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Phenomenology and the Problems of Oral History

R. Kenneth Kirby

Abstract: In this article, the author argues that many of the best practices of oral history reflect phenomenological thinking even though practitioners may not describe themselves as using phenomenological methods. The author suggests that knowledge and application of phenomenology can clarify or minimize such potential problems as interviewer bias and informant unreliability and can refute accusations that oral history is less reliable than history taken from documents.

Keywords: Cultural history, historical truth, Husserl, phenomenology, subjectivity

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Several years ago, while a colleague and I were preparing a conference paper on a joint service learning project we had done in an interdisciplinary communications course we both teach, she asked me what my communication theory was. When I said I did not really know (my primary background is literature), she asked me to describe it, and at the end of my brief explanation, she replied, "Oh, okay, that's phenomenology." At that point I was not much better off than before. But once I started reading phenomenology, I discovered that she was right—I was a phenomenologist without being aware of it. I began studying the philosophy and applying it, in a more deliberate and disciplined fashion, to my various courses and projects in communications, literature, and oral history.¹

Definition and description of phenomenology

Phenomenology resists a brief, layman-friendly definition, but it addresses the structures of consciousness, both of what we perceive and how we perceive it, and

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advocates a “bracketing” or suspension of taken-for-granted attitudes about reality in order to reconstruct a more accurate view of self and world. It explores the subjectivity and flux of human knowledge in ways that can be brought to bear on the dynamics of oral history projects. Phenomenology assumes that we all have a prescientific, natural attitude toward the world around us, to the events we experience, and to the culture we have inherited, as these things appear to our consciousness; this natural attitude gives us a framework for interpreting our experience. But this natural attitude does not really look at the essence of things and experiences. In order to truly see and know, we must bracket or suspend belief in the normal assumptions we have had. Maurice Natanson describes it as “placing in methodological suspension the basic believing-in the world.” We must “get beneath the fundamental assumptions of daily life, to see our taken-for-granted attitudes toward experience as well as ourselves from a vantage point which did not presuppose the very object of our concern.”² Once we advance in this direction—and granted, no one can fully achieve such a vantage point—we can look afresh, past many prejudices and false assumptions. Then we are able to rebuild a “life-world” that sees more clearly. In the words of Max Van Manen, “phenomenological research consists of reflectively bringing into nearness that which tends to be obscure, that which tends to evade the intelligibility of our natural attitude of everyday life.”³ Phenomenology, while not a philosophy of idealism, assumes that we cannot know the world objectively; all we can know for sure are the phenomena that appear to us in consciousness. But these phenomena, despite their subjectivity, are all we know, and all we need to know, of the world beyond us. Our perceptions of things and events, experienced, interpreted, and then communicated to others, form our history, our culture, our world.

Many scholars who conduct oral histories intuitively use phenomenological methods and concepts even if they do not describe themselves as operating from a phenomenological standpoint. Consider this passage by Valerie Raleigh Yow:

And yet, is it not the meaning attributed to the facts that makes them significant or not? After all, history—or society—does not exist outside human consciousness. History is what the people who lived it make of it and what the others who observe the participants or listen to them or study their records make of it. And present society is what we make of it.⁴

There is much phenomenological thinking here, though Yow makes no direct reference to phenomenology or to any of its key figures anywhere in her text. My purpose, therefore, goes little beyond merely articulating, from a phenomenological perspective, what I perceive to be some of the “best practices” from existing oral history methods, and I hope to provide only a general introduction to a subject that would require a thick volume to do it justice.⁵ My plan is to briefly outline the problems associated with oral history, then to discuss some key principles of phenomenology that help clarify and minimize those problems, and to conclude with a few examples from the history of Five Mile Creek.

Problems of oral history

There seems to be a fairly broad consensus about the problems involved in gathering reliable data from oral history interviews. How can the interviewer ask relevant,

informed questions yet still provide an atmosphere that will not improperly influence the informant's responses? How can the historian evaluate the responses of the informant, which can be tainted in a variety of ways? And related to both of these is the larger issue of the objectivity or subjectivity of all historical data, indeed of all human knowledge. Glenn Whitman sums it up well when he tells his students, as they embark on their oral history projects, that "all historical sources should be treated with equal skepticism. Such skepticism should also be turned on themselves as interviewers."⁶

Problems associated with the interviewer

Concerning problems associated with the interviewer, Paul Thompson's statement of almost thirty years ago is even more relevant today: "There is an abundance of sociological discussion on the interview method, the sources of bias in it, and how these may be estimated and minimized."⁷ Historians are aware that the location of the interview can affect the kind of responses but that informants do not necessarily respond better to interviewers of the same class, gender, and race. An ill-prepared interviewer with less-than-relevant questions can encourage a broad range of unreliable responses from the informant. Yet the interviewer needs to balance the goals of the project, which may require certain kinds of opening and leading questions, with the need to develop a neutral, nonthreatening atmosphere for the interview so the informant will feel free to answer as candidly as possible.

