**Abstract:** When undertaking oral history research with any group defining itself as a community the researcher's relationship to this 'community' must be considered. Intersubjectivity's central role in the oral history interview is widely acknowledged. However, there is little work investigating how being an 'insider' or 'outsider' amongst those whom we interview impacts on the interview encounter. This paper will draw on my experience of conducting two very different sets of interviews in order to assess this impact. Firstly, I examine the ramifications, positive and negative, of being an out lesbian interviewing other lesbian women. I then compare this with being an 'outsider interviewer', amongst survivors of the Bethnal Green tube disaster, where interviewees were bonded together in a community of trauma.

**Listening in, listening out: intersubjectivity and the impact of insider and outsider status in oral history interviews[1]**

> Intersubjectivity describes the interaction – the collision, if you will – between the two subjectivities of interviewer and interviewee. More than that, it describes the way in which the subjectivity of each is shaped by the encounter with the other.[2]

Here Lynn Abrams explains the concept of intersubjectivity, now a fundamental theoretical underpinning of oral history practice. In its essence it enables us to understand the oral history interview as an encounter, taking place between two

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unique individuals at a unique moment in time. A focus on intersubjectivity also pushes the oral historian to consider their own role in the creation of the interview. As such it follows well-established traditions within feminist oral history theory, which call for self-reflexivity on the part of the interviewer, so that we might understand how our own subjectivities, and how they are perceived by those we interview, contribute to the final interview recording as well as to our subsequent analysis.[3]

Abrams continues: 'It has become understood in the oral history community that the interviewer actively constructs a subjectivity for him or herself and respondents actively devise "appropriate performances" in response.'[4] This focus on the 'active' nature of subjectivity and intersubjectivity necessitates that we see intersubjectivity as something always in process, shaping our interview encounters throughout. Our ability to engage with and explore both our subjectivities as researchers, and the subjectivities of our interviewees is vital in understanding what impact these dynamics have on the interview: on what our interviewees do or do not say, and the questions we do or do not ask.

Intersubjectivity is not a recent intervention in oral history. Indeed, as Stacey Zembrzycki notes, Valerie Yow, nearly twenty years ago, urged oral historians to 'make a conceptual shift towards the subjective – to acknowledge the "complex web" of interpersonal relations that develops during an interview'.[5] However, Zembrzycki also notes that despite a general consensus on the importance of such considerations, few have 'taken up Yow's challenge' by writing openly, honestly and in detail about this 'complex web' that frames and moulds the

interviews at the heart of our research. Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki's recent collection, *Oral History Off the Record: Toward an Ethnography of Practice*, is an attempt to heed Yow's call, and draw to centre stage the 'corridor talk' that so informs and moulds our practice but is so often deemed too emotive or even narcissistic to be given space in oral historians' writing.

Where intersubjective concerns have been discussed the focus has very often been on power: namely, the asymmetry between interviewer and interviewee. This is nowhere more prevalent than in feminist oral history, where debates over power differentials have been ongoing and persistent. Ann Oakley's influential essay, 'Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms', posed a feminist approach as a corrective to traditional hierarchical social science interviewing methodology.[6] Equally influential, Gluck and Patai's much-cited and now classic collection, *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, critiqued and complicated the concept of feminist methodology as a panacea for power imbalance, raising concerns that such an approach overlooked complex socio-cultural inequalities embedded by race, ethnicity, class, age, sexuality and dis/ability. Writing in 2016, Oakley revisited her original article and the research that inspired it, calling her previous optimism about feminist interviewing 'naïve' and over-simplistic, unable to contain the multi-faceted nature of subjectivity and intersubjectivity.[7]

The more nuanced picture that has emerged in these intervening years has continued to home in on power as a central defining factor in intersubjectivity. Whilst there is no doubt that power is a key component within interview

dynamics, its continued primacy in the limited material on intersubjectivity has been to the exclusion of other intersubjective components worthy of our attention. Indeed, I suggest that the approach to power has, itself, been over-simplistic. Discussions of power overwhelmingly assume a linear and hierarchical relationship in which the interviewer is the wielder of power, while the interviewee is the potentially exploited. While this is clearly an important ethical position to interrogate, the insistence on this linear one-directional functioning of power obscures more nuanced dynamics at work. As Oakley discusses, assuming that narrators can be 'forced' into disclosures by researchers' manipulation is patronising, and in fact narrators exert agency and authority in all sorts of ways, including writing the interview out of their personal histories by forgetting it even took place.[8] This echoes Karen Olsen and Linda Shopes's humbling reminder that academics may 'overestimate our own privilege, even our own importance, in the eyes of the people we interview' and that most interviewees 'seem not especially overwhelmed, intimidated or impressed with us at all.'[9] Sherna Gluck, reflecting on a long career of interviewing women, concludes that 'ultimately it is the narrator's terms and conditions that govern the process'.[10] Elsewhere Pamela Sugiman has reflected on the lessons learned through her experiences with Lois, a *Nisei* (second generation) Japanese Canadian who exerted her authority and agency by staunchly disputing Sugiman's depiction of the Second World War internment of Japanese Canadians.[11]

So, power is important, but it is not one-directional. I propose that, moving away from linear understandings of interpersonal dynamics, and drawing on an

awareness of post-structural frameworks of complex and multi-faceted identity positions and positioning, oral historians would do well to consider other potentially illuminating facets at work within intersubjectivity. In my own work in LGBTQ oral history, I have experienced first-hand the powerful and significant impact of 'insider' identity. As a lesbian woman undertaking interviews with other members of the LGBTQ community, I have had the opportunity to observe and reflect on how intersubjectivity operates in interviews in which both parties are members of a minority group, and one in which community has often been formed in response to discrimination and oppression. Of course, not all community projects are carried out by people from within those communities. As such it is important to pay attention to the impact of 'outsider' status on the interview scenario, looking at the particular ways in which this otherness might shape the narrator's response to the interviewer.

