

# **Emotional histories: materiality, temporality and subjectivity in oral history interviews with fathers and sons.**

## **Biographical note.**

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## **Abstract**

This article is about uses of oral history for telling intimate stories of inter-generational relationships across life-courses. It conceives of interviews about families' lives as unresolved emotional histories, which are inter-subjective, and under perpetual negotiation. While interviewees draw on historic cultural scripts and social relationships to tell their stories, they also engage with continuities of feeling, in relationships which are ongoing. Drawing on research with men about their post-war experiences of fatherhood and 'sonhood', I explore the materiality and temporality of oral history interviews, before examining subjectivity and social relationships using linguistic and psychoanalytic interpretive strategies. I conclude that men's narrations of parenting experiences produce idiosyncratic emotional histories, which are nevertheless bound by particular familial and gendered dynamics, historic socio-cultural contexts, and the present-day situations in which they are recalled and retold.

## **Keywords**

Parenting; material culture; subjectivity; masculinity; emotions

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In this article, I explore the utility of oral history for telling intimate stories of inter-generational relationships across life-courses. Drawing on research conducted for my doctoral project, 'The Emotional Lives and Legacies of Fathers and Sons in Britain, 1945-1974', I suggest that my subjects' reflections on their pasts constitute emotional histories, which are inter-subjective, and under perpetual negotiation. Interviewees' experiences of parenting engage with cultural scripts that can be located historically; however, they are also informed fundamentally by present-day attitudes and behaviours. Fathers and sons' historic social relationships are assessed across life-courses, from the vantage points of middle- and old-age. I have organised my enquiry into two areas: 'Contexts' and 'Dialogues'. In Contexts, I examine the materiality of interviews' physical settings and the lifestages of my subjects at the time of interviewing. In Dialogues, I consider the narrated content of the interviews, including linguistic forms used by the respondents, and the inter-subjectivity of the interviewer-interviewee dynamic. I argue that men's reflections on their family lives are bound by the particularity of their relationships, understandings of historic normative gendered attitudes and behaviours, and the present-day contexts in which they are recalled and retold.

The examples I highlight in this article come from a set of interviews I conducted between 2015 and 2017 with eight father-son 'pairs' and one pair of brothers

(whose father had died young).<sup>1</sup> This cohort is part of wider research, which also includes existing oral history testimony and post-war social studies. Across the whole sample, my subjects come from a range of social backgrounds and regions, although all are white-British.<sup>2</sup> As a set, the fathers and sons discussed below have a slight middle-class bias, with one exceptional upper-middle-class family. To give an indication of their social range, the fathers' jobs were: draughtsman-turned-entrepreneur; builder; mechanical engineer; mechanic; farmer and major general.<sup>3</sup> Principally, they were distinguished by age: they all either became a father or experienced childhood between 1945 and 1974. Each pair was given the choice to be interviewed separately or together, resulting in an even split of single and joint interviews. The interviews followed a semi-structured questionnaire.

My project is inspired by an interest in patterns of generational change and continuity in post-war British families. Between 1945 and 1974, despite rising numbers of women entering the workforce, male-breadwinning remained overwhelmingly the model of adult masculinity to which boys were expected to aspire.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, as they came of age, sons' aspirations were shaped by better educational opportunities, greater confidence that work would be available, and broader cultural horizons than their fathers had known a generation earlier. I explore how these patterns were negotiated at the level of inter-personal relationships in families, from sons' post-war childhoods to the reflections of both generations in middle- and old-age. In this respect, my study joins recent work by Julie-Marie Strange and Laura King, which has sought to reassess men's identities as fathers between the mid-nineteenth and mid-

twentieth centuries.<sup>5</sup> Both Strange and King have emphasised fathers' orientation towards their families, as a corrective to social histories that have tended to focus instead on men's public lives or on instances of family neglect or desertion. Like theirs, my work also underlines the importance of the family in the formation of masculine identities; but I focus on inter-generational dynamics, putting 'sonhood' on an equal footing with fatherhood, and my conclusions about male emotional lives are ambivalent. In telling stories of their fatherhoods and childhoods, my respondents accessed a repertoire of emotions including love, fear, guilt, resentment, reverence and pride. Expressions of these feelings were reciprocal and contested, determined fundamentally by the particularity of each family's experience. But they also interacted with normative modes of masculinity – such as fatherly protection and provision, practical craftsmanship and childhood adventure – and with recourse to historical and present-day cultural scripts.

The inter-subjectivity of parenthood has been addressed in a recent edited collection by Sian Pooley and Kaveri Qureshi. They describe filial relationships in terms of 'multi-directional processes', which see parents and children 'receiving, reinterpreting or rejecting' aspects of each other's lives.<sup>6</sup> They describe how children 'engage – unequally – in the process of negotiating what is passed down to their generation', with particular emphasis on processes of transmission from the older generation towards their adult children.<sup>7</sup> Building on this important work, I focus principally on adult-child relationships, interviewing pairs of fathers and sons about their experiences in the generation after 1945. Giving equal weight to the perspectives of both generations, I highlight processes of

inter-generational exchange: how feelings arose out of the interplay of parent-child negotiations. I suggest that the inter-subjective encounters of filial relationships were characterised by reciprocity, as well as imposition.