Donald A. Ritchie observes that the potential for bias in the interviewer's questions is frequently based on the research agenda. Ritchie points out that "an individual researcher usually approaches an interview with a thesis to prove and may assume that anything contradicting that thesis is wrong," though he warns against this approach. "Interviewees may see things entirely differently from the researcher," he remarks, "and although interviewees might be biased or just plain wrong, so might the researcher's thesis. The best information to emerge from an oral history is often completely unexpected ..."⁸ When historians "bracket" at least some of their assumptions, they are practicing a principle that reflects phenomenological method. Oral history literature is full of accounts of interviewer agendas that were abandoned for a more fruitful set of assumptions, though of course there may be just as many studies in which the interviewer's initial assumptions proved to be fairly correct. Ritchie acknowledges that sometimes the interviewer should guide the interviewee's thinking. When statements of fact and other observations accompany the interviewer's question, the informant's memory can be stimulated, but Ritchie cautions that the interviewer must be careful not to allow such statements to distort or improperly influence the responses.⁹

Problems associated with the informant

Another set of problems in oral history methodology is associated with the informant. These deal with such matters as the selection of informants—whether the group of people available to interview is representative of the general population—with the location of the interview, the degree of trust in the interviewer,

the reliability of memory, the willingness of the informant to be candid, and the informant's tendency to be nostalgic. With some issues, such as the issue of memory, there are of course disagreements about how much of a problem actually exists, especially as it applies to older informants. Thompson provides evidence that the memories elderly people have of their youth and life are about as reliable as any form of historical evidence, asserting that "the problem of memory power is not much more serious for interviews with old people in normal health than it is with younger adults." In fact, for some older adults, when retirement or loss of spouse triggers a "life review" and the informant comes to believe "that active life is over, achievement is completed," long-term memory may become even more reliable.¹⁰ Yet the question remains as to how reliable any memory really is. How can historians be sure that events are being reported accurately, even honestly? Since most oral historians are aware that "the perfectly frank interview, of course, is only a myth,"¹¹ how can they be sure they are recognizing biased statements and are correctly identifying the source of bias?

To be sure, as Thompson points out, often such questions are less troubling than they seem. "The key point is to be aware of the potential sources of bias, and the means for countering them One of the deepest lessons of oral history is the uniqueness, as well as representativeness, of every life story."¹² The historian must actually consider whether bias is part of the lesson to be learned, for as Thompson observes,

... neither contemporary nor historical evidence is a direct reflection of physical facts or behaviour. Facts and events are reported in a way which gives them social meaning. The information provided by interview evidence of relatively recent events, or current situations, can be assumed to lie somewhere between the actual social behaviour and the social expectations or norms of the time. With interviews which go back further, there is the added possibility of distortions influenced by subsequent changes in values and norms, which may perhaps quite unconsciously alter perceptions. With time we would expect this danger to grow.¹³

Thompson's statement that "facts and events are reported in a way which gives them social meaning" reflects phenomenological thinking about the subjectivity of both individual experience and history. It is at least partly in the "social expectations and norms" that historical meaning and values lie, and phenomenological method attempts to provide the frame of reference with which to identify the truth that can be found in bias. This could happen either by identifying the nature of the bias or showing that it is the very bias that provides the meaning, because the word "bias" sometimes carries an unfairly loaded implication. Informants may not always agree upon what events occurred, or in what order, or for what reason, but something in the recording or telling of the events just might reveal the important "expectations and norms" that are the most valuable part of the story.

This may be especially true of cultural history such as the present study of Five Mile Creek, where the primary goal was to examine the informants' childhood experiences growing up amid adverse economic and environmental conditions. Now granted, there was a need for historical facts: to create interpretive signage for locations along the greenway, the Five Mile Creek Greenway Partnership wanted to identify sites on the creek where churches baptized and children played, where improvised

ball fields and other recreational facilities were located, and where industrial ruins could be found in areas long since reforested. But there was also a desire to understand the informants' attitudes about growing up in an area characterized primarily by brown fields, abandoned stores, and a horribly polluted creek. As Natanson has commented,

... the 'what' rather than the 'why' of experience is the first concern. In the end, it may be that the 'why' of events can be understood through a reconstruction of the 'what' of experience. But that demands a searching out of the meaning of sources, a rebuilding of forgotten or apparently inaccessible origins, and a tracing out of the routes we traverse in becoming "men of the world."¹⁴

For the present study, my goal was to move from the "what" to the "why" of the experiences of those who grew up along Five Mile Creek and then to provide a framework for thinking about how we should value the creek and its environs today based on the way it has been experienced and valued in the past.

Problems associated with the subjectivity of knowledge

Oral history raises the question raised by all history and indeed all pursuits of knowledge: how sure can the researcher be of the validity of his or her results? If the goal of history is to uncover what really happened and why, when can historians say their job is complete? In today's scientific era, there hangs a sort of atmosphere of certainty over the natural sciences, a belief or assumption, whether from scientists or lay people, it is hard to say, that some day science just might be able to explain *everything*. The most abstract phenomena—religious faith, altruism, guilt, laughter—may ultimately be explainable by chemistry and physics, by the quantifiable behavior of brain cells, organic molecules, and subatomic particles. Yet Valerie Yow speaks for me and I believe for many in the humanities and social sciences, when she says, "All of us who study humans—whether with quantitative or qualitative methods—know that we cannot hold our conclusions with absolute certainty."¹⁵ Given the unavoidable subjectivity of all human perception, all conclusions have to be considered tentative, all disciplines open to further understanding.

