Notes and Comments

As contributions to this section, the Editors welcome shorter articles as well as discussions, comments or collections that are not of conventional article length, topic or organization.

A Folklorist in the Family: On the Process of Fieldwork Among Intimates

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Some fieldwork guides, especially those written for beginning students, suggest that a good place to carry out a first fieldwork project is within one's own family. Lindahl, Rikoon, and Lawless write: "If you conduct fieldwork with your own family, you begin with the advantage of an intimate knowledge of the group. Ideally, this knowledge should allow you to interpret the folklore items correctly" (1979:61). Zeitlin, Kotkin, and Baker append to their book on family folklore a section titled "How to Collect Your Own Family Folklore," in which they present a practical guide to conducting fieldwork within one's family, including a list of potential interview questions which suggest exploring such aspects of family lore as family names and nicknames, stories about ancestors or family "characters," family expressions, recipes, and celebrations, to name but a few (1976:260–271). Brunvand recommends the study of family folklore in his *Guide for Collectors of Folklore in Utah* (1971) and Dorson, in his introduction to *Buying the Wind* (1964:18), also assures students that family and relatives make good subjects for a fieldwork project. In the introductory folklore classes for which I have assisted or taught, students are often encouraged to look to their family and friends as an advantageous group for study.

Indeed, studying the folklore of one's intimates does seem logical and natural. Since folkloric behaviors are constantly being exhibited by those around us, turning to those with whom we interact on an everyday basis seems sensible and sound. The "rapport" that authors of guidebooks tell their readers to "build" with informants is already intact with relatives and friends. There is generally a strong degree of mutual trust, liking, and cooperation. The researcher has knowledge of his or her coparticipants' behaviors and can call on shared experiences to aid in the process of fieldwork. Although Gold-

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stein's notion of "stranger value" (1964:64) may indeed have worth, for most of us it simply seems easier to work with people we already know and like.

Some researchers have been very successful in carrying out studies based on data gathered from their family members. For example, Sandra Stahl's work on personal experience narratives (1977) draws heavily on her mother's storytelling for her data base. Sharon R. Sherman has produced a videotape documenting her family's annual Passover Seder in which she analyzes the inter-familial dynamics of celebration and ritual. While her endeavors result in an excellent videotape, she shares the trials and tribulations of conducting fieldwork (especially via videotape) in an important methodological article describing her fieldwork process. It is not, she notes, without difficulties. Another researcher, Margaret Yocum, based her dissertation on fieldwork conducted within her own family. Like Sherman, she finds that although it is a rewarding enterprise, one faces certain problems. In her dissertation she details some of these methodological difficulties that arise when engaging in "personal-family" fieldwork and proposes some possible solutions. Anne Murase also focussed on family members in her research, writing about her grandfather's motivations for engaging in certain types of expressive behavior, correlating aspects of his personality with the "selection, creation, and/or the communication of that lore" (1975:171). Clearly all these researchers have made excellent use of data gathered from intimates. However, despite all its positive aspects, conducting fieldwork among one's intimates also has its own special problems, as some of these fieldworkers point out. My purpose in this paper is to characterize some of these that I have experienced as well.

Currently I am documenting the life stories of my grandparents. While this has proved richly rewarding in many ways, it has also raised a number of issues as well. One important issue is that relating to the negotiation of role. This is a commonly discussed problem in fieldwork (see Georges and Jones 1980, Jackson 1987, Sherman 1986, for example). Role negotiation is usually not so difficult when one is working with individuals one does not know well. Roles such as those of researcher-informant and interviewer-interviewee are usually easily established. However, in my work with intimates I found role negotiation to be somewhat difficult because of the long histories of my relationships with family members or friends. Understandably, expectations have developed over time. I am known to intimates as daughter, granddaughter, best friend, etc. When relatives and friends view me as "researcher," however, they have different expectations. In the "storytelling sessions" involving my grandparents and me, for example, difficulties in negotiating and operating in terms of these roles can be readily discerned. When, for example, my grandparents are narrating, much of the communication is personal and familiar. They regale me with stories of their past, referring to people, places, and events that I know well because I am their granddaughter. However, they are also continually aware that I am a researcher with specific objectives to fulfill. On a number of occasions one of my grandparents chastises the other for telling a story that "she doesn't want" or "isn't interested in." There is often an abrupt change of topic to "get back to" what they perceive I am interested in. Although I assure my grandparents that what-

ever they tell me is both appropriate and desired, they seem to have an image in their minds of what it is I require as appropriate material for study. However, they wish not only to provide me with proper and adequate data, but they also want to enhance my personal knowledge of my family as well. Thus, ambivalence arises about the purpose of the "story sessions": are my grandparents narrating to their granddaughter, as they seemed to be doing before I "formalized" the interaction by tape recording our storytelling sessions, or are they narrating to a researcher whom they judge to have specific research goals in mind? This issue arises repeatedly during the sessions. Their conceptions of our relationship shifts and changes according to what the narrator envisions my role to be at a given moment.

