

YOUTH IN TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO WORK  
IN THE 1930s-1950s: A WORK-IN-PROGRESS  
REPORT

Allyson Holbrook

ABSTRACT

This paper will report on the progress achieved in a project funded by a small ARC grant on the topic of the transition of youths through primary and secondary school and into work during the period 1930-1950. The study endeavours to determine the factors involved in and influencing the process of transition during this earlier period. Some seventy interviews have been conducted with people who completed their schooling in the Hunter region. The paper will focus on the methodology of the project, in particular the dynamics of the oral history/life history interview and the nature of the evidence gleaned from such interviews.

Paper presented at the AARE Annual Conference, 22-25  
November 1993, Fremantle Western Australia

YOUTH IN TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO WORK  
IN THE 1930s-1950s: A WORK-IN-PROGRESS

## REPORT

Allyson Holbrook

This paper outlines a History of Education research project currently being funded through the ARC. It provides an overview of the project and its rationale and then focusses on some key issues of interest that have arisen during the course of the early phases of the project in the Hunter region during 1993. At the time of writing interviews have been conducted with some seventy volunteers who attended schools in the Hunter region. In 1994 more interviews will be collected in Sydney and in 1995 in Wagga and Broken Hill. Full

transcription of the Hunter round of interviews is now taking place, plus preparation (indexing) for analysis using NUDIST software.

### Overview and rationale

The study aims to explore the school, work, and transition from school to work experiences of adolescents in the period 1930-50 and endeavours to determine the factors involved in, and influencing, the process of transition. Education Historians have made headway in understanding the structural and institutional aspects of education and policy that underpin transition in Australia, the bureaucratic processes, and the social construction of adolescence, but not how these actually operated with respect to the recipients of education. How did young people perceive the transition? What influences shaped their experiences at school and at work, their vocational choices and aspirations, and their consciousness of the worlds of school and work? Were there common elements in the experience and do they translate across time to inform our understanding of the processes and problems of transition evident now? Traditional historical sources can not adequately answer such questions, thus the oral history interview is central to the study.

Because of the dearth of historical research Blakers (1990) could only hypothesise about transition in the past in *Youth and Society: The Two Transitions*. For more than two decades the nature and outcomes of youth unemployment, and the factors that influence the process of transition from school to work and further study or training, have been regarded as important research issues in Australia and in other western

industrialised nations (Blakers, 1990, pp.296-8). Furthermore, the politics of training and transition have increasingly become the subject of critique (Centre of Cultural Studies, 1991). However, the research thrust has been firmly anchored in the latter half of this century and, with the exception of the use of statistical series to indicate trends in youth employment and school retention, there has been very little attempt to consider the issues connected with transition within a broader historical perspective. Nonetheless, it is not uncommon in policy documents, journalism and even scholarly discourse, to find statements to the effect that transition from school to work prior to the seventies was a smooth procedure and that youth unemployment is a new phenomenon. Research by the author suggests otherwise on both counts (Holbrook & Bessant 1987, Holbrook, 1987, 1993a).

In Western societies young workers' jobs have long been very vulnerable to economic downturn (Eichengreen 1987, Keyssar 1987). Youth unemployment remained disproportionately high throughout the period under study and Stricker and Sheehan's (1981) research into hidden unemployment in the early and mid seventies contributes to a picture that suggests that youth unemployment and thus problems in transition may have been more persistent this century than had been thought. The various market theories of transition have not proved particularly helpful in explaining the transition process or its problems in recent times. The economic studies of markets which dominate the literature rarely consider the social perceptions, and uses, of information about work, or the social networks that convey information and give it legitimacy. For example, why is institutional advice with respect to subject choices and careers ignored by many recipients? (Rosenbaum et.al. 1990, p.293) Recent work

utilising oral history suggests that transition from school to work during the first half of this century, and especially through school, was frequently far from smooth and was affected by diverse factors including interactions with peers, the influence of specific teachers, domestic experiences and informal job vacancy networks (Holbrook 1990,1991,1994).

Many historians of education are engaged in a critique of their discipline that was primarily set into motion by recent developments in social theory (Connell 1987, Miller & Davey 1990, Kaestle 1992, Kincheloe 1991). The treatment of the past, and of official and elite sources of evidence as problematic, has given rise to fresh insights into educational practice, school organisation and administration, policy

formulation and educational politics. One of the outcomes of the internal debate has been a willingness to draw on theoretical and methodological approaches and developments in other disciplines and explore alternative sources of evidence - their applicability and explanatory potential. As Kaestle (1988) points out we are now able to benefit from this diversity and concomitant methodological innovations without having to subscribe to a particular theoretical framework. However, much of the History of Education still reflects an historical perspective that focuses on elites and elite institutions, and an uncritical stance on public and 'progressive' education. Finkelstein (1992) in her review of developments in the History of Education, and Harold Silver (1992) point to the need to examine Education from a variety of historical perspectives, not least of which involve exploring the processes, not just the structures of learning and educational provision, and human interactions and relationships, including intergenerational relationships, not just policies and politics. It is the process of transition that is the key concern of this project including the impact of the role taken by the state through its schools and other agencies, as experienced by the recipients of formal schooling. Through this approach it will be possible to explore the much-debated relationship between work and schooling in the past from a hitherto unexamined perspective, namely the meanings brought to those two institutions by adolescents. That this potential exists through the use of oral evidence in the form of narrative is evident in the results of the pilot study that has informed this proposal. Historians have long treated the recipients of education as passive. The data collected in this particular study can contribute to the identification and understanding of manifestations of individual and community agency. The central role of the adolescent experience also raises ancillary questions about the temporal and psychological as well as the social aspects of transition in the period under study.