Historians themselves, for the most part, feel that the thoroughness of their methods enables them to come to some degree of certainty about the truth of the past. Debates persist, of course, and new approaches arise, but when a sufficient number of scholars who share an interest in a certain place and time in history begin to draw similar conclusions about the "what" and "why" of events, and if new evidence continues to support these conclusions, historians may assert that these conclusions are likely true. Criticism of the truth of history comes largely from outside the discipline, mostly from postmodern thought in linguistics and cultural studies, where relativism rules and truth is scoffed at. But it is often historians themselves who criticize oral history, claiming that while interviewer bias can perhaps be identified and dealt with, it is harder to peel back the layers of bias that

can affect the informant. Thus, the same claims of cultural bias that, according to their critics, historians are unable to overcome in interpreting the documents from the past—these same criticisms are leveled by historians at oral history informants. Are the criticisms justified in either case? Let me try to show they are not.

Christopher Behan McCullagh argues that any cultural bias historians possess need not be a hindrance to arriving at historical truth, provided one has the correct conception of what historical truth is:

Some writers, like Paul Roth, think that because our knowledge of the world is constructed from the concepts and beliefs of our culture to account for evidence available to us, we are not warranted in calling such descriptions true or false. There are two reasons they have for this conclusion. One is that to call a description of the world true suggests to most people that it represents some objective, God-like view of the world, undistorted by cultural presuppositions, and Roth points out that such a culturally neutral view of the world is not available. So truth of this kind is not possible. This is a true, important point, which is now widely accepted. If historical descriptions can be true, it must be in some other sense than this. The second reason for denying that historical descriptions can be true is the assumption that if such descriptions are constructed from culturally conditioned concepts, they cannot truly represent the world. This is also widely believed, but it is not true, and needs to be examined.¹⁶

McCullagh's explanation of why this is not true differs somewhat from mine, but his argument is subtle and cannot be treated in depth here. The point is that humans cannot have that God-like objectivity and must define truth in some other way. The transcendental phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and the later hermeneutic phenomenology of philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer offer such a way of defining truth.

Principles of phenomenology that address the problems of oral history

What, then, are the principles from phenomenology that can help address these problems associated with oral history? The next few sections offer a brief introduction to the phenomenological topics of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, time consciousness, memory, and the value of openness to experience.¹⁷

Subjectivity of knowledge

Phenomenology began, at least in part, as Husserl's response to a trend in his day to apply the so-called objectivity of the natural sciences to the humanities. Since Husserl believed the natural sciences, as practiced since Galileo and Bacon, were not as objective as they claimed in their effort to uncover the principles of the natural world, he felt that these methods were especially inappropriate for work in the humanities, disciplines that attempt to make sense of the human spirit.¹⁸

Husserl sought a theory of knowledge that avoided both the pretended objectivity of natural science and also the idealism and potential for solipsism of philosophies at the other end of the spectrum. What he developed is an epistemology which says that the phenomena given to consciousness, when reflected upon intentionally by the conscious subject, can give knowledge that is appropriately described as “absolute,” even though it remains subjective and even imprecise.

Phenomenology’s potential contribution to oral history lies first and foremost in this broad, overarching view of the subjectivity of knowledge; within this larger issue lie the ways in which it can address the problems associated with interviewer, informant, and interpretation of data. Husserl makes a comment near the end of *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy* that helps define historical truth and sums up much of what I want to say about how we should define the truth of history and, in my case, the truth of Five Mile Creek as a presence in people’s lives. His theme throughout the work has been the subjectivity and intersubjectivity of all knowledge, especially knowledge of the human spirit, though he insists that knowledge of physical nature must be brought to bear on this topic. He gives the example that to understand Greek culture and civilization, we cannot address only Greek philosophy and literature but also agriculture, transportation, building materials, and other presumably aspiritual matters. Then he makes this comment:

The historian, the investigator of spirit, of culture, constantly has of course physical nature too among the phenomena with which he is concerned; in our example, nature in ancient Greece. But this is not nature in the sense understood by natural science; rather it is nature as it was for the ancient Greeks, natural reality present to their eyes in the world that surrounded them. To state it more fully; the historical environing world of the Greeks is not the objective historical world in our sense; rather it is their ‘representation of the world,’ i.e., their own subjective evaluation, with all the realities therein that were valid for them, for example the gods, the daemons, etc.