Like Pooley and Qureshi, I also highlight the non-fixity of parental relationships, which, they suggest, remain in perpetual negotiation across the life-course (and, as some of my interviewees have demonstrated, after death, through the memories of lost parents – and sadly, on occasion, children). This bubbling continuity of feeling is brought vividly to life in oral history interviews, which see men refine and recompose their memories of fatherhood and childhood in real time. As their filial relationships remain ongoing, so too do their emotional experiences of those relationships. Recent investigations into expressions of feeling in interviews have drawn profitably from the scholarship on the history of emotions.<sup>8</sup> I share this interest in exploring, for example, how interviewees may be perceived as belonging to certain ‘emotional communities’, or how they deliver narrations which might subscribe to, or transgress, particular ‘emotional regimes’.<sup>9</sup> However, such interpretations may impose too much historical contingency on emotions. Interviewees may remember emotions that were expressed in response to cultural contexts in the past; but their recollections may also see those emotions reproduced in the present.<sup>10</sup> As Margaret Wetherell suggests, affective activity is an ‘ongoing flow [...] of forming and changing bodyscapes, qualia (subjective states), and actions constantly shifting in response to the changing context’.<sup>11</sup> Such activity informed men’s stories of parenting, which emerged as both historical and biographical. Men’s experiences

of father-son relationships were processes of constant negotiations with the present, as well as with the past.

### **Masculinity and material contexts**

In their illuminating assessment of cooking utensils as biographical objects, David Sutton and Michael Hernandez explore the relationship between the durability of material things, and certain continuities of family feelings and behaviours.<sup>12</sup> They use the example of a skillet owned by an Illinois man, which, he claimed (it turns out, mistakenly), was once owned by an ancestral uncle, who used it to cook for his regiment in the American Civil War. Despite its erroneous provenance, it had become a 'repository of family history', representing deeply held family values of skill, camaraderie and patriotism.<sup>13</sup> For Jack and David Shotton from North Shields near Newcastle, whom I interviewed, it was a type of extractor fan, used in shipping, which had particular resonance for their family. Jack had designed the fan while working as a draughtsman in the 1960s, before setting up his own business manufacturing them. Not long after his son David came of age, he decided to go into the family business, which he now runs. Talking me through his decision, David explained that he had never been 'a studying type person – more with my hands', at which point Jack interjected to say 'That was my father to a tee! My father worked with his hands.'<sup>14</sup> For Jack, the skill, ingenuity and craftsmanship that the fan had come to embody spanned three generations of the Shotton family.<sup>15</sup> As a part of the thriving post-war northeast shipping industry, the fan also carried associations with industry and attachment to place, which were strongly gendered. Over the course of the late twentieth century in Britain, stories of familial succession in business became

less common, though a booming post-war economy provided helpful conditions for entrepreneurs. The Shottons demonstrated how values of craftsmanship and enterprise could still bind together multiple generations of men in families. Jack also presented a photograph, in which he stood proudly in a shirt and tie, alongside David, seen in overalls, with the fans (see picture). Their dress in the photograph reinforces their gender-normative roles in the design and manufacture of the product. More importantly for Jack and David, the photo was a material reminder of how Jack's extractor fan had provided an enduring source of connection for father and son; and in Jack's memory, a connection to an earlier generation too.

As Janis Wilton has cautioned, however, structuring interviews too closely around material culture can have a distorting effect on the way personal histories are remembered.<sup>16</sup> To encourage someone to elucidate on a particular photograph, or heirloom, while it might elicit rich and freighted reflections, may bias a life-story towards certain memories and associations, and away from others. Equally, a material thing that carries particular significance for an interviewee may exist only in memory, its physical presence having faded from view over time (This was the case with a father I interviewed, whose treasured pipe had its precursor in the form of a toothbrush, which as a child he had pretended to smoke, anticipating his adult male habit). Whether physically present, or in the remembered past, I chose not to lead conversations towards discussions of particular material things. However, it quickly transpired that the materiality of family homes, in which most of my interviews took place, often provided cues for narrations of certain emotional pasts. For example, the

television cabinet that broke during a child's balancing game that prompted an 'infamous' angry exchange, or the window through which scenes of children playing elicited happy memories and digressions. The rooms' material cultures were drawn on incidentally, but the stories they inspired were often among the richest I encountered.

The room in which I interviewed Alan and Mark Birchwood (individually, in succession) was richly symbolic of their relationship. Evidently proud of his own handiwork, Alan, a mechanical engineer, systematically described the room's fixtures and fittings. He chose to explain in some detail the carpentry, plumbing and decorating he had undertaken more than 50 years previously. The badly fitted shelf above the fireplace was singled out as an anomaly; reluctantly, he had employed a builder to install it. Its imperfection had provided an unhappy visual reminder of his decision ever since. For Mark, this material culture provided an example of his father's exemplary skills, against which not only the outsourced builder, but he himself, had fallen short:

Yeah, I came 'round to borrow something... 'cause he's very good... like, he built that cupboard. What else did he build in here? He built that shelf... he didn't do the brickwork, the brickwork wasn't done to how he wanted it apparently. Anyway... and I like to think... though I haven't done for a while... but I can do indoor decorating, like hanging wallpaper, stuff like that. But... I came around to borrow something... he was having a clear-out of his tools and he said "you don't do so much of the DIY do you?" [pause] I thought I did [laughs], but no, I don't do all the great building projects that he did.<sup>17</sup>



Mark echoes Alan's dissatisfaction. They each refer to a shared memory of poor craftsmanship, whose owner has long faded from view, but from which the brickwork remained as an enduring reminder. That memory's association with inadequacy prompted feelings of niggling regret for Alan, but for Mark, it triggered conflicting emotions: pride at his father's pre-eminent DIY skills; and resentment that his own abilities had been underappreciated. The fireplace had been built in the early 1960s, at a time when DIY proficiency was commensurate with normative performances of masculinity in the home. Brickwork was thus associated with a cultural model of successful manhood, which had retained some traction for Mark fifty years on. As we shall, see, it became apparent over the rest of the interview that Alan's impressive practical skill was just one of many areas of family life that left Mark regretful of having fallen short of his father's example.