The tape recorder, mentioned above, is of course far from an innocent presence. The tape recorder is indeed a "silent participant" as Jackson has noted (Jackson 1986:88–89); and in my experience it acts as a catalyst, changing my grandparents' conceptions of who I am and what kinds of stories I want to hear. The appropriateness of the subject matter, delivery, and remarks is constantly being monitored while the tape recorder is on; but everything seems to be appropriate when it is off. This is not to say that we all behave cautiously and self-consciously while the machine is recording, for considerable spontaneity is readily apparent. But the presence of the recorder is ever conspicuous; and it does affect my grandparents' behavior and the nature of the relationship between them and me. The recorder is a "professional trapping" in my grandparents' experience. Therefore, when the machine is going, they seem to be ambivalent about how to perceive me: as a professional or as a granddaughter.

Role conflict also arises with regard to the end result of this undertaking. I began this project for purely personal reasons—to document, at the request of family members, my grandparents' stories so that other family members could share, enjoy, and learn from them. However, my professional interest in narrating was quickly aroused, and I proposed to my grandparents the idea of turning our personal pursuit into a scholarly one. While they not only agreed but were also flattered and honored that I found them "interesting enough" to provide information for a dissertation, serving as "informants" for a research project also affects their behavior. As a granddaughter I am privy to much (but, undoubtedly, not all) information. As a researcher who will present and maybe even publish what they tell me, I am perhaps not so fortunate. Indeed, much has been said that is "off the record"—suitable for my ears but not for those of others. Furthermore, it is not only my grandparents who are apprehensive. I also have reservations about making their stories part of a research data-base. The stories pertain primarily to my Jewish grandparents' escape from Nazi Germany and the subsequent rebuilding of their lives in America. I feel no true identification with my Jewish heritage, have had no religious training as a Jew, and generally do not acknowledge "Jewishness" or have such an identity ascribed to me by others. By making my grandparents' stories the focus of my dissertation research, I present for the scrutiny of others a part of me that I generally do not acknowledge, for the stories not only reveal much about my grandparents, but also information

about me. As a researcher I am interested in the stories for the insights they provide into the process of narrating and the nature of life stories. But I am also concerned about how the data I present might affect others' views of me.

A colleague of mine has expressed similar uneasiness caused by her study of her and her husband's dyadic traditions. While she knows that she has gathered meaningful and important material by documenting these behaviors, she is hesitant to share them because of their highly personal nature and because of the potential effects that presenting them to others might have on others' views of her. She says, "I don't want this to be all they know of me!" This conflict is part and parcel of the process of doing fieldwork among intimates—when one reveals something about one's coparticipants, one is also revealing something about oneself. For no matter how one tries to distance oneself, if the material is presented as "family folklore" or as the folkloric behavior of close friends, one will be conceived of as intimately related to those one is studying. Thus, role negotiation should not be regarded only as something that is done by others in relation to oneself. As a researcher one will have to negotiate these roles internally as well.

Another aspect of role negotiation has less to do with the actual fieldwork situation than with the dynamics of the family during, and most likely after the completion of, the data-gathering phase of the project. My role within my extended family has changed significantly since I decided to make my grandparents' life stories a focus of my dissertation research. I am now "historian," a role with which I am not altogether comfortable. Because of my interest in "Gramma and Grampa's stories" and my work in documenting them, my family expects a constant flow of updated transcripts and interpretations. Indeed, I have become the "official" documenter of the family folklore. Although Sharon Sherman says that "as insiders within a family, folklorists often observe folkloric behavior without telling anyone we are doing so" (1986:65), we are also sometimes made to document folklore whether we want to or not, by virtue of our being ascribed the role of "researcher" by family members. As another colleague exclaimed as we were discussing her family reunion and the potential thereof for fieldwork, "I don't *want* to do fieldwork, I want to go to my family reunion!" Sometimes we want simply to enjoy our family, not investigate it!

In my newly-acquired role as family "historian," family members other than my grandparents have begun to relate much historical information to me, some of which is not of particular interest to me. Of course, I have to accept and discuss these materials, for I am, after all, a family member first and foremost. However, I feel some conflict when I do not incorporate these data into my research. Family members tell me that they know additional facts about events my grandparents relate to me. Assuring them that I respect and appreciate the information, I explain that it is what, how, and why my grandparents narrate that particularly interests me. I explain that I am not doing a family history *per se*. Yet "historian" is generally my ascribed role, rather than that of the student of narrating I perceive myself to be. While I regret giving less attention to the knowledge of other family members, as a researcher I know that I must pursue my line of investigation. However, my interest in the

storytellings seem to be an impetus for my grandparents to narrate to other family members, for others now tell me appreciatively about the stories that my grandparents are sharing with them. As a member of the family *and* as a researcher, I find this to be a positive result of my own research project.