This article, then, is my own response to both Yow's challenge, and Sheftel and Zembrzycki's timely reminder, in which I use the prism of insider and outsider identities to examine the interview encounter. Several contributors to *Oral History Off the Record* are grappling with issues related, in particular, to insider status, but there is room for further theorisation.[12] Elsewhere, work that draws direct comparisons between insider and outsider positioning is scant. Anna Bryson gives brief consideration to the significance of her Catholic identity when interviewing Catholics and Protestants, acknowledging that, 'as a Catholic, it was easier to elicit frank information from Catholics'. However, Bryson ultimately plays down the impact on the research stating she 'was nevertheless satisfied that the diversity of experience recounted by Protestants provided for a

reasonably balanced comparison'.[13] Here, I examine in detail the significance of

my own insider/outsider status, comparing two very different projects. I begin

with an examination of the insider status afforded to me during my research

with self-identified lesbian women about their lives in post-war Britain. I then

explore my experiences of interviewing survivors of the Bethnal Green tube

shelter disaster of 1943. In this instance I was an absolute outsider, with no pre-

existing connection with the disaster or the community that has sprung up from

it, or even to the geographical community in east London, where the disaster

happened. This examination rethinks the role of insider/outsider identity in the

interview scenario, arguing that, particularly within oral histories of

communities, the impact of the interviewer's position as insider and/or outsider

cannot be overlooked. Furthermore, I consider how we might use these very

different subjectivities to the benefit of our research practice. In discussing my

experiences of interviewing lesbian women, I also offer a new LGBTQ

perspective on insider interviewing. LGBTQ historians have been keen to make

use of the 'history from below' potential of oral history, and research has

expanded in line with theoretical and methodological developments in oral

history and queer theory.[14] Very often, LGBTQ oral histories have been

conducted by researchers who themselves identify as LGBTQ. Discussions of this

insider status have been explicit but not extensive, often relegated to

introductions and methodology sections. LGBTQ research conducted by non-

LGBTQ researchers is much less discussed, but in one notable example Carol

Archibald concludes that her research with older lesbians would have been

assisted if she had herself been a lesbian, arguing that participants would have

been more open with her and would have participated in greater numbers.[15]

Here, then, I bring the role of the LGBTQ interviewer into the spotlight, interrogating the queer potential of interviews in which both participants know keenly what it is to be 'other' in an historically and continued heterocentric and homophobic world.

**On the inside:  Lesbian Oral History and Community**

In 2008, I began my first oral history project. My PhD thesis examined lesbian identity and lesbian literature in post-war Britain through an analysis of life narrative oral histories conducted with self-identified lesbian women born before 1955. Travelling around Britain I met women in their homes, often interviewing several members of a friendship group and in some cases both members of a couple. Given the nature of the research, interviews covered intimate and personal topics, such as sexual and gender identity, sexual relationships, experiences of homophobia, coming out, and staying in the closet. Within this research project my insider status was hugely influential, aiding in establishing rapport, building trust, and, as a result, eliciting in-depth and richly textured interview responses.

Feminist oral history, as part of the drive for self-reflexivity, has called on researchers to adopt the maxim, 'no intimacy without reciprocity'.[16] In other words, you must be willing to give of yourself in order to gain interviewees' trust and build rapport. The commitment to be personally present in the interview

encounter has the ability to foster intimacy and greatly enhance the outcome. In the case of my research with lesbian women, this reciprocity was built around our shared identity as lesbians. This situated our relationship within the larger context of lesbian identity, as two members of a wider, interconnected community; one whose members have historically banded together because of their difference, in solidarity and support in the face of a mainstream world that has often been hostile and unwelcoming.

I recently attended a conference where a researcher presented on his attempts to interview members of a small but long-established LGBTQ community in an American town.[17] An experienced oral historian, he spoke of his disappointment at being unable to find willing interviewees, and that of those he had been able to persuade the results had not been particularly illuminating. Eventually some community members told him people were reluctant to speak to him because he was not one of them. As a cisgender heterosexual man, he was not a trusted confidant. He was surprised by the barriers he had experienced and by this reluctance. I was equally surprised at his surprise. Older LGBTQ people can be a difficult research group to crack. Years of institutionalised homophobia, criminalisation, forced secrecy about home and private lives and the pressures of living in the closet all add up to a community which can be sceptical or suspicious about appeals for information, especially from institutions or authorities, and wary of voyeuristic intrusions from the heterosexual community. By being open about my own sexual identity and identifying as a member of the LGBTQ community I have been able to allay fears as well as overcome some of these barriers.

Of course, this is not to say that all LGBTQ people are the same, or even that they share a majority of experiences. But in the case of LGBTQ oral histories the perception of this shared identity is invaluable in overcoming many other social and cultural differences, placing the emphasis on a mutual understanding of the issues faced as members of a marginalised and historically oppressed group.[18] When I arrived on the doorstep of lesbian interviewees rapport was quickly established and ice broken. In the majority of cases my insider status was tacitly granted, interviewees assuming my lesbian identity. In large part this is due to my visibility as a lesbian, and to my awareness of the community codes that signpost my status. I am comfortable in saying that I look identifiably 'like a lesbian' and am generally recognisable as such to other members of the LGBTQ community. I have discussed this with other LGBTQ researchers who perhaps do not present in such immediately recognisable ways. They have remarked on their strategies for outing themselves in interviews with other LGBTQ people, by mentioning a same-sex partner, or referring to personal experiences such as coming out. These small acts of reciprocity smooth the way for the interview process.