Brickwork also had symbolic resonance for brothers Fred and Phil Avery. In their seventies at the time of interviewing, they lived next door to each other on the same site their father, who died in 1966, had renovated when they were children. Phil explained: 'That brickwork out there, can you see? [gestures to window] That's dad's handiwork. We've been tempted to make the drive wider... but every time, we think: no, we can't knock dad's bricks down'.<sup>18</sup> The brickwork carried particular significance for Fred, who as a teenager was apprenticed as a builder by his father and went on to succeed him in the industry. Like many working-class young men in the late 1950s, however, he traded blue-collar for white-collar work and became a quantity surveyor. Phil also helped out his father on building sites; although, via a more circuitous career path, he

eventually emerged as a care-worker and driver for children with special needs. Despite undertaking several renovation jobs on the cottages since his father died, in agreement with Phil, Fred had felt obliged to leave this particular wall standing. During the 1950s and 1960s, building work remained a key site of adult male manual labour at a time of creeping automisation and the growth of clerical and managerial jobs. Neither Fred nor Phil followed their father as builders, but their preservation of his wall confirmed their mutual reverence for his practical skill and made a fitting commemoration of his early death.

Both the Averys' and Birchwoods' bricks had come to represent their fathers' ingenuity and devotion to their family homes. They remained as powerful symbols of fatherly protection and provision, and for Fred in particular, of parental nurturing and guidance. Daniel Miller suggests material things have a 'strange and little understood humility [...] [they are] concrete, upfront, evident to the eye. Yet they work generally as background, as that which frames behaviour and atmosphere [...] they hide the power to determine the way you feel'.<sup>19</sup> In the course of my oral history interviews in family homes, some of this power was revealed. Paul Thompson has argued that DIY in the post-war period provided welcome outlets for men whose practical and creative skills were becoming less valued at work.<sup>20</sup> The association of such skills with adult masculinity had given the materiality of many family homes a certain gendered resonance for many fathers and sons. As the Shottons and Averys examples illustrate, however, practical skill and ingenuity remained powerful binding agents of inter-generational emotional connection at work too. Each family's circumstances were different; but the material culture men drew on in their

interviews represented common negotiations of culturally pervasive modes of masculinity in the past and present.

### **Retrospective contexts**

In her 2004 appraisal of social, cultural and psychoanalytic interpretations of life narratives, Anna Green implored oral historians to 're-assert the value of individual remembering, and the capacity of the conscious self to contest and critique cultural scripts or discourses'.<sup>21</sup> My findings have revealed how fathers and sons engaged with cultural scripts and discourses *unconsciously*, as we shall see in Dialogues. However, it is particularly useful to have in mind Green's foregrounding of the *conscious* self when approaching oral histories of parenting told from the vantage points of old- and middle-age. Having reached a life-stage past the point at which they have decided whether or not to become parents themselves, my interviewees consciously engaged with present and past cultural scripts of fatherhood and childhood when composing their narratives. As Joanna Bornat has suggested, interviews with older people do not always lead to past tensions being resolved; rather, they form part of ongoing negotiations with personal histories, into which the oral history interview has given temporary access.<sup>22</sup> The examples in this section show the ways in which men deliberately drew on their life-stages, social relations and cultural scripts, in ongoing negotiations with their identities as fathers and sons.

Men's conscious reflections tended to stress continuities of feeling from the remembered past to the present, sometimes in opposition to present-day cultural norms. Accounting for changes in emotional norms and behaviour over

time has been the subject of a now well-established literature in the history of emotions. For example, William Reddy's idea of the 'emotional regime', in which particular rituals, practices and ways of speaking (Reddy's 'emotives') underpin the social relationships of a culture at a given historical moment; or, similarly, Peter and Carol Stearns' 'emotionology', which refers to the cultural standards against which historical expressions of emotion can be assessed.<sup>23</sup> My interviewees also drew on historic measures of cultural acceptability and understandings of normative social relationships when composing their histories of parenting. They reflected on the extent to which their feelings and behaviour had subscribed to, or transgressed, prevailing emotional standards. However, while they acknowledged various ways in which they considered these standards to have changed over the course of the last fifty or sixty years, they drew strength from maintaining that their feelings had nonetheless remained consistent. Telling their emotional histories across life-courses, they were more likely to stress these continuities than to reflect that their lives had adapted to in response to social and cultural change.

For example, Phil and Fred Avery happily recalled 1950s experiences of mischievous childhood games, which they characterised as ingenious, imaginative and full of masculine adventure. They consciously located their exploits amidst an authoritarian parental culture, in which punishment was 'all physical';<sup>24</sup> thus making their childhood selves appear all the more daring. As Phil commented, proudly: 'you see, that's the difference between the kids today and us: we never got caught!'<sup>25</sup> Remembering a similar period, John Taylor echoed the Averys' disapproval of children today, but his childhood experience

appeared much more restricted. He explained: 'We did none of this staying up all night like kids do now. I'd go up to bed, read in bed, to keep out the way!'<sup>26</sup> His tendency to 'keep out the way' endured, as he explained: 'I've never been one for becoming part of a group really... I've always felt on the outside of groups, even at parties'.<sup>27</sup> Both the Averys and John Taylor imagined a historic culture of authoritarian parenting. But while their responses to it were different, their respective feelings had continued into adulthood. Phil remembered his childhood self as cunning, but also that 'kids today' have failed to live up to their standards. Similarly, John's memory of feeling isolated was reflected in his present-day attitudes towards groups and parties.