Environing world is a concept that has its place exclusively in the spiritual sphere. That we live in our own particular environing world, to which all our concerns and efforts are directed, points to an event that takes place purely in the spiritual order. Our environing world is a spiritual structure in us and in our historical life. Here, then, there is no reason for one who makes his theme the spirit as spirit to demand for it any but a purely spiritual explanation. And this has general validity; to look upon environing nature as in itself alien to spirit, and consequently to support humanistic science with natural science and thus presumably to make the former exact, is nonsense.¹⁹

By “spiritual,” Husserl is not, of course, thinking theologically but rather philosophically, defining knowledge and being in terms of consciousness and the process of perception. I believe that many people would find it possible to consider a stream like Five Mile Creek, or any aspect of our environing world, as having the potential for a spiritual impact in this sense. And the truth about Five Mile Creek and its environs—the tributaries and woods where people fished and hunted, the active railroad yards and the abandoned mines and coke ovens that people played in as children—that truth is historical and spiritual in a way that does not require the objectivity demanded by descriptions of processes in the natural sciences.

Of course, knowledge with at least some degree of objectivity is not out of place in the humanities and social sciences. The difference between the aims and methods of subjective versus objective research is often spoken of in terms of qualitative versus quantitative research. Yow again speaks in language common to phenomenology when she says, "Qualitative researchers question positivistic approaches, that is, quantification of data with objectivity and certainty about results as the goal."²⁰ Concerning qualitative research, she states that "by accumulating sources of information and comparing them, we can arrive at an approximate understanding of what happened or is happening and hold this information with some certainty. But there is never absolute certainty about any event, about any fact, no matter what sources are used. No single source or combination of them can ever give a picture of the total complexity of the reality. We cannot reconstruct a past event, no matter how recent, in its entirety."²¹ And as Thompson points out many times, even the statistical data of the social and natural sciences are not as factual as researchers sometimes are tempted to assume:

Social statistics, in short, no more represent absolute facts than newspaper reports, private letters, or published biographies. Like recorded interview material, they all represent, either from individual standpoints or aggregated, the social perception of facts; and are all in addition subject to social pressures from the context in which they are obtained. With these forms of evidence, what we receive is social meaning, and it is this which must be evaluated.²²

Phenomenology, then, gives a framework for identifying the subjectivity that exists even in the natural sciences, so it is especially needed in the more spiritually focused humanities. Gerhard Funke describes Husserl's view this way: all knowledge is scientifically relevant "when the 'subjective' origins of all 'objectivities' have been successively disclosed through a radical reflection."²³ This radical reflection is the phenomenological process of moving beyond the natural attitude, via the bracketing spoken of above, to arrive at a "life-world" of true consciousness.

Time consciousness

One of Husserl's main contributions to modern philosophy, and one which has been applied by scholars to the philosophy of history, is the issue of how consciousness perceives time. Donald M. Lowe gives a clear and persuasive explanation of Husserl's ideas about internal time consciousness and how these in turn provide a key to historical knowledge. According to Lowe, the historian needs to understand what historical subjects did and how they viewed their era and their actions. The historian, however, knows what happened later, knows what the results of these actions and motives were; therefore, the historian interprets the historical events in light of present culture and perspectives. Lowe describes Husserl's view of how individuals perceive time, anticipating the future as the present flows into the past; then he demonstrates how this consciousness of time can show how the historian, looking back from a future that was only projected by the historical subject, can both interpret the historical subject's limited view of the effectiveness of his or her actions and offer a more thorough view of those actions.²⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer points out that this process continues. The historian "belongs to the text that he is

reading. The line of meaning that the text manifests to him as he reads it always and necessarily breaks off in an open indeterminacy. He can, indeed he must, accept the fact that future generations will understand differently what he has read in the text.”²⁵

These remarks about time consciousness probably have in mind history done from documents about subjects most of whom have died. But the principles also apply to oral history data, with the difference being that the informants themselves have experienced a change in historical perspective. As people grow and have more experiences, their interpretation of the value of certain past actions changes. Just as succeeding generations of historians reevaluate the past, individuals reevaluate the various stages in their personal development. These perceptions may change slowly and subtly, for Husserl believes that “memory is in a continuous flux because conscious life is in constant flux and is not merely fitted member by member into the chain.”²⁶ Nevertheless, with the passage of time or with reflection, a person’s view of his or her experience will change. Phenomenology, then, actually predicts that oral history informants should change their story with successive retellings; the very telling of the story could cause a reevaluation, so that a retelling the very next day could be different. Phenomenology also tells the historian to look for different perspectives in the view of the informant; in one sentence the informant could be trying to reconstruct his or her perspective at the time of the historical event, and the next sentence could be a present-day evaluation.

Openness to new experience

A common theme in phenomenology, growing out of the perceived need, discussed above, to see more deeply and truly into the “life-world” of our experience, is the idea of openness to new experience. Husserl, in the second of his *Cartesian Meditations*, describes it as “an absolute universal criticism, which, for its part, by abstention from all positions that already give anything existent, must first create for itself a *universe of absolute freedom from prejudice*” (italics in original).²⁷ This principle addresses, among other things, the subject of the interviewer’s agenda. Researchers can sometimes be too driven by their preconceptions; agenda-driven interviewing even appears, wrongly I believe, in works that openly apply phenomenological method to at least some aspects of the study. Peter Friedlander says his approach to labor history is “a Hegelian Marxism greatly influenced by phenomenology, linguistic philosophy, and structuralism.”²⁸ Yet he acknowledges that he had “prefabricated categories” of responses that he expected to get from his informant, Edmund Kord, who was president of UAW Local 229 during its first eighteen years. Here is a brief description from Friedlander’s methodology section: “I was convinced that there were significant ethical or moral differences between the Appalachian migrants, the first-generation Slavs, and the wildcatters among the second generation. Twice in the course of our second series of discussions (July 1973) I raised these questions. Twice Kord replied negatively. The third time, however, something clicked” and Kord gave the desired answer.²⁹ My understanding of phenomenology, and of interview technique in general, suggests that there is no way to tell if the repeated question uncovered the answer, or if it put the answer there. To be fair, Friedlander does not seem particularly guilty of trying to conduct the