Sitting at kitchen tables and on sofas, surrounded by the domestic ephemera that made up these lesbian lives, my interviewees treated me as one of their own. Once the recorder was turned on the formal barriers between interviewer and interviewee were quickly dissolved by knowing laughs about teenage crushes on other girls, and eye rolls and sighs of shared exasperation at tales of homophobia and misogyny. This performed knowability of lived experience had the effect of

reducing the passage of time and the age difference between my narrators and I, and of foregrounding the subjective selves in the interview. It is important to acknowledge that alongside the shared identity of lesbianism, I also shared with most of my narrators our class and race. Due to the snowballing method I employed, the participants were predominantly middle class, and all were white. However, despite the recognition of aspects of shared lived experience, there was an age difference at play in all these interviews. I was in my late twenties during my thesis research. The women I interviewed ranged in age from late fifties to early seventies. In the context of lesbian identity this age gap actually enhanced the impact of my insider status and the resulting interview encounters.

**Intergenerational Rapport and Queer Lineage**

Throughout these interviews with older lesbian women I was profoundly aware that I was frequently granted a familial role within the interview scenario, that of a niece or granddaughter perhaps.[19] The idea of pseudo-familial relationships forming between interviewers and interviewees is not new territory. Stacey Zembrzycki discusses the grandmother/granddaughter dynamic that developed between her and Holocaust survivor, Rena Schondorf.[20] Alessandro Portelli has noted the deep significance of a long-term interviewee's address to him as 'my son'[21]. However, my own experiences were particular in suggesting a queering of familial bonds, forged as they were between generations of lesbian women. I came to realise that I was, in effect, being passed down the 'family story', in which the family is the lesbian community. Many of the women I interviewed did not have children of their own. Even if they did, their stories of discovery of their

lesbian identity and a lesbian community are not immediately the ones that would be handed down to biological family as 'the family history'. This was particularly so in this project as all the women who had children had them within previous heterosexual relationships rather than in lesbian relationships or as single parents. Indeed, stories of coming out and of burgeoning awareness of lesbian desire were at times antithetical to those past lives. These women's stories of their lesbian selves sat at odds with their one-time heterosexual lives.[22] Instead, in this non-biological community, I became the recipient of that other 'family' story. This led to a wonderful sense of ease, and a sense of gifting, passing along, handing down.[23] The location of these interviews facilitated the process: these were fireside stories, full of richness and depth.

The intergenerational connections that were built, this queer lineage, extended beyond the formal frame of the interview recording. Of course, oral historians are aware that the influence of intersubjectivity begins with first contact and can extend long after the interview has been completed, especially where concepts of shared authority are applied to research outputs.[24] In the case of this project the insider status I was afforded worked to create intersubjective relationships that established the dynamic at work in the interview recordings and beyond. One of the most extreme examples of this queer familiality, taking place in the domestic milieu of lesbian home life, came when I interviewed a couple, Margaret and Hilary, in their home in the North East of Scotland. I had met both women very briefly when I came to discuss my project with their book group but had not spoken with them one-on-one beyond their signing up to be interviewed.[25]

Arriving at lunchtime one Saturday I was immediately ushered into the kitchen, where we all sat together over a home-cooked lunch. During the conversation I was asked if I had a partner (assumed to be female), about where I had grown up, and about my university career and aspirations. When lunch was over Hilary and I went into the living room armed with cups of tea for our session. When we had finished, I was taken out into their back garden where the three of us spread a bedsheet under an apple tree, shaking the tree so I could gather apples to take home 'to make a pie'. Margaret and I reassembled in the living room, this time with a roaring fire in the hearth. The pops and crackles from the coal are audible on the interview recording, giving an atmospheric quality to the audio that speaks of the warmth and intimacy of the whole encounter. Afterwards I was invited to stay for a three-course dinner, then asked if I would like to stay and watch the television programme, 'I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here'. Martina Navratilova featured in the show that year and so we once again shared common ground in reminiscing about Martina and her status as a lesbian icon. All in all, I was in their home for around eight hours. Their desire to offer cosy and homely hospitality was clear, as was their generosity. Driving home, apples on the seat beside me, I reflected on how 'looked after', and even spoiled I had felt that day, much as one might on visiting an older relative. As stated, oral historians have often reflected on the unequal power dynamic in an interview, with researchers retaining ultimate authority and control of the interview and resulting material. But my experience in Margaret and Hilary's home, along with several other encounters on this project, complicated this idea. I was an insider, certainly. But as such I was also part of an intergenerational community in which elders took younger members under their wing.