For father and son Peter and Roger Wilkins, it was important to frame an intimate memory about riding on Peter's tractor in an era less encumbered by rules and regulation. Roger explained:

To begin with my dad used to be with me. When I was too young to actually reach the pedals, I used to sit between his legs, with hands on the steering wheel, and he used to guide... guide me so I didn't do anything stupid. But he was the one controlling the speed and the brakes, and things like that [smiles]. It was all good fun though, good experience... but it was a... let me think [pause]. You see these days, when so many farms have accidents on them, things like that... when I was doing it with my dad, they didn't really think about health and safety, all this kind of stuff.<sup>28</sup>

In a separate interview, unprompted, Peter also described how Roger would spend all day with him on the tractor and shared his views on 'health and safety'. When I asked if he was helping him with work on the farm, he replied: 'Well, no,

he just used to be with me... no, he didn't do anything, just... with me, you know. You'd never be able to do it now – health and safety and all that'.<sup>29</sup> When I had asked Roger whether his sister had also ridden the tractor, he replied that she had not: her only engagement with the farm was when her father taught her how to look after the chickens. In Peter's account however, he described how all three of them would go on the tractor, and he produced a photograph to illustrate it. Both Roger and Peter took pleasure in remembering moments of father-son bonding in a past less inhibited by 'health and safety'. The absence of Roger's sister from his recollections illustrates the way cultural understandings of gender-appropriate childhood behaviour can distort individual memories. More poignantly, however, it confirms his conscious intention of preserving this intimate recollection as something only he and his father shared. His smile upon remembering it shows how the feelings it evoked had endured.

Mark Birchwood also recalled happy childhood memories of parenting, but his negotiations of them in the present were held uneasily. As we saw earlier, the quality of his father Alan's handiwork elicited abiding feelings of inadequacy in Mark. Such feelings also extended to Mark's reflections on fatherhood, in which he again compared past with present. Mark described a blissful 1960s childhood, characterised by joyful holidays, a loving and supportive home-life, and a father whose kindness and patience he thought to be model qualities for parenthood. On becoming a father himself, Mark aspired to emulate his parents, but he also reflected on his abilities with some misgivings, as he explained: 'I don't think I've done such a good job as being a parent as they have'.<sup>30</sup> Mark's negative self-reflections illustrate the different turns emotional inheritances can take as they

are passed down generations. They also show how negotiations of those experiences remain in motion. Despite having cause to reflect on a happy upbringing, his memories amplified ongoing feelings of self-doubt.

John Taylor bore his emotional inheritance even more weightily. As we saw earlier, his reflections evoked an isolated figure with few friends, who often played alone. John's account contrasted with that of his father, Bill, who was more inclined to emphasise his family's enduring closeness, as he explained: 'a lot of people never see their children, but they all come 'round here'.<sup>31</sup> However, although he was never punished physically as a child, John remembered being frightened of his father and feeling distanced from his mother, who in his infancy worked as a night nurse and slept during the day. Asked to compare his views on children in the present-day, with life as a child in the 1950s and 1960s, he explained:

When I see children nowadays, I'm er, I'm quite glad, I mean, I'm quite glad we didn't have any children 'cause I can't stand the little brutes [laughs]. I don't think I would have made a good father. But I might have done, but never... we'll never, never find out. But I suspect that because my father... I don't, as I said earlier, I don't recall my mum and dad hugging me, or being particularly, you know, physical with me.... erm... I would have probably been like that to my own children, had I had any... which... without wanting to be... and.... I would have passed on the traits that my parents had passed on to me, I would have passed on to me own children.... You know, psychologically and emotionally, and it probably wouldn't have been a good thing.<sup>32</sup>

Just as John had reflected that his childhood feelings of isolation had continued into adulthood, he also articulated more recent attitudes towards fatherhood in

response to past experiences. At a cultural level, his reasoning can be seen to accord with the growing prominence of psychoanalytic discourse in the 1970s (when John came of age), which looked to the family and childhood for explanations of psychological discord in adults.<sup>33</sup> At a personal level, his comments provide a sad and touching illustration of the emotional legacies experiences of parenting can cast.

As with the Averys and Wilkinses, the experiences of Mark Birchwood and John Taylor illustrate the importance of present-day contexts in providing psychic, social and cultural markers for making conscious judgments on the past. The retrospectivity of these accounts provides insight into experiences of social and cultural change over time. But in accounting for those changes, men stress continuities of thoughts, feelings and behaviours deriving from longstanding child-parent relationships.

### **Narrative traits in dialogues**

In interpreting the dialogues that emerge out of these contexts, it has been productive to examine certain narrative traits. In particular, my interviewees' uses of pronouns provided clues to feelings towards family members, and with their wider social worlds. Instinctive uses of 'they', as opposed to 'we', for example, often represented family unity or division. Mark Birchwood remembered how, as a boy growing up in the 1960s, his parents had bought him a toy action figure, 'Brains', from the television show Thunderbirds. For them it was preferable to the popular Action Man toys, which were not commensurate with their views about the military (like many young liberals in the 1960s,



Mark's father Alan was a critic of Britain's involvement in international conflicts). Any upset, however, was mitigated by the Birchwood parents' willingness to compromise by way of a collective, family strategy. Mark, having been used to 'close substitutes' for toys deemed too expensive, remembered: 'I thought, oh, this is a close substitute for an Action Man, and so we did the thing of saying... I bought Action Man clothes for Brains out of Thunderbirds, so he was dressed in camouflage and had a gun, and everything like that'.<sup>34</sup> The 'we' in this sentence betrayed a closeness Mark felt to his parents, which was also reflected in my interview with Alan. For example, remembering when Mark had hesitated about pursuing a degree in dentistry after passing his A-Levels, Alan described how 'we said, well what else could you go into with what you've done?'<sup>35</sup> The sense of familial intimacy was summed up in Mark's memory of a family holiday, which was peppered by collective pronouns:

*We had holidays down near... we had a couple of holidays, at least one, in Bridport. I remember it was pee-ing with rain, so we had – dad has this stuff – a useful sheet of polythene. So we were all sitting, backs to the sea-wall with this sheet of polythene draped over us like a tent... [laughs]*<sup>36</sup>

As they huddle together in comic defiance of the rain, the Birchwoods appear as a happy, collective family unit. The anecdote also underlines Alan's practical resourcefulness and impression of fatherly care.