interviews in such a way as to get the answers he wanted. "I sought to bring to bear on Kord's experience," he remarks, "a number of theoretical and historical conceptions that I thought critical to an understanding of the CIO—conceptions that I found myself forced to alter as my increasingly concrete information obstinately refused to fall into some of my prefabricated categories."³⁰ Interviewers must be careful not to suggest or "plant" a response and should not let the informant know what sort of answer is desired, even if other evidence has the interviewer "convinced," as in the Friedlander example, that only a certain kind of response could be correct.

Some historians are, of course, unashamed of their agenda and rightly so. Katherine Borland admits that as a feminist she has "an explicitly political vision of the structural conditions that lead to particular social behaviors" and that her role in conducting the interview and interpreting the informant's responses is to show these conditions at work, regardless of whether the informant has recognized them. She says that she and researchers who share her perspective attempt to describe these conditions, as they appear in the remarks of the informant, "in a way that grants the speaking woman interpretive respect without relinquishing our responsibility to provide our own interpretation of her experience."³¹ Feminists would not be the only group unashamed to examine most evidence in terms of their "explicitly political vision" of the world; environmentalists, of whom I am one, might also be suspected of such an approach. Interviewers practicing phenomenological method, however, make every effort to balance their current vision against the possibility of new understandings.

Intersubjectivity

Phenomenology reminds the historian that all human perspectives are both subjective and intersubjective, with one human being subjectively reacting to the subjectivity of others. Lowe offers an application to the work of historians themselves that helps clarify this subject. He adopts a phrase from Alfred Schutz, who points out that the historian's interpretations of the views of historical subjects are "constructs of the second degree."³² They are "constructs of constructs," subjective evaluations by the historian of the historical subject's subjective evaluation of his or her life.

This does not, of course, mean that the researcher's evaluation takes as much for granted as the subject's evaluation does. On the contrary, the researcher has usually gone much farther than the subject in looking past the appearance of events and getting at their essence. As an example, John D. Brewer, in his sociological oral history of the British Union of Fascists (BUF), makes use of Schutz's phenomenology and acknowledges that his conclusion is a "construct of the second order." Brewer concludes that former BUF members justified their membership by rationalizing that Britain was in crisis in the 1930s and that fascism at that time seemed to be a rational way out, despite current perceptions of fascism. He arrives at this conclusion by making use of Schutz's notions of "shared 'typifications,' 'idealizations' and 'recipes'" that transform subjective individual consciousness into the intersubjective world of public consciousness.³³ Brewer's position is that, because sociologists study and can identify these typifications with perhaps more honesty and clarity

than the subjects themselves, they are in a position to empirically evaluate the bias in the subjects' responses. But Brewer acknowledges that his work is "to construct a typification of the typifications of [BUF] members themselves."³⁴

Awareness of the intersubjectivity of all human understanding, then, should keep the historian honest. In addition, Husserl's view was that as long as the historian keeps intersubjectivity in mind, the historical subject's perspective can be known, not with scientific objectivity, but in a manner that is actually more in line with the way human knowledge is formed and transmitted. In cultural history such as the history of Five Mile Creek, "any claim to universality," to borrow a phrase from Daniel Frank Chamberlain, "any claim to absolute truth, is dismissed in favour of a deeper level of understanding, a level in which communication between different perspectives becomes the rule."³⁵

Memory

Many of the issues concerning human subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and time consciousness come together in considering the reliability of memory. Edward Casey describes memory as having a "thick autonomy," where "thick" refers to the multiplicity of overlapping or interacting factors that affect memory and "autonomy" relates to Schutz's ideas about typifications that lead to social understanding while being unique to each individual. Ultimately Casey asserts that the truth of memory is memory as it appears to us in consciousness. On different occasions, our own memories of the same event, place, or person may vary in the specific details, the precise feelings or impressions that come to mind, or other things. Each memory may be prompted by different things, resulting in these variations. But in every case it is autonomous—it is our memory—and it is "thick" in the sense that it is the result of a combination of factors that we could never quite sort out. "Implicit in all remembering is a commitment to truth concerning the past, a truth that reflects the specificity of this past even if it need not offer an exact likeness of it."³⁶ Casey's study supports the general trend in phenomenological thinking, which is that our access to the past through memory is subjective, variable, and yet as true as any form of human consciousness.