These relationships were not all as straightforward as queer versions of aunts and nieces. Sometimes my insider status was granted in more complex ways. Rae was about to turn seventy when I met her. She had been in the WRNS in the 1960s and had, by her account, enjoyed an adventurous sexual life in this all-female environment. I interviewed her along with her friends, in their home in rural Aberdeenshire. An accomplished storyteller, Rae played up a Lothario persona throughout her interview, telling rollicking tales of her sexual encounters and knowingly camping up her performance for the recording. This Lothario persona was not confined to her past exploits. Instead it was very consciously threaded through into representation of her present-day self in the interview. Throughout our meeting Rae took several opportunities to flirt with me, always in a very performative and over the top way. Although this perhaps seems rather inappropriate in the context of research, it fostered positive intersubjective rapport in a way that it would not do were the power dynamics different, such as in the case of an older heterosexual man being interviewed by a younger heterosexual woman.[26] I felt entirely comfortable with this performance, knowing how deliberately over-the-top and camped-up it was. In addition, our interview was specifically about sexuality and identity. Thus, Rae's heightened and comedic presentation of her sexual self was in keeping with the context. The fact that it played out while two of her friends were also present and participating further highlighted the performative nature of the exchanges. Overall it served as a reminder that we belonged to the same sexual community. Rae's role as a ladies' woman was intrinsic to her self-presentation. Therefore, in continuing that role into the present day, through our intersubjectivity she

created a coherent self that stretched from past to present, of a vibrant and liberated self, at ease with her sexual orientation. My role as insider facilitated this performance and thus Rae's composure in our interview.[27] Rae's flirtatious performance might also be viewed as her exerting her power and authority in relation to me, a much younger woman. It certainly served to demonstrate that she was in no way intimidated or subordinated by my academic credentials or 'authority'.[28] The dynamics at work in both this situation and in my encounters with Margaret and Hilary resulted in a queering of the intersubjective relationships between interviewer and interviewee, both in the creation of queer lineage, and in the complication of that lineage, through sexuality and sexual expression that cut across generations.[29]

For LGBTQ people signs and signifiers that are universally readable within the community but invisible or untranslatable to the heterosexual world have historically had great importance in making oneself knowable to other members of the community.[30] In this case, be it knowing laughs, over-the-top flirtation, cultural references or the adoption of intergenerational connections, these lesbian narrators employed strategies to signal our sameness, therefore establishing rapport and a context of empathy. By responding to these cultural connections that interviewees passed between us, across the recorder, and sharing in their performances of our knowability to each other, I was able to harness the intimate and personal ambiance created to great effect. Despite being my first oral history interviews some of them remain among the best I have conducted.

**Assuming too much: Complications of Insider Interviewing**

However, this cosy picture I have painted, and the benefits I have suggested are not without their complications. There are some potential negative implications of having, and assuming, such explicit and intimate insider status. Firstly, there are potential issues with assuming sameness, common ground and shared experience. In practical terms, this can result in omissions and areas unexplored. With rapport established and the interviewer at ease, the recorder and imagined audience can fade into the background. Responding to the interviewer as an insider, the interviewee may leave things unsaid. In my interviews with lesbian women I notice the transcripts peppered with phrases such as, 'Of course you would know all about that', or 'Well, I don't need to explain that', and even the less obvious but potentially more insidious, '...and all that', 'etc', and 'you know'. It is therefore incumbent on the interviewer to be alert to occurrences and prompt for elaboration. This can be tricky when such prompting feels forced. It may require the researcher to bring attention back to the constructedness of the interview scenario, saying, 'Ah yes, but could you say more about that for the sake of the recording?'. This, in my experience, is more conducive in maintaining rapport and trust than the alternative, which is to play up ignorance, purporting not to know what the interviewee is referring to. This can have a negative effect, either in the interviewee becoming aware of this performance, or by threatening the veracity of the insider status they have granted.

Another potential consequence can be that the interviewee may not wish to contradict someone they perceive to be an expert on the topic. This may inhibit

them from deviating from lines of questioning to foreground aspects that are more important or meaningful to them, or from accurately reflecting their own experience if they feel it is at odds with the researcher's expectation. Of course, this can be true of any oral history research where the interviewer is, by nature of their researcher status, deemed to be 'an expert'. However, this has particular ramifications in the case of insider research. Working with older lesbian women, this led to a strange omission or avoidance that I was not expecting. It was only on reflection that I surmised a potential cause. I was very keen to talk to women who had been part of the vibrant butch/femme scene within the post-war lesbian community. This is a well-known aspect of lesbian history. However, it proved surprisingly difficult to elicit responses on this theme. There seemed to be a stock response of, 'Yes, of course lots of other people were into butch/femme at that time, but I wasn't really a part of it'. I know from other things some of these narrators said elsewhere in interviews, or from context I am aware of, that this cannot always have been true. But is seems when I posed the question explicitly interviewees avoided or rejected this identification.

This is a complex issue, full discussion of which is beyond the scope of this essay. However, as a brief overview, butch/femme identities and roleplay have become contentious aspects of lesbian history. The second wave feminist movement and nascent gay activism in the 1970s both rejected butch/femme, alleging it represented the aping of heterosexual and patriarchal culture.[31] This patina of forty years of identity politics and community tensions sat between these interviewees and me. It is my belief that some of the women I interviewed did not wish to disclose what has since become a highly problematized identity to

me, whom they perceived to be a lesbian with roots in second-wave feminism, due to my age and class. In omitting to discuss this particular part of their life experience my narrators can also be seen as exerting their authorial control and power of veto. My interviewees' silence on the history of butch/femme represents an aspect of lesbian community history that remained untold despite our shared belonging within that community.[32]

This phenomenon also brought to the surface the age difference between my interviewees and me. Having previously suggested that this factor was either mitigated by our shared sexuality, or indeed helpful in establishing an intergenerational community connection, in this instance the age difference may have foregrounded the effects of the decades between us, and the changes in the lesbian community during that time, situating us in different cultural contexts. In one particular instance, an interviewee highlighted our age difference in order to demonstrate this cultural shift, and indeed underscore just how seismic has been the change in the lived experiences of lesbian women.