In John Taylor's descriptions of family holidays, he was more inclined to use 'I' and 'them' than the Birchwood's 'we', drawing attention to feelings of separation. Again, John's reflections contrast with those of his father Bill, who used family holidays to further exemplify his family's closeness: in summary, they were 'nice

times, really good times'.<sup>37</sup> However, after describing two incidents in which he felt scared while stuck on a cliff path, and fell and hurt himself in some sand-dunes, John explained:

Things that don't have any trauma attached to them I don't really remember... I'm sure there were lovely, you know, nice holidays and... I probably, I probably got sat outside a pub occasionally with a bottle of Coke and a pack of crisps like everybody did in those days... and other days I went out with them walking... or... on the beach... or whatever they were doing. Driving around looking at places, probably.<sup>38</sup>

In understanding John's narrative traits in this passage, it is useful to adopt Simon Schrager's approach to analysing social relationships in oral testimony. Schrager identifies three possible 'aspects of composition': 'the position of the teller vis-à-vis events'; 'similarities and oppositions in different tellers' versions of events'; and 'categories that the teller employs when generalising and individualising events'.<sup>39</sup> Applying these to John's testimony, firstly, we can detect a shift in John's position as 'teller': he moves from *personal* 'traumatic' recollections of cliff paths and sand-dunes, to *imagined* 'nice' memories of pubs, walking and driving around, told from his parents' perspective. Second, there appears to be a potential 'opposition' between John's version and his father's, as Bill fails to recount the particular traumas remembered by his son. Finally, in his description of pubs, Coke, crisps, walks and drives, John employs 'categories' deriving from culturally available scripts of 1960s British family holidays 'in order to generalise an event'. Alert to this use of generalisation, he qualifies it with the word 'probably', which he uses three times. The discrepancies in this passage, illuminated by Schrager's analytic approach, offer insight into John's

social relationships within and beyond his family. His wish to join an imagined social world of pubs, walks and drives is undermined by his personal 'trauma' memories and the sense of separateness that he emphasises with his use of pronouns.

By way of contrast, Mark Birchwood's recourse to generalised memories took on forms of happy fantasy. For example, remembering a favourite holiday destination, he commented 'In my mind we went there hundreds of times, to this place, but it probably wasn't more than, like, half a dozen'.<sup>40</sup> At another point in the interview, he remarked on how 'the summers went on forever and all that kind of stuff'.<sup>41</sup> For Mark, insertions of vague, fantastical generalities alongside vivid anecdotes, such as the Bridport sea-wall moment (see above), contributed to his overwhelming sense of childhood contentment. In contrast, John's mundane imaginings of walks, drives and pubs did little to offset his memories of particular traumatic events. By analysing the narrative traits in both accounts, we are able to access rich insight into the respondents' experiences of their social relationships with their parents, and the emotional legacies of these relationships fifty or sixty years on.

### **Inter-subjective dialogues**

As we have seen, fathers and sons reflected on their emotional lives in ongoing dialogues with their emotional inheritances, with real and imagined social worlds, and with prevailing cultural scripts. They also told their stories in dialogue with the researcher. The interview has been the subject of sustained debate in the historiography on oral history method, particularly around issues

of empathy and researcher-subjectivity.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, as Valerie Yow has suggested, 'when we pretend there is nothing going on inside of us that is influencing the research and interpretation, we prevent ourselves from using an essential research tool'.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, oral history has its roots in giving voice to, and building solidarities with, disempowered groups; and such motivations were often premised on mutual sympathy between researcher and subject. But as Carrie Hamilton has shown in her discussion of the mixed feelings she felt as a feminist towards female Basque separatists, the relationship between emotional engagement and political solidarity can be complex, leading to moments of tension as well as harmony.<sup>44</sup> Hamilton turned to self-reflection, including techniques of dream analysis, in order to understand the inter-subjective dynamics at play in the course of her research. The subjects of my research have not been selected in order to interrogate such highly politicised agendas; however, like Hamilton, I have found certain psychoanalytic concepts useful when reflecting on my subject position in relation to my interviewees, particularly with reference to my age, gender, family and class identities. My self-reflection has not extended to dream analysis; however, I have been attentive to the roles of unconscious, as well as conscious, communications in my interviews.

As Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson have reminded us, the objectives of oral historians and psychotherapists are quite different. We do not, after all, ask our respondents to recline on couches, free-associate or record their dreams; our interest is in historical research, not therapeutic outcomes.<sup>45</sup> However, as Michael Roper has suggested, the situational similarities between oral history interviews and psychoanalytic therapy sessions demand that we explore the

utility of certain Freudian interpretive principles.<sup>46</sup> Like psychoanalysis, oral history takes the form of an open discussion with attentive listening; it also often includes reflections on early family experiences; and in both settings, narrations of 'emotional content' may expose feelings about the past that remain unresolved.<sup>47</sup> Roper's interest in the association of oral history with psychoanalysis follows work by Karl Figlio, which encourages us to see interviews as social relationships.<sup>48</sup> As in any other social relationship, Figlio suggests, oral history interviews are subject to the presence of *transference* and *counter-transference*, in which past experiences of each party are transmitted unconsciously into the conversation.