Summary—implications for oral history

These issues—the subjectivity of all knowledge, time consciousness, openness to experience, intersubjectivity, and memory, as well as other issues not discussed here—permeate phenomenological writing, and the implications for oral history are clear. Because any knowledge of a historical subject is limited by human subjectivity, the historian should search for the perspectives that result from that very subjectivity. A historian who plans the interview and interprets the data with the goal of constructing the life-world of this place and time might be able to separate fact from fable, but more importantly he or she might be more likely to identify the meaning in fable. And the historian should search for and then present the "what" and "why" of the past in such a way that leaves the topic or era open for further discussion and evaluation by future generations. According to Gadamer,

knowledge—"the truth of experience"—"always contains an orientation towards new experience," and experienced persons are characterized as much by an awareness of what they do not know, as what they do know. Such a person, according to Gadamer, is "also open to new experiences" and "is radically undogmatic" about truth. "The dialectic of experience has its own fulfillment not in definitive knowledge, but in that openness to experience that is encouraged by experience itself."³⁷

Concerning the problems of interviewer bias and informant reliability, a phenomenological perspective on history offers some guidelines, many of which are already practiced by those who conduct oral histories. The interviewer, keeping in mind the subjective nature of all preconceptions she might have about the events the informant will narrate, keeps an open mind within the framework of the general topic of the historical study. The interviewer designs her questions so as to allow the informant to set his own agenda and not think in terms of meeting interviewer expectations. When the informant's memory seems vague or unreliable, the interviewer keeps in mind that all the "real facts" cannot be known under even the best circumstances and looks rather for truths of understanding, of spirit, of cultural values, that tell the real story of the historical event or era, or, in my case, the geologic feature known as Five Mile Creek. And everything relates back to the subjective and intersubjective way that individuals perceive their own experience.

Application of phenomenological principles to oral history interviews

Let me sum up the discussion of a phenomenological perspective on oral history with two examples from interviews about Five Mile Creek. First, two female informants spoke of government programs that gave out sacks of flour.

(Informant E.C.B., 1907–2005)

KIRBY: So you moved near the creek after you got married.

E.C.B.: Yes. After I got married I was still working. We moved out to Lewisburg and built a house out there We married right in that Depression, and I guess if we had known it was coming we would have put it off. We never dreamed it was coming. This was Aug. 30, 1930, when we got married. And Robert got laid off over there at the power house; Mr. Williams had to keep it by himself. So he had to walk and go any way he could to look for a job. Everybody was in the same way. It was a terrible time, I tell you. [Speaks further of hard times and coupons, handouts of shoes, work for coupons or receipts.] And down at the school, they give the men a little bit of work and then would give them this little slip to get groceries—a 24-pound sack of flower—and then we could buy enough stuff until the next time they could work.

(Informant R.G.F., b. 1915)

KIRBY: What do you remember about your mother?

R.G.F.: Her family all had TB. It ran in the family, and she died with TB. And it was during the war, World War I, and people didn't have food to eat, and the Red Cross gave a 24-pound sack of flour once a month, and in a family with kids that didn't go a long way. I know my daddy said he and my momma ate cornbread because us kids wouldn't eat it.

A striking aspect of this second response is the way in which the informant's mention of her mother's death triggered the association with the Red Cross relief in the form of flour. Her parents were willing to sacrifice so that the children could have what Huck Finn called "'baker's bread'—what the quality eat—none of your low-down corn pone." But I had to question the date that she gave. Red Cross aid during the World War I era usually went only to families with men who served in the war, whereas the informant's father did not serve, and her brother was an infant. Informants' chronology is sometimes vague; as Thompson points out, "Historians too easily forget that most people are less interested in calendar years than themselves, and do not arrange their memories with dates as markers. Awareness of this might reduce some of the suspicions of unreliability commonly aroused by oral evidence."³⁸ Casey, too, remarks that in memory the "temporal matrix is more discontinuous and disjunctive,"³⁹ which may explain why memories come out jumbled and why the interviewer must repeatedly ask "what year would this have been?" Yet when I inquired of R.G.F. several months later about the date of the free flour, she reaffirmed that it was from her early childhood, reported to her by her parents. Flour packaged in 24-pound sacks, with the sacks made of material that could be made into clothing, was common during this period and on through the Great Depression, so perhaps both informants are reporting accurately. But clearly both are remembering government relief during eras of hard times—in one case being poor and having a sick mother and the other case marriage during the depths of the Depression—and their appreciation of the relief, rather than shame at needing it, seems to be the "why" of the experience.

Another example—a story related separately by women who had known each other as children—also suggests that the underlying values come through even if the details do not agree. Informant R.C.N., born in 1923, reports being about six years old at the time; informant A.B.M., born 1919, reports being somewhere between eight and ten, so the chronology is close, and the informants seem to be relating the same unusual incident.

(Informant R.C.N., b. 1923)

R.C.N.: One summer in Jefferson they found a human skeleton lodged on a tree. They were burning the field, and the tree caught fire. When the branches burned, it exposed the skeleton. Everybody went down there to see it. My brother and I went, and I got punished for it, because I had to tell my mother everywhere I went. And we were all so excited, and everybody was running down there, so we just went on down to see, and I was punished when I got back. I guess I was about six.