Born in 1948, Moira was closeted for most of her young adult life. Although she was aware of her attraction to women, she married in her early twenties. The marriage was not a success and she was divorced by the age of twenty-five. She was then single for almost a decade. At the age of thirty-four she was finally able to embrace her sexuality, beginning a relationship with another woman. During our interview I asked her about the experience of living a closeted life for so many years, as well as the homophobic culture that necessitated that secrecy:

> *Moira*: [I]t was such a no-no. I don't know… Can I be rude and ask how
> old you are?
>
> *Amy Tooth Murphy*: Twenty-seven.
>
> *Moira:* Well…[Puffs] Eh…I can't, I can't, you can't…really, you may
> have heard it described. It wasn't like living in a horror story. But the,
> the, this fear of being shunned and, thought of until you almost
> thought of yourself as something unworthy, and ought not to have
> been born type of thing. Eh, just kept you, eh, very much closeted.[33]

In the expressive and puffed out, 'Well', Moira seems to underline the gulf of experience that exists between us, a timely reminder that in this case shared sexual identity is not enough for shared understanding. Moira stumbles over her words, apparently searching for a way to convey both something that cannot be conveyed unless experienced, and the inability of words to do it justice. By saying that I 'may have heard it described' she clearly positions my researcher identity before my insider identity. I may receive these stories of lesbian life, but I will never be able to embody them.[34] Ultimately, as much as we may share many characteristics and experiences with our interviewees, we must be ever mindful of becoming too comfortable in our assumed knowledge.

**'You're not from round here, are you?: negotiating outsider status in London's East End**

Having been immersed in LGBTQ communities, operating as an insider-researcher over the course of several research projects, in 2013 I was plunged into a scenario that could scarcely have been more different. As Project Manager for the Bethnal Green Memorial Project (BGMP) I was suddenly responsible for the memories and testimonies of a group of people united by their experiences of a singular traumatic event. As a complete outsider to this community of experience I felt keenly the weight of that responsibility. I also became rapidly aware of just how much my insider status had previously informed my research methodologies and shaped my expectations of the interview encounter. Ultimately, through an exploration of this new role of outsider, I was able to harness its potential to the benefit of the project.

On 3 March 1943, 173 people died in the stairway of Bethnal Green tube station. Bethnal Green, an area of east London, suffered extensive bombing during the Second World War. The tube station was in use as a public shelter, able to accommodate as many as 2000 people during an air raid. On the evening of the disaster air raid sirens sounded and people converged on the station. In nearby Victoria Park the Home Guard was testing the new Z-Battery anti-aircraft rocket. As people descended the staircase, wet from the rain, ill-lit due to blackout laws, and lacking central handrails, the unfamiliar noise of the Z-Battery startled the crowds, precipitating a surge down the staircase. Three steps from the bottom a woman carrying a baby fell, and an elderly man fell on top of her. Soon a domino effect had created a mass of bodies tumbling on top of each other. In seconds over 300 people were crammed into the enclosed staircase of nineteen steps. In just a few minutes 173 people were dead, sixty-two of them children, and over

ninety more were injured. The irony is that there was no air raid that night and the alarm that had sounded was a false one. Despite being the biggest civilian disaster in twentieth century Britain, only recently have a small number of historians shone a light onto this tragedy.[35]

Their research has proven that there were elements of a government cover-up at play in the immediate response and in the official private enquiry that followed. This led to deep-rooted anger, bitterness, and resentment on the part of many survivors and family members. Furthermore, the cultural silencing that followed the disaster meant that many survivors died with their stories untold, with others only very recently breaking their silence. In 2006 a group of survivors and family members formed the Stairway to Heaven Memorial Trust (SHMT). Through their fundraising and campaigning a memorial has been constructed in Bethnal Green Gardens, next to the tube station.[36] This has been an entirely bottom-up project, with years of hard work to raise every penny of the £600,000 required. In 2013 the University of East London, working in partnership with SHMT, secured a Heritage Lottery grant to undertake the historical research and public engagement necessary to complement and contextualise the fund-raising and memorial construction. One of the primary aims was to collect oral history interviews with survivors, rescuers and family members.

This highly sensitive project, working directly with survivors of a traumatic event, further complicated by tense personal politics and relations (of which I was initially unaware) made for a rigorous testing ground for my newfound outsider status. Having come from a context of in-jokes, knowing nods and the

comfortable familiarity of common ground now I was an outsider in every respect. I had never even been to east London before, never mind Bethnal Green. My Scottish accent gestured immediately to otherness, amongst a community who shared geography and East End heritage in addition to their collective trauma. I had never heard of the Bethnal Green tube disaster until I applied for the position. Sitting across from interviewees I was aware of the chasm between us, of things I did not know. This led to an initial insecurity about my ability to do justice to these memories. Despite the research groundwork I had done, I felt a detachedness I was not accustomed to. I lacked the sense of 'knowability' I had experienced in previous projects. I wondered if I was the right person for the job. However, although my outsider status had multiple tangible impacts on the interviews, it was not the case that interviewees similarly questioned my legitimacy in eliciting their stories. In some respects, their perception of me as an outsider actually facilitated the research, paving the way for rich interviews. Julie Cruikshank and Tatiana Argounova-Low found in their work with communities in the Yukon Territory and Sakha Republic that interviewees saw them as 'intermediaries and mediators – perhaps even as proxies for that outside world – who could help them extend their work and stories to broader audiences.'[37] This echoes my own experiences with the Bethnal Green disaster community, who for so many years have fought to have their story heard.