During my interviews with fathers and sons, I have found evidence of transference channelled through unconscious associations with my age and family identity. This was the case in my interview with Peter Wilkins, the farmer, who first became a father in the early 1960s. In the course of his narration, he had been clear that as a new parent he did not want to be as controlling as his parents had been:

[My parents] would always try and plan, or suggest what we did, in any situation... and, erm.... they used to have their say, whether it was asked for or not... and, as Roger or Catherine were brought up... I told myself... I wouldn't tell them what to do, but I would encourage them to do well, what they wanted to do themselves... I wouldn't say I resented what my parents were – you want to do this and do the other – but... it's... that sort of thing. And as I became responsible for others growing up, I made the decision that I wouldn't do that.<sup>49</sup>

My interview with Peter had been slightly stilted, with some abrupt responses and pauses in the conversation's flow. He would also regularly check in with me for reassurances, using phrases such as 'if you follow what I'm saying?' and 'do you understand me?'.<sup>50</sup> Quite late in the interview, he interrupted his own thoughts on being a grandparent to address me again: 'Am I patronising you?'.<sup>51</sup> After assuring him that I did not feel at all patronised, he explained that *he* had felt patronised by his grandparents, and this had led him to make efforts to speak to his own grandchildren 'on the level'.<sup>52</sup> As I listened back, his hesitations appeared to stem from a heightened cautiousness about patronising younger generations. He was transferring experiences of his own grandfatherhood, fatherhood and childhood, into the conversation with me, who, approximately 40 years his junior, might have represented a child or grandchild.

Equally, in the course of listening back to the interviews, I became aware of points at which *my* experiences and relationships entered the conversation unconsciously, as counter-transference. For example, during the conversation about Mark Birchwood's perceived shortcomings at DIY (see above), I noticed my attempt to make light of it and comment on my own deficiencies. In the following excerpt, Mark's laughter had in fact been drowned out by my own: '...[Dad] was having a clear-out of his tools and he said "you don't do so much of the DIY do you?" [pause] I thought I did [laughs]...'.<sup>53</sup> In the same passage of conversation, when Mark drew attention to a bookshelf that he thought did not 'look too hard' to make, I replied 'it does to me!'.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, in my interview with Alan, I noticed my silence in response to a joke he made about Mark having not tried hard enough at university, and my tentative responses to his

descriptions of Mark's faltering early career. In both examples, I felt an affinity with Mark. On reflection, hearing about his relationship with Alan had roused unresolved feelings about my relationship with my own father (who died several years ago), which manifested in my losing composure at certain points in both interviews. Such examples illustrate some of the ways in which unconscious communication relating to our own family identities can come to form part of the stories that are remembered and presented to us.

Along with family, gender also informed inter-subjective dynamics in my interviews. Literature on interviewing as a gendered process has suggested that men interviewing men creates a competitive dynamic, as each seeks to impose their authority in the conversation.<sup>55</sup> In general, however, the gendering of my interviews has been more benign, with men noticeably concerned with establishing a rapport around traditionally masculine subjects. For example, I had a number of substantive conversations about sport, in which my interest in football and cricket enabled a free-flowing discussion, fostered by a shared understanding. My interest in pop music led to similarly rich testimony. However, discussions of cars, motorbikes and DIY, which often represented significant sites of connection for fathers and sons, were sometimes foreshortened as a result of my ignorance. Moreover, men often reached for subjects that conformed with gender-normative interests, as attractive counterpoints to discussions of parenting and childcare, on which they felt less comfortable. Where men *were* more open about their experiences of parenting, this sometimes coincided with the revelation of my own fatherhood, which served to create a safe space for discussing a subject most men still saw as a

primarily a feminine concern. This gendered inter-subjectivity was dynamically constituted in the interview; doubtless, it also contributed to the psychic, social and cultural anchor points my subjects drew on when narrating their histories.

On one occasion, gender intersected with class and politics as part of a more confrontational encounter, which was redolent of the masculine competitive dynamic mentioned above. An interview with a retired major general and his son was marked by intermittent changes in mood as my interviewees turned to question me. Where Peter Wilkins (above) had questioned me only for reassurance ('do you understand me?'), the Henrys' enquiries of me, on reflection, had the effect of affirming our different class identities. Some of the references that illuminated this distinction were representative of peculiarly masculine cultures to which I was excluded, such as certain City of London (i.e. the financial district) institutions and officer hierarchies in the army. But arguably, although classed, thwarted discussion of such topics merely corresponded with the sort of foreshortened conversations about motor cars and DIY I had experienced with other respondents. Towards the end of our interview, however, the son, Charlie, directed a question towards me which appeared more provocative:

I mean if you look at the ageing problem in the UK and the pressure on the health service.... If you're in Japan or Taiwan [where the interviewee had spent time], this is up to the family – why should the state be dealing with this? I mean, I don't know if your parents are still alive, but will you look after them or will you just send them off to a state nursing home and the state can look after them?<sup>56</sup>



I was discomforted by the remark and didn't respond. On listening back, I was able to locate my feeling in the context of a broader narrative of inter-subjective class difference: such was their wealth, it seemed unlikely they would ever have cause to depend on state care. Moreover, their testimony throughout had been characterised by what Mike Savage and Andrew Miles have described as 'gentlemanly motifs' – judicious uses of rhetorical understatement in order to confirm a sense of class distinction.<sup>57</sup> Charlie's question to me was a more confrontational demonstration of the same instinct. In the context of my wider study, the exchange reinforced the impression that Norman and Charlie had been more concerned with the sustenance of class hierarchy than other fathers and sons, whose responses about class identity had been more ambiguous.