What are the practical applications of such research, over and above the contribution made to historical knowledge and method? If Australians are to manage change in a period when, arguably, the patterns of work and its place in society are changing, then studies which examine assumptions about education, youth and work need to be undertaken. From a policy perspective it can be argued that there is much to be gained from extending temporal horizons in order to enhance the quality and appropriateness of policy scenarios.

Methods and Techniques

The plight of the young unemployed today would seem to give rise to the adoption of views of the recent past that may

well be more imagined than factual. The historian who depends heavily on oral evidence must also deal with the pervasiveness of myth and tradition in memory. In a recent paper (Holbrook 1992) the author addressed the most frequent criticisms of oral history and argued that the integrity of oral testimony lies more in its reflective use by the historian than by its demonstrable authenticity and factual accuracy - to concentrate on explicit statements is possibly the least meaningful use of oral history data. This project is designed to take account of the layers of meaning in oral testimony, thus the study breaks new ground not only in its subject but in its design. It focuses on the processes of transition from the perspective of the school child. The bottom-up perspective implied in the latter requires a shift towards alternative sources (in this instance oral testimony) which in turn raises problems of interpretation.

The growth of interest in qualitative methodologies in the social sciences has led to wider applications, as well as a more reflective use, of the interview as a research technique. Developments in oral history have also reflected such trends. There have been two broad themes running through the debate and practice of oral history. The first has been concerned with the standardisation of technique so as to improve the validity and reliability of accounts. In the second it is argued that there is a need to undertake systematic research that is cognisant of the importance of an understanding of the oral interview as a speech event (Mishler, 1986). Because meaning transcends words, the context in which the interview is undertaken, including the interaction between interviewer and informant, becomes part of the analysis. The discovery of shared meaning between interviewer and informant is an essential element in the interpretation of meaning. Furthermore, it is argued that if the informant has the opportunity to provide narrative, as opposed to disjointed, responses, then techniques of narrative analysis as well as historical analysis can be brought to bear and so improve the validity of the information collected through the oral history interview.

Each interview is a discrete event with a specific character. It is useful to examine its elements or characteristics, identifying those that are unique to that one event or to the one interviewee/interviewer. Other elements may be common across events and across interviewees/interviewers. Identifying such characteristics

renders them visible, and assists in the analysis of the layers of meaning found in each interview. Key elements in the interview are 'performance', 'content' and 'background', and two even more abstract ones, temporality and culture. These elements may configure quite differently for interviewer and interviewee. How a person perceives their world depends very much on the cultural forces which have shaped those perceptions. Even if one thinks they share a particular cultural framework with an informant because they live in the same time, or the same town, this can be a trap. In a one off interview the oral historian can do little more than realise and acknowledge the possible problems this will create in meaningful interpretation of the data. Secondly the interviewee and the interviewer will generally be working within different temporal frameworks. Inevitably the oral historian will be mainly working with a linear framework and a sequence of events, whereas the informant, dependent on how their recollections emerge, will very likely be utilising a more flexible, non linear temporality, possibly even imagining and creating memories outside time. A study of transition

implies simple linearity, but on the basis of the data collected so far the imposition of linearity may well be obscuring the nature of the phenomenon. Finally, the timing of the interview also intrudes to alter the character of the event. Each interview is a 'performance' of sorts. Both parties have different roles and motivations which influence interaction and mode of delivery. Then there is verbal and non-verbal 'content'; the testimony in the case of the interviewee and the questions, probes and general input of the researcher. Finally there is 'background' specific to the event; that individual knowledge base on which the researcher and the informant draw for the purpose of the interview. The diagram below attempts to give form to these concepts.

At this stage it is anticipated that the interviews undertaken in the study will be subjected to three levels of analysis in an attempt to improve the interpretation of oral testimony. First, the interviews will be analysed for information about specifics - events, dates, sequences, actions, etc. Some of this can be verified through other sources (traditional document study will play a role in the project), or subjected to internal verification based on the composition of the interview and interview technique and informant characteristics. This is the first level of holistic analysis, and the most commonly used in projects involving oral testimony. The second level treats the interview as a speech event, and aims to identify the broad

characteristics of the narrative, for example, the stories within the narrative, the shape and internal dynamics of the discourse. The third level focuses on the 'subjective' aspect of individual testimony, an area that is still in its infancy in history, and is concerned with how people make sense of their lives - connecting past and present:

Most history is only able to observe myths and traditions in the public realm. Oral historians are uniquely well placed to observe connections and continuities which are otherwise invisible...for in order to make sense of their lives individuals pillage the resources of tradition...the most powerful myths are those which influence what people think and do: which are internalised, in their ways of thinking, and which they pass on consciously or subconsciously. (Samuel & Thompson 1990:pp.14-15).