(Informant A.B.M., b. 1919)

A.B.M.: My daddy was a farmer and a miner And he'd also plant pumpkins. And the time, it was in the fall and it come a flood; it flooded our fields. And pumpkins were just floating everywhere! Everybody got all the pumpkins they wanted.

KIRBY: So they just all waded out into the fields and got a pumpkin before they washed away.

A.B.M.: That washed a lot of timbers and logs and stuff down the creek, and it just piled up along the bank. My brother was pushing the logs off and letting them flow on down and uncovered a man. When he saw him, he had to get my daddy. And my daddy sent us girls all home. I never saw the body.

KIRBY: How old were you?

A.B.M.: I was 11 when my daddy died, so I must have been 10, 9, 8, somewhere down in there, a child. And of course that's the reason we didn't see any of that and why he sent us home.

Their memories of the circumstances are somewhat different. One describes a skeleton, seemingly up in the tree; the other speaks of a body covered with "logs," which suggests being near the ground. One informant remembers this as occurring during a time when the fields would have been rather dry for burning; the other remembers a time after a flood when the ground was littered with flotsam. But their stories share a meaning, which is that both girls' parents were trying to protect them.

Thompson sums up the general principles historians must use in examining their evidence: "to look for internal consistency, to seek confirmation in other sources, and to be aware of potential bias."⁴⁰ Concerning the gift of flour, in seeking confirmation from other sources, I was unable to prove that either memory was incorrect. I see the key issue, however, as being what the relief meant to the informants. After all, a factually wrong answer can sometimes tell as much or more about the meaning and values than a technically correct answer. And ultimately the goal of cultural history is not necessarily to arrive at "what really happened" but at what the experience or event, though perhaps misremembered or imprecisely related, means to the informant. As Yow asserts, "After all, history—or society—does not exist outside human consciousness."⁴¹

Conclusion

The perspective phenomenology offers to oral history is that during the process of both conducting the interviews and assembling a text, the historian's existing assumptions about the place or topic of investigation should be bracketed as much as possible. During the interviews, the historian should consider avoiding any leading questions until the informant broached a specific topic, though at that point it might be appropriate and even obligatory to pursue this topic and explore one informant's impressions and stories as they might relate to data collected from other informants. As the author of the written portion of the history, the historian obviously has to have some reason to include one particular part of an interview and not another, but often the goal should be to suggest possibilities rather than draw conclusions.

To conclude with a final example concerning Five Mile Creek, one of the first problems I tried to address was the mystery of how the creek, which is twenty-eight miles long from its headwaters to its confluence with the Black Warrior River, got its

name. In the initial interviews, most informants said they had no idea. Then another source, not one of the actual informants in the study, told me that she had heard an explanation from a local collector of Native American artifacts, at that time recently deceased. Her source said that the creek got its name from a pioneer era crossing on a major route people used to bring their children to a boarding school, located in what is now the East Lake section of Birmingham. When they crossed the creek, they knew that they were only five miles from the school and that their journey was almost complete. When this account was published in *The Birmingham News* in a story on the Five Mile Creek Greenway Project, predictably I received several letters to the effect that “Your information is wrong—the creek was named for such-and-such,” though the other explanations also referred to a distance of five miles from some point on the creek to another landmark or destination. I was left to conclude that, though only one account was likely to be true in fact, they all were true in their essence—the creek was named not so much for itself as for its value as a landmark on a journey that was almost finished. This, by the way, indicates that a significant change in attitudes has taken place: in the past, when the creek was so horribly polluted, it was little more than a landmark for most Alabamians; now that environmental regulations are being enforced and the creek is clean, more people value it for itself. There is pride that the fish, frogs, kingfishers, and herons have returned, that property values are increasing, and that recreational use of the creek is on the rise.

I have spoken a lot about subjectivity and limits to knowledge and the value that comes from acknowledging these limits in recording and producing oral histories. I associate these limits with Wolfgang Iser’s notion of “blanks” or “gaps” in a text that permit, that in fact require the reader to participate in the creation of meaning.⁴² But I am also aware that, in assembling material from interviews and published sources and in providing commentary to produce narratives about cultural history from oral history data, there is much, of course, that can be presented with confidence. As phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur says, “We expect history to have a certain objectivity which is proper to it.”⁴³ But for some things the historian’s job might be to provide the gaps Iser speaks of or, given the fact that gaps always exist in the available material, to present those gaps in a way that encourages the reader to draw meaningful conclusions, though within limits, and that will open the door to other meaningful conclusions in the next generations. Phenomenology offers, to some degree, a “less is more” approach to history: by restricting the precision with which we can say, for example, “Five Mile Creek got its name this way and no other,” we may actually expand our understanding of the way the creek and its environs played an important part in people’s lives.