Such confrontational exchanges were exceptional. More often, I was struck by my subjects' enjoyment of their interviews. In one of several follow-up emails I received, a son thanked me for a 'joyful and most memorable occasion';<sup>58</sup> in another response, mid-interview, a subject commented 'This is all good stuff!' ... 'I've never spoken... you suddenly start thinking and the words start tumbling out...'.<sup>59</sup> Joanna Bornat has written about the therapeutic potential of oral history for older people, who can find in it a welcome counterpoint to feelings of distance and exclusion from contemporary life.<sup>60</sup> Although it is beyond the scope of the study – and my training – to assess whether this has been the case for my fathers and sons (who ranged in age from late fifties to mid nineties), I have had increasing cause to reflect on the *purpose* and effects of my research in this context. At one level the interviews have formed part of an intellectual process

with the aim of producing a piece of academic work; but at another, they have been sites of productive reflection for interviewees and interviewer alike.

## **Conclusion**

The dynamic interaction of the oral history interview, in which memories are recalled and viewpoints shared, provides a vivid illustration of how reflections on the past are negotiated in the present. My research with fathers and sons has suggested ways in which such negotiations take place with recourse to material culture and from the vantage points of particular life-stages. By deploying methods of narrative analysis, I have explored the relationships fathers and sons had with each other, with cultural scripts, and with wider social worlds. By using psychoanalytic interpretive strategies, I have illuminated unconscious, inter-subjective transmissions, and shown how they can contribute to intellectual conclusions. Binding these findings together has been men's interactions with available modes of masculine identity, which were drawn from culture, but processed subjectively. Overwhelmingly, men were influenced by continuities of feeling emanating from particular family circumstances. Oral history's retrospectivity enables such processes to be assessed across life-courses, against contexts of socio-cultural change. The emotional lives of fathers and sons were bound by history but also unstable; their legacies continued to affect thoughts, feelings and actions, as part of emotional histories which remain in motion.

## **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> \*Author's name removed\*, *The Emotional Lives and Legacies of Fathers and Sons in Britain, 1945-1974*, 2019 (forthcoming) *University of Cambridge*.

<sup>2</sup> The whiteness of my sample reflects the relatively low levels of racial and ethnic diversity in Britain for the period I am studying, and its concentration in particular urban areas. That said, my thesis does address 'whiteness' as a racial category and considers these men's responses to immigration.

<sup>3</sup> These details are offered while conscious of the many pitfalls of using men's occupations as sole determinants of class status, including the absence of women's jobs in the analysis and non-occupational markers of class identity.

<sup>4</sup> In 1971, the percentage of working-age men who were economically active remained high, at 91%, as the equivalent number for women had risen sharply, but only to 57%. See Ian Gazeley (2007) 'Manual Work and Pay, 1900-1970' *Work and Pay in Twentieth-century Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2007), pp 55-56. The perception that women's work was ancillary to men's remained stubbornly engrained. See Dolly Smith Wilson, 'A New Look at the Affluent Worker: The Good Working Mother in Post-War Britain' in *Twentieth Century British History*, 17 (2006).

<sup>5</sup> Laura King, *Family Men: Fatherhood and Masculinity in Britain, c.1914-1960*, Oxford University Press, 2015; Julie-Marie Strange, *Fatherhood and the British Working Class, 1865-1914*, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Sian Pooley and Kaveri Qureshi, *Parenthood Between Generations: Transforming Reproductive Cultures*, Berghahn Books, 2016, p 1.

<sup>7</sup> Pooley and Qureshi, 2016, pp 5, 7-8.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Carrie Hamilton, 'Moving Feelings: Nationalism, Feminisation and the Emotions of Politics' in *Oral History*, 38, 2010; Sheena Rolph and Dorothy Atkinson, 'Emotion in Narrating the History of Learning Disability' in *Oral History*, 38 2010.

<sup>9</sup> For an excellent discussion on these concepts, together with Peter Stearns' 'emotionology', see Jan Plamper, 'The History of Emotions: An Interview with William Reddy, Barbara Rosewein and Peter Stearns' in *History and Theory*, 49 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Roper outlines this critique of the history of emotions in Michael Roper, 'The Unconscious Work of History' in *Cultural and Social History*, 11 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Margaret Wetherell, 'Trends in the Turn to Affect: A Social Psychological Critique' in *Body & Society*, 21 (2015), p 147.

<sup>12</sup> David Sutton and Michael Hernandez, 'Voices in the Kitchen: Cooking Tools as Inalienable Possessions' in *Oral History*, 35, 2007.

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<sup>13</sup> Sutton and Hernandez, 2007, p 70.

<sup>14</sup> ELL09 Interview with Jack and David Shotton, from the *Emotional Lives and Legacies* project, recorded in Tyne and Wear, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2017. All interviews cited were conducted by the author. Original names of interviewees are cited unless indicated by 'ps.'.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Roper also identifies men's reification of workplace material culture in Michael Roper, 'Product Fetishism and the British Company Man, 1945-85' in *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain Since 1800*, Routledge, 1991.

<sup>16</sup> Janis Wilton, 'Telling Objects: Material Culture and Memory in Oral History Interviews' in *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, 30, 2008, especially p 46.

<sup>17</sup> ELL05 Interview with Mark Birchwood (ps.) recorded in Sussex, 26<sup>th</sup> April 2016.

<sup>18</sup> ELL03 Interview with Fred and Phil Avery, recorded in Sussex, 14<sup>th</sup> April 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things*, Polity, 2008, p 163.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Thompson, 'Imagination and Passivity in Leisure: Coventry Car Workers and their Families from the 1920s to the 1990s' in David Thoms, Len Holden and Tim Claydon (eds) *The Motor Car and Popular Culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, Ashgate, 1998.

<sup>21</sup> Anna Green, 'Individual Remembering and 'Collective Memory': Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates' in *Oral History*, 32, 2004, pp 42-43.

<sup>22</sup> Joanna Bornat, 'Remembering and Reworking Emotions: The Reanalysis of Emotion in an Interview ' in *Oral History*, 38, 2010.

<sup>23</sup> William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p 124; Peter and Carol Stearns, 'Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards' in *American Historical Review*, 90/4, 1985.