No matter who one's coparticipants are, data gathered while one is researching life stories are to a large extent dependent upon the relationship of the parties involved, as suggested by Crapanzano (1980), Langness and Frank (1981), and Oring (1970), among others. Because the stories a narrator chooses to tell affect the researcher's perceptions of him or her, the intimate knowledge and history one shares with close friends or family members may preclude the characterization of certain events and experiences. As Bruce Jackson points out, this "pre-existing intimacy makes [a] new revelation embarrassing—the revelation says 'I'm not who or what you thought I was' " (1986:95). A family member or close friend may not wish to take such risks. An extensive mutual history can affect other aspects of behavior as well. For example, the narrator may assume that the researcher already knows much of the desired material and may choose not to relate it or to do so in only a perfunctory manner. There seems to be, after all, an unwritten "rule" that generally precludes telling someone what he or she already knows! And, chances are, when conducting fieldwork among intimates one knows a great deal about one's coparticipants. This issue arises time and time again during the course of my research. I often urge my grandparents on, by assuring them that "you told me once, but I forgot," or "you did tell me that, but I really love this story!!" or by telling them that I want the story on tape. While at first they seemed a bit uncomfortable with this, they are now accustomed to relating stories they know I know already. Again, this points to the ambivalence of the focus of the narrating sessions—are the stories presented for personal or scholarly use? In addition, my family status as a young female, a granddaughter, an American, or a member of the Scheiberg branch of the family, for example, may again affect my grandparents' narrative choices. However, I hope that the data I am able to obtain and my interpretations thereof will be richer and more meaningful than if the data were obtained from a stranger or by a stranger. Indeed, Anne Murase's sensitive study of her grandfather's behaviors is a fine example of the potential interpretive richness possible when doing fieldwork among those one knows intimately.

However, what if the data suggest negative interpretations? Another conflict that can arise is the handling of the negative feelings and experiences that almost inevitably accompany any field project. Unlike anthropologists studying some "exotic" and "foreign" people, a researcher studying his or her intimates cannot simply pack up and go home when the research is through. The emotional baggage one brings to the encounter is only added to in the end. Surprisingly negative traits can be discovered in those one is studying. Perceptions of individuals can be altered, and assumptions one has can be shattered. Futhermore, in the presentation of the research, can and should the investigator present his or her negative findings? Where are the loyalties to be—with the family or with the academy? While luckily in my research

these questions have not yet arisen (or perhaps I am not seeing them), I am aware that at some point they may have to be addressed.

Finally, and perhaps parenthetically, while "family folklore" or folklore gleaned from one's close friends is deemed acceptable and even preferable for beginning folklore students, the advanced student or professional folklorist may not always be allowed this luxury, despite the effectiveness demonstrated in the above mentioned studies. For example, in negotiating the written output for an advanced graduate seminar in linguistic anthropology, the professor dissuaded me from writing a mock proposal for funding, telling me "it's just your grandparents—you'll never get money for that." Likewise, some people have remarked that "studying my grandparents" surely must be a waste of time—what of scholarly interest can there be in this exercise? Indeed, Yocum states that this question was raised by members of her own family, the very people she proposed to study! She writes,

> When I asked my parents if I could stay with them for several months while I collected our family's history and traditions my father replied, 'sure, but will they—the school—let you do your dissertation on something like that? Our family? Who'd want to read about us?' Because most Americans see themselves neither as storehouses of valuable information about the past nor as integral participants in history, many relatives, surprised and puzzled by the request, will ask, 'Why us?' (1982:262–3).

This is similar to the response my grandparents made when I proposed my project. However, family or not, these individuals *are* engaged in important folkloric processes and behaviors which are meaningful to them and to the researcher. In the case of my research, I am interested as a granddaughter, for I am learning about my family, my heritage, and myself, and I am fascinated as a folklorist, for I am learning about the human need and desire to express, communicate, and narrate one's story, one's life, one's self. One is incidental to the other; yet the fact that they can coexist demonstrates the real value of this type of research.

Herein, then, lies the paradox of fieldwork among intimates: while they may be the most willing and readily accessible individuals to study, they are often difficult to research. However, if one is willing to accept the methodological and analytical risks, the rewards, both personal and scholarly, are great. For, as I have said, one not only discovers more about human expressive and communicative behavior, one discovers more about oneself and one's relationships to those one loves. For the beginning student and the professional, that is indeed a great deal to gain.

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