NOTES

- 1 This article describes the methodology that I used in conducting an oral history of communities along Five Mile Creek in northern Jefferson County, Alabama, in 2005. For over seventy years, from about 1920 until the early 1990s, Five Mile Creek was heavily polluted by industrial effluent, acid mine drainage, and other sources; the history had as its goal an understanding of how environmental factors affected the daily lives of people who grew up along the creek during the period 1920–60. The thirty-one interviews were conducted as a service to the Five Mile Creek Greenway Partnership, a consortium of local governments, environmental groups, and economic development organizations working

- together to manage growth, preserve industrial and cultural history, and create a system of parks and greenways along the entire length of the creek.
- 2 Maurice Natanson, *The Journeying Self: A Study in Philosophy and Social Role* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1970), 88.
- 3 Max Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990), 32.
- 4 Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2nd ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2005), 21.
- 5 There are few studies that claim to apply phenomenological principles to the practice of oral history, and even these say little about methodology. One of the exceptions is James G. Blight and Janet M. Lang, "Burden of Nuclear Responsibility: Reflections on the Critical Oral History of the Cuban Missile Crisis," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 1 (1995): 225–64. Blight and Lang based their approach on the phenomenological psychology of William James, who stresses subjectivity and intentionality. Most use of phenomenology in interviewing in fact comes from disciplines such as family studies, psychology, or nursing, where the interviewer's goals are very personal; sociological and anthropological uses of phenomenology, however, are sometimes more closely akin to the goals of history and to the method described in this study. A more purely historical study that makes use of phenomenological method is Michael Harkin, "History, Narrative, and Temporality: Examples from the Northwest Coast," *Ethnohistory* 35 (Spring 1988): 99–131. However, it analyzes Native American tales rather than actual oral history.
- 6 Glenn Whitman, *Dialogue with the Past: Engaging Students and Meeting Standards through Oral History* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004), 23. At the time I was preparing this article for submission, one of the most recent studies available to me was by Charles Hardy III, who spoke persuasively of the "impermanence and fluidity of all human experience and of all history" in "A People's History of Philadelphia: Reflections on Community Oral History Projects and the Uses of the Past," *Oral History Review* 33, no. 1 (Winter–Spring 2006), 30.
- 7 Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1978), 92.
- 8 Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, *Twayne's Oral History Series No. 15* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 96.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 67.
- 10 Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, 113.
- 11 Alessandro Portelli, "Conversations with the Panther: The Italian Student Movement of 1990," in *International Annual of Oral History, 1990: Subjectivity and Multiculturalism in Oral History*, ed. Ronald J. Grele, 162 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992).
- 12 Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, 129.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 100.
- 14 Natanson, *The Journeying Self*, 4.
- 15 Yow, *Recording Oral History*, 6.
- 16 Christopher Behan McCullagh, *The Truth of History* (London: Routledge, 1988), 25.
- 17 Perhaps this is an appropriate time in this introductory study to point out the impossibility of even briefly discussing all the ideas raised by phenomenology that could apply to the practice of oral history. I will limit my discussion to a few key elements. Readers interested in pursuing other issues might examine Natanson's discussion of microcosmic and macrocosmic history in *The Journeying Self*, 88–107, a seminal discussion of how universal history and individual lives reflect each other. Jeffrey Andrew Barash's *Martin Heidegger and the Problem of Historical Meaning* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1988) illustrates the development of phenomenological thought from Edmund Husserl's transcendental approach to the more hermeneutic approach of Heidegger and others.
- 18 The most thorough discussion of this topic is found in Edmund Husserl's *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

- 19 Edmund Husserl, *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, trans. Quentin Lauer (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 153–4.
- 20 Yow, *Recording Oral History*, 15.
- 21 Ibid., 21.
- 22 Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, 96.
- 23 Gerhard Funke, “Phenomenology and History,” in *Phenomenology and the Social Sciences*, vol. 2, ed. Maurice Natanson, 36 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973). Funke’s monograph is an excellent introduction to phenomenology as a method for historical study.
- 24 Donald M. Lowe, “Intentionality and the Method of History,” in *Phenomenology and the Social Sciences*, vol. 2, ed. Maurice Natanson, 114–22 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973).
- 25 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2003), 340.
- 26 Edmund Husserl, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, trans. James S. Churchill (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1964), 77. Another valuable phenomenological study on time consciousness is Peter K. McInerney, *Time and Experience* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1991).
- 27 Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995), 35.
- 28 Peter Friedlander, *The Emergence of a UAW Local, 1936–1939: A Study in Class and Culture* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1975), xxi.
- 29 Ibid., xxix.
- 30 Ibid., xii.
- 31 Katherine Borland, “‘That’s Not What I Said’: Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research,” in *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, ed. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, 64 (New York: Routledge, 1991).
- 32 Lowe, “Intentionality,” 125. Lowe makes reference to Alfred Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, trans. George Walsh and Frederick Lehnert (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1967).
- 33 John D. Brewer, “Looking Back at Fascism: A Phenomenological Analysis of BUF Membership,” *Sociological Review* 32 (November 1984): 745.
- 34 Ibid., 755.
- 35 Daniel Frank Chamberlain, *Narrative Perspective in Fiction: A Phenomenological Mediation of Reader, Text, and World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 5.
- 36 Edward S. Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 283.
- 37 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 355.
- 38 Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, 131.
- 39 Casey, *Remembering*, 75.
- 40 Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, 92.
- 41 Yow, *Recording Oral History*, 21.
- 42 Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 163–79.
- 43 Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 22.