**Outsider status and the limits of rapport**

One of the most immediately obvious differences was in terms of rapport. In my interviews with lesbian women the ice was easily broken by assumed

membership of an identity club. However, with BGMP interviewees no such sense of ease was established. The interviews retained a formality I was unused to. At first, I was concerned that I had not done enough to ingratiate myself with interviewees. However, I realised that it was simply my expectations that were misguided, based on my previous experience of being an insider. In interviews with Bethnal Green survivors and family members I was, first and foremost, an academic and a researcher. This lent a certain gravitas to my presence. Amidst a community who have fought long and hard to be heard, narrators felt that they were finally telling somebody 'important', somebody who had a platform to draw attention to their story. In addition, the university paperwork and recording equipment I brought with me were welcomed as trappings that granted our encounter, and therefore their stories, legitimacy. This legitimacy was embodied in the formal manner in which many interviewees approached the interview. The clear-cut relationship of researcher and information-giver maintained and foregrounded the official nature of our relationship. As long as I remained a detached outsider-researcher I represented the detached gravitas of the university.

This detachedness challenged the feminist-informed research methodologies I had previously employed: 'no intimacy without reciprocity'. What if your interviewees don't want reciprocity? Compared to what I was used to in terms of self-disclosure, I was seldom asked about myself in interviews with Bethnal Green disaster survivors. Instead of developing intimate interpersonal dynamics these interactions could be understood within a more traditional definition of an interview – a one-off encounter where someone, a researcher, comes to receive

the information they seek, from a respondent with particular information to offer. On one level the difference is hard to ascertain: I was welcomed into narrator's homes, offered tea and coffee, and privileged with the sharing of deeply personal stories, very often of trauma and loss. But the dialogue, and the dynamic, were one-way. Although I have not personally dealt with the challenges of being a lesbian in the 1950s and '60s – as Moira pointed out – during such interviews I have invariably been treated as someone who nonetheless understands what it is to face the challenge of being an LGBTQ person. In contrast, having no personal experience of the Bethnal Green tube disaster, I was deemed someone who could learn about others' experiences, but could not achieve a personal understanding of that experience. As an outsider who had come to listen and learn on behalf of a research project, my relationship with narrators was delimited within that project. That relationship was perceived by narrators to begin and, more importantly, end with the interview. Pausing to reflect on my own motivations here, I would argue that, as an LGBTQ person with a deep commitment to my community and its solidarity, I have been moved by the intergenerational, cross-gender, and cross-class connections[38] that have been fostered between myself and my narrators, and sought to carry those precious threads with me when I leave, spinning them into the wider context of my world. I never felt that sense of connection with survivors of the Bethnal Green tube disaster. I was touched and affected by their stories of loss and suffering. But I was not, and never would be, one of their number. Their tragedy, on such an immense scale, was tellable but not knowable. This group are bound together by the grief that I could hear but not share. Their visceral experiences of the horrors of that night in 1943, and the generational memory reverberating

down family lines, had forged, in the sixty-five intervening years, a group identity that ultimately fixed clear boundaries between survivors and family on one side, and the rest of the world on the other. The borders of this community were not permeable. As a cipher between them and the general public my own identity always fell on the side of outsider. This felt right and appropriate. One could not become a survivor, and therefore my own identity as incomer-outsider was more authentic and ingenuous than forced attempts to integrate myself into the group.

Whilst true that deeper interpersonal dynamics did not emerge, it was not that I was never asked about myself at all. On my first week in post on the Bethnal Green project, and at my first meeting with the Stairway to Heaven Trust, I gave a presentation on the project, its aims, and on how I now planned to proceed. Afterwards I asked if there were any questions. A hand went up. I would later learn that this was Derek, one of the lynchpins of the Trust, who is widely liked and known for bringing people together. 'Yes, I have a question – do you support Rangers or Celtic?'. This reference to the two main football teams in Glasgow was an attempt to find common ground through pointing out my outsider status; highlighting my Glaswegian origins in order to build rapport through something that was relatable to many of those gathered at the meeting: sport. As it happens, I am one of those for whom sport is not a relatable topic. I have no interest in football and would struggle to name a player on either team. However, I am aware of the considerable cultural currency (as well as difficulties) that discussions of Rangers and Celtic can bring.[39] Seeing the chance to establish rapport I did not reveal my complete disinterest in football. Instead I laughed along, making a joke of that being a 'dangerous question to answer', and bowing

out on the grounds that I am not originally from Glasgow. This dodge seemed to do the trick. After all, I doubt Derek was actually interested in which team I supported. A naturally personable and welcoming individual, Derek was most probably engaging in some deliberate rapport building of his own.

From this early experience I came to take the approach of highlighting my own outsider status. I adopted some stock phrases: 'As you can tell from my accent, I'm not from round here!' People enjoyed the joke. I was very much 'other' in the sense of my Scottish heritage. Scottish people, particularly Glaswegians I've found, are rather popular in the East End of London. There is a sense of a shared working-class heritage, and a similar pride in your roots. So, despite the geographical distance between us, we often sought to find commonality in our sense of our heritage. This was also true in building relationships with the volunteers I managed on the project, many of whom were from the East End, or had family connections with the area. In addition, I sometimes made reference to the bombing of the Clydeside during the Second World War. Whilst highlighting geographical difference this simultaneously spoke to solidarity amongst communities who had endured sustained enemy attacks. Of course, being in my early thirties at the time of the interviews I was obviously not witness to the bombing of Clydebank or of Bethnal Green. But that faint link in the cultural memory of our communities was enough to signal to a shared past.

