especially since personal memories are not usually arranged around dates as markers. The value of the interview taking place in the home, at work or in some other social place may vary according to which aspects of a life story it is most hoped to ascertain. Similarly, the presence of others may or may not be useful. An informant may feel free to talk alone, but a couple can sometimes jog each other's memory, and a group can provide useful insights into variations in account.

### A Coming Together of the Disciplines

Oral tradition is very different from written tradition as collective consciousness. First and foremost, it is an *oral* source. It differs from written prose in terms of vocabulary used. A lot depends on velocity and tonality and all those inflexions of the voice at a given point rather than grammar. And yet when it tends to become immutable as evidence is when it is transcribed. A written transcript is already processed. It is already a different kind of language which conforms to a logic of grammar, a logic of punctuation, which has had to be inserted and may in fact be changing the nature of the oral testimony. Particular skill is therefore needed in transcription, in rendering the meandering richness and texture of speech in the life story. There is an art in punctuation and phonetic spelling, in the use of italics, to convey rhythm and tonality, to present evidence as imaginative literature. This is the point at which life stories really come into their own and breathe life into research.

In oral history, the historian is no longer the outsider sitting before the documents trying to evaluate what has passed. The oral historian is part of the very process of creating history. Those being studied may be speaking for themselves but they are speaking through the historian. It is the historian as narrator who defines and writes down the perception of what this history is all about. As the social scientists attempt to go beyond the sample survey to the life story, thus coming closer to historians, so oral historians are being drawn as active participants into research much along the lines of the social scientist.

It was perhaps somewhat ironic that I, as a female historian, should have initially chosen on the basis of collective male wisdom to study a predominantly male sector of workers, catering to an eminently male market, with a quite phallic product to boot. However, as I embark on further research on the women tobacco stemmers and a new project on the role of women in pre- and post-revolutionary agrarian structures in Cuba, leading up to the present day cooperatives, I find it was my use of the life story method in my earlier research which has best prepared me for this new phase in my work.

### Bibliographical note

Discussions of the methodology of oral history include Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: oral history*, (Oxford University Press, 1978). Both methodological and substantive studies can be followed in the journal *Oral History* (available from the Oral History Society, c/o Department of Sociology, University of Essex, Colchester, England).

Examples of work which rely heavily on oral testimony include: Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain. An Oral History of the Spanish Civil War*, (Allen Lane, London, 1979). Luisa Passerini, 'Work ideology and consensus under Italian fascism', *History Workshop Journal*, 8 (1979). Sidney Mintz, *Worker in the Cane. A Puerto Rican Life History*, (second edition, W. W. Norton & Co., New York, 1974).

For wider questions about the use and 'invention' of the past see *inter alia*: E. J. Hobsbawm, 'The social function of the past: some questions', *Past & Present*, 55, 1972. E. J. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition*, (Cambridge University Press, 1983).

### References

- Stubbs, Jean, 1982, 'Dandy or rake? Cigar makers in Cuba, 1860-1958', Collected Seminar Papers no 29, *Caribbean Societies*, vol 1, University of London Institute of Commonwealth Studies
- Tobacco on the Periphery: a case study in Cuban labour history*, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming
- Thompson, Paul (ed), 1982, *Our Common History*, Pluto Press, London