<sup>24</sup> ELL03 Interview with Fred and Phil Avery, recorded in Sussex, 14<sup>th</sup> April 2016.

<sup>25</sup> ELL03 Interview with Fred and Phil Avery, recorded in Sussex, 14<sup>th</sup> April 2016.

<sup>26</sup> ELL01 Interview with John Taylor (ps.) recorded in Middlesex, 5<sup>th</sup> October 2015.

<sup>27</sup> ELL01 Interview with John Taylor (ps.) recorded in Middlesex, 5<sup>th</sup> October 2015.

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<sup>28</sup> ELL07 Interview with Roger Wilkins (ps.) recorded in Cambridgeshire, 2nd February 2017.

<sup>29</sup> ELL06 Interview with Peter Wilkins (ps.) recorded in Cambridgeshire, 10<sup>th</sup> November 2016.

<sup>30</sup> ELL05 Interview with Mark Birchwood (ps.) recorded in Sussex, 26<sup>th</sup> April 2016.

<sup>31</sup> ELL01 Interview with Bill Taylor (ps.) recorded in Middlesex, 5<sup>th</sup> October 2015.

<sup>32</sup> ELL01, Interview with John Taylor (ps.) recorded in Middlesex, 5<sup>th</sup> October 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Deborah Cohen, *Family Secrets: Living with Shame from the Victorians to the Present Day*, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 223-226.

<sup>34</sup> ELL01, Interview with John Taylor (ps.) recorded in Middlesex, 5<sup>th</sup> October 2015.

<sup>35</sup> ELL04 Interview with Alan Birchwood (ps.) recorded in Sussex, 26<sup>th</sup> April 2016 (my emphasis).

<sup>36</sup> ELL05 Interview with Mark Birchwood (ps.) recorded in Sussex, 26<sup>th</sup> April 2016 (my emphases).

<sup>37</sup> ELL01 Interview with Bill Taylor (ps.) recorded in Middlesex, 5<sup>th</sup> October 2015.

<sup>38</sup> ELL01 Interview with John Taylor (ps.) recorded in Middlesex, 5<sup>th</sup> October 2015.

<sup>39</sup> Samuel Schrager, 1983, 'What is Social in Oral History?' in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds) *The Oral History Reader*, Routledge, 1983, p 285.

<sup>40</sup> ELL05 Interview with Mark Birchwood (ps.) recorded in Sussex, 26<sup>th</sup> April 2016.

<sup>41</sup> ELL05 Interview with Mark Birchwood (ps.) recorded in Sussex, 26<sup>th</sup> April 2016.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack (1998) 'Learning to Listen: Interview techniques and analyses' in Perks and Thomson (eds) *The Oral History Reader*, 1998; Kathleen M. Blee, 'Evidence, Empathy, and Ethics: Lessons from Oral Histories of the Klan' in *The Journal of American History*, 80 (1993); Katherine Borland 'That's not what I said': Interpretive conflict in oral narrative

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research' in Perks and Thomson (eds) *The Oral History Reader*, 1991; Carrie Hamilton, 'On Being a 'Good' Interviewer: Empathy, Ethics and the Politics of Oral History' in *Oral History*, 36, 2008.

<sup>43</sup> Valerie Yow, "'Do I Like Them too Much?': Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa' in *Oral History Review*, 24, 1997, p 70.

<sup>44</sup> Hamilton, 'Moving Feelings: Nationalism, Feminisation and the Emotions of Politics' in *Oral History*, 32, 2010.

<sup>45</sup> Raphael Samuel and Paul Richard Thompson, *The Myths we Live by*, Routledge, 1990, pp 1-2.

<sup>46</sup> Michael Roper, 'Analysing the Analysed: Transference and Counter-Transference in the Oral History Encounter' in *Oral History*, 31, 2003.

<sup>47</sup> Roper, 2003, p. 22.

<sup>48</sup> Karl Figlio, 'Oral History and the Unconscious' in *History Workshop Journal*, 26, 1988.

<sup>49</sup> ELL06 Interview with Peter Wilkins (ps.) recorded in Cambridgeshire, 10<sup>th</sup> November 2016.

<sup>50</sup> ELL06 Interview with Peter Wilkins (ps.) recorded in Cambridgeshire, 10<sup>th</sup> November 2016.

<sup>51</sup> ELL06 Interview with Peter Wilkins (ps.) recorded in Cambridgeshire, 10<sup>th</sup> November 2016.

<sup>52</sup> ELL06 Interview with Peter Wilkins (ps.) recorded in Cambridgeshire, 10<sup>th</sup> November 2016.

<sup>53</sup> ELL05 Interview with Mark Birchwood (ps.) recorded in Sussex, 26<sup>th</sup> April 2016.

<sup>54</sup> ELL05 Interview with Mark Birchwood (ps.) recorded in Sussex, 26<sup>th</sup> April 2016.

<sup>55</sup> For a discussion on this, see Yow, pp. 73-74.

<sup>56</sup> ELL08 Interview with Norman and Charlie Henry (ps.) recorded in London, 14<sup>th</sup> February 2017.

<sup>57</sup> Andrew Miles and Mike Savage, 'The Strange Survival Story of the English Gentleman, 1945-2010' in *Cultural and Social History*, 9, 2012, p 603.

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<sup>58</sup> Relating to ELL03 Interview with Fred and Phil Avery, recorded in Sussex, 14<sup>th</sup> April 2016.

<sup>59</sup> ELL05 Interview with Mark Birchwood (ps.) recorded in Sussex, 26<sup>th</sup> April 2016.

<sup>60</sup> Joanna Bornat, 'Oral History as a Social Movement: Reminiscence and Older People' in *Oral History*, 17, 1989.