Much has been written in recent years about conducting oral research with survivors of trauma, this at least partially in response to the rise of Trauma Studies.[40] The Bethnal Green project, deeply embedded within a framework of

trauma, brought various personal and professional challenges, none more so than through the intersubjective dynamics at work when interviewing survivors of disaster. Several narrators broke down during interviews, overwhelmed by the process of remembering the trauma. Whilst I had dealt with narrators crying and becoming upset before, this had never been in response to something that was so far outside my own experience. I experienced a feeling of utter inadequacy when faced with the totality of someone else's raw grief, unable to offer any form of comfort or consolation. I often felt entirely unable to speak, with a sense that any words would be meaningless in the face of such embodied trauma. I have never felt like such an intruder into someone's home and life as I did at those moments. It was at those times that I questioned the rightfulness of such an outsider as myself conducting those interviews, and wondered if that duty and that privilege did not belong to someone closer to that community than I. In this community of struggle, brought together by a shared trauma and then by years of battling to get recognition for their suffering, I was a detached incomer, without the deep personal resonances and years of commitment which many of them had.

**Negotiating Community Divisions**

However, my outsider role brought advantages that aided the research and allowed me to maintain a distance that was beneficial when working in such an emotive area. It granted a level of personal detachment, acting as a form of protection against horrifying and upsetting testimonies. In addition, the fact that

I was not an insider within this community meant that I did not bring with me the agenda of my own story to tell, nor my own emotional investment, meaning I was free to listen authentically to interviewees' testimonies. This proved to be particularly important when I became aware of the significant community politics at play amongst survivors and family members. Brought together by a singular event and consciously built over several years of fundraising, annual memorial services, regular meetings, struggles and triumphs, this community experienced significant tensions. Formed in the context of grief and anger, passions run high, and personalities and agendas have clashed. This led to the forming of two identifiable camps, both keen to disavow the other's stories and claims to credibility. I believe it would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible, for someone already a part of that strained environment to undertake interviews across the board. As an outsider I came unencumbered with loyalties. I will readily admit that I used that to the project's advantage, playing down my knowledge of the tensions across these camps. In doing so I elicited more information – from both sides as well as from those who were not affiliated with either – about the history behind the creation of this division, how it related to events around the disaster, what each 'side' thinks of the other, and the role the division has played in the community's efforts to achieve public recognition.

More generally, my perceived outsider status invited interviewees to expound and speak at length, especially with regards to contextual information about East End life during the Second World War. Interviewees perhaps assumed I had a reasonable working knowledge of the disaster itself, given that I presented to

them as an 'expert' from the university. However, my geographical separateness, always clear from my Scottish accent, along with the fact that I was a great deal younger than the majority of participants meant that many of the interviewees sought to tell me – a foreigner – all about their beloved East End, their wartime experiences, and the changes they had seen in the area in the intervening decades. Here my outsider status worked to my distinct advantage in eliciting full responses. Whereas in my interviews with lesbian women, where the pretence of not knowing had the potential to jar and seem inauthentic, here the response of, 'No, I didn't know about that; tell me more' could be perceived as entirely genuine, inviting the interviewee to go into greater detail and description.

**Conclusions:**

While writing this article I contacted one of my lesbian narrators, Jane, asking her to reflect on the role that my insider status may have had on our encounter. She listened back to the interview and remarked that she was demonstrably relaxed and that 'I think that was a lot to do with knowing we were coming from the same place […] That there was a level of basic understanding before we began.'[41] She also referred to our 'tribe', revealing a great deal about the depth and resonance of shared identity. So much of what I have discussed here exists or at least begins outside the official interview recording, or 'off the record', in Sheftel and Zembrzycki's words. But, where they feature, insider and outsider identities are too significant and influential on the oral history interview to be relegated to the side-lines. Rather they create the frames within which these oral

histories take place. Working within the two very different projects I have outlined here gave me the opportunity to observe and experience both insider and outsider interviewing. In comparing my experiences, I have come to see the resulting impact not as polarised 'advantages and disadvantages', but simply as different possibilities, resulting in different outcomes. Returning to the focus on uniqueness embedded at the heart of the concept of intersubjectivity, each interview has a unique set of possibilities, and these are to some extent brought about by perceptions of insider and outsider status between interviewer and interviewee.

I have shared my earlier anecdote of the heterosexual male conference presenter with numerous LGBTQ friends and colleagues, some oral historians, some not. They have all had the same quizzical reaction to his lack of awareness of the fundamental barrier caused by his outsider identity. If researchers are attempting to reach marginalised communities, they must be aware that they *may* be gifted some of those communities' stories, and that they may not. They must be further aware that the stories they hear will most likely be different to the stories those communities tell amongst themselves. Meaningful, useful, illuminating; but different. At times I questioned my suitability and ability to carry out the BGMP interviews. But ultimately the project was a success, and survivors and family members did indeed get a messenger, with a remit to take their stories out into the wider community. I cannot know what I was unable to 'hear' in those interviews, just as heterosexual and/or cisgender interviewers will be unable to perceive what they cannot 'hear' from LGBTQ narrators. That does not render these endeavours futile. As with all aspects of intersubjectivity it

necessitates awareness, and a consideration of the dynamics that are already in motion before the recorder is turned on and reverberate long after it is turned off.

Notes

[1] I would like to thank the reviewers for their helpful comments and, in particular, Chris Wall for her encouragement and mentoring, both of which have meant a great deal.

[2] Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2010, p 58.

[3] Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (eds), *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, Abingdon: Routledge, 1991.

[4] Abrams, p 58.

[5] Stacey Zembrzycki, 'Not just another interviewee: befriending a Holocaust survivor', in Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki (eds), *Oral History Off the Record: Toward an Ethnography of Practice*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p 130.

[6] Ann Oakley, 'Interviewing women: a contradiction in terms', in Helen Roberts (ed), *Doing Feminist Research*, London: Routledge, 1981.

[7] Ann Oakley, 'Interviewing women again: power, time and the gift', *Sociology*, Vol 50, No 1 2016.

[8] Oakley, 2016, p 209.

[9] Karen Olsen and Linda Shopes, 'Crossing boundaries, building bridges: doing oral history among working-class women and men', in Gluck and Patai, pp 196-197.

[10] Sherna Berger Gluck, 'From California to Kufr Nameh and back: reflections on 40 years of feminist oral history', in Sheftel and Zembrzycki, 2013, pp 37-38.

[11] Pamela Sugiman, 'I can hear Lois now: corrections to my story of the internment of Japanese Canadians – "for the record"', in Sheftel and Zembrzycki, 2013, pp 149-167.

[12] See, for example, Sugiman, and Alan Wong, 'Listen and learn: familiarity and feeling in the oral history interview' in Sheftel and Zembrzycki, 2013, pp 97-111.

[13] Anna Bryson, '"Whatever you say, say nothing": researching memory and identity in Mid-Ulster, 1945-1969, *Oral History*, Vol 35, No 2, 2007, pp 45-56.

[14] See, for example, Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*, London: Routledge, 1993; Bob Cant and Susan Hemmings, *Footsteps and Witnesses: Gay and Lesbian Lifestories from Scotland*, Edinburgh: Word Power Books, 1993; Esther Newton, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in American's First Gay and Lesbian Town*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1993; John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999; Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003; Emma Vickers, *Queen and Country: Same-Sex Desire in the British Armed Forces, 1939-1945*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012; Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio Roque Ramírez (eds), *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012; Jane Traies, *The Lives of Older Lesbians: Sexuality, Identity and the Life Course*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. On the development of the field see, Nan Alamilla Boyd, 'Who is the subject? Queer theory meets oral history', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol 12, No 2, 2008, 177-198.

[15] Carol Archibald, 'A Path Less Travelled: Hearing the Voices of Older Lesbians: A Pilot Study Researching Residential Care and Other Needs', in Rebecca Jones and Richard Ward (eds), *LGBT Issues: Looking Beyond Categories*, Edinburgh: Dunedin, 2010, pp 30-41.

[16] Oakley, 1981, p 49.

[17] Oral History Association Annual Conference, Long Beach, CA, October 2016.

[18] Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*.

[19] For discussions of the complex relationships formed between LGBTQ interviewers and interviewees, see Alamilla Boyd and Roque Ramirez, 2012.

[20] Zembrzycki, 2013.

[21] Portelli, 'Afterword', in Sheftel and Zembrzycki, pp 274-275.

[22] On the impact of this on interviewees' ability to achieve composure see, Amy Tooth Murphy, '"I conformed; I got married. It seemed like a good idea at the time": domesticity in post-war lesbian oral history', in Brian Lewis (ed), *British Queer History: New Approaches and Perspectives*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp 165-187.

[23] See Oakley, 2016 on oral history testimony as gift giving.

[24] Michael Frisch, *Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*, New York: SUNY Press, 1990.

[25] Pseudonyms used at the request of one of the interviewees.

[26] Juliette Pattinson, '"The thing that made me hesitate…": re-examining gendered intersubjectivities in interviews with British secret war veterans', *Women's History Review* vol 20, no 2, 2011, pp 245-264.

[27] The theory of composure is extensively employed in oral history research. See Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994 and Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities*, London: Routledge, 1994 for key seminal works on composure, and Thomson's recent revisiting of this early work and its ramifications on oral history theory: Alistair Thomson, '*Anzac Memories* revisited: trauma, memory and oral history', *Oral History Review*, Vol 42, No 1, 2015, pp 1-29.

[28] I am grateful to Christine Wall for this observation on my interaction with Rae.

[29] Kelly Anderson, 'Gender, desire and feminism: a conversation between Dorothy Allison and Carmen Vazquez', in *Boyd and Ramirez*, pp 130-148.

[30] Green carnations, hanky codes, pinky rings, dolphins, labryses, Polari and rainbow symbols are just some of the signifiers LGBTQ people have used to make themselves visible to others.

[31] Rebecca Jennings, *A Lesbian History of Britain: Love and Sex between Women since 1500*, Oxford: Greenwood World Publishing, 2007.

[32] Alexander Freund, 'Toward an ethics of silence?: negotiating off-the-record events and identity in oral history, in Sheftel and Zembrzycki.

[33] Interview with Moira, conducted by Amy Tooth Murphy, 24 April 2008.

[34] Sugiman, in Sheftel and Zembrzycki

[35] Sean Dettman, *The Bethnal Green Tube Shelter Disaster of 1943*, London: The East London History Society, 2010 and Rick Fountain, *Mr Morrison's Conjuring Trick: The People of Bethnal Green (deceased) v The Crown*, London: RTF Media, 2012.

[36] <http://www.stairwaytoheavenmemorial.org/> Last accessed 5 August 2019.

[37] Cruikshank and Argounova-Low, '"On" and "off" the record in shifting times and circumstances', in Sheftel and Zembrzycki, p 51.

[38] Other LGBTQ oral historians have revealed similar reflections. See Alamilla Boyd and Roque Ramírez (eds), *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History*.

[39] Bill Murray, *The Old Firm: Sectarianism, Sport and Society in Scotland*, second revised edition, Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, 2000.

[40] See Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory,* pp 175-94 and, for example, Erin Jessee, *Negotiating Genocide in Rwanda: The Politics of History*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

[41] Jane, email correspondence with author, April 2018.