Schooling and transition experiences in Western industrial society are trans-generational, and the subject of public myth. In this study the author is in a position to examine the connection between myth in personal narrative and in public tradition. This aspect provides the study with a contemporary relevance. The attempt to determine the most appropriate method of integration of evidence is a new departure. The ultimate aim with respect to the design is to provide a more sensitive analysis of oral testimony than the more traditional (first level) analyses are able to provide and thus within the framework of other evidence, enhance the potential of oral testimony to contribute to a critical interpretation of the past.

The design involves geographically based case studies - the Hunter (metropolitan and rural), Sydney (metropolitan), Wagga and Broken Hill (rural) this site selection will make possible generalisation to metropolitan and rural NSW. The original intention was to interview people who left school between 1935-1940 and 1945-50. What decisions were actually made about who would be interviewed is discussed later. Restriction to these two time blocks was initially conceived as a way to exclude the most dislocative period of Depression (1930-33) and the War when the Manpower Directorate could dictate work placement. The thirties and forties were acknowledged by the authorities of the time as periods of uncharacteristically high and unacceptable levels of youth unemployment. The politicisation of youth unemployment can be traced to this period.

A pilot study preceded the data gathering for 1993 and so much of the method was determined by that experience. However,



as is the case with all qualitative research, decisions are constantly being made about specifics of design and the appropriateness of techniques. The volatility of the process

of obtaining volunteers led to some alterations in the research plan as well as highlighting some important research issues. These will now be discussed.

#### Some reflections on voluntary interviews

Ultimately, identifying informants requires a judgemental sampling procedure with enough flexibility to pursue pertinent leads. Practical considerations figure largely (availability, accessibility and well-being of informants, and availability of alternate sources to verify information) as well as specific considerations that attempt to reflect the characteristics of educational provision and population factors in the time period under study. With respect to the latter the Hunter had a very small population of non anglo-saxon residents in the period under study; a factor evident not only in census data but also in the many school photographs collected. An attempt has also been made to interview equal numbers of males and females, obtain a spectrum of length of school attendance (early leavers, leaving-age leavers, and those who stayed on - bearing in mind the majority of students left as soon as they reached the official leaving-age) and incorporate a range of types of schools (depending on the availability of choices then available to families in the communities studied).

In the planning phase for the Hunter sixty ninety minute interviews were regarded as a manageably large number of interviews. The author had planned to make some use of publicity but the main tactic for obtaining volunteers was to have been visits to senior citizens clubs and retirement villages to create interest in the project. Extensive mailing of information about the project and a call for volunteers in poster form to managers of nursing homes and retirement villages had only yielded two calls at the time of the newspaper publicity. The project received front page publicity (courtesy of the university public relations unit) in the Newcastle Herald as well as in the local weeklies throughout the region. After that there was a flood of calls. Moreover, once some interviews had been completed, the 'grapevine' yielded another round of inquiries. Some seventy interviews have been completed at the time of writing and the total will probably reach 100. If the number of interviews planned for was sixty, why not stop at sixty? One powerful reason is the amount of goodwill generated by the exercise.



What emerged was a great deal of appreciation of the fact that academics are interested in 'ordinary' people. Secondly, if one seeks elderly volunteers through a public process it becomes very difficult to reject any one of them unless their schooling falls well outside the parameters of the study (eg, outside the Hunter), thus making explanation easy and avoiding hurting their feelings. Moreover, what historian would reject the opportunity to interview a few willing 90-year-olds even if their study focussed on a younger group? Dependence on volunteers means a significant loss of control over sample characteristics initially but some balance can be reinstated through more controlled sampling later once the characteristics of the volunteers become apparent. Thirdly, it soon became clear that obtaining volunteers whose school experience fell exactly within the neat boundaries of 1935-39 and 1945-50 was going to be difficult and rather than reject those who left school between 1929 and 1953 it seemed most sensible to take almost all-comers even if their tapes were not immediately useful to the project. One useful realisation prompted by the problem was that the year limits originally postulated were based on an assumption about what constituted

meaningful periods during those three decades. The data now spans those decades enabling the researcher to identify whether or not there was any clear difference in transition experience between the depression and war years and the years in between. Taking on more volunteers appears to have solved more problems than it caused.

All but two of the interviews were undertaken in the informant's home, where it was decided they would feel more at ease and there would be memorabilia to prompt memory. On the basis of the results of the interviews the decision to go to the informant was the right one for the expected reasons. In addition it meant the informant was entertaining a visitor, a rare occurrence for some, and pleasurable for most. The interviewer was generally welcomed with tea or lunch and shown around the house, or invited to walk in the garden. All three interviewees (including the author) are females in their forties and fifties with similar physical and personality characteristics. All three have teaching experience as well as being used to communicating one-to-one. The decision to engage female research assistants with similar characteristics was an attempt to try and improve, however marginally, the comparability of the interview data. Both of the research assistants already knew each other which contributes to a strong team approach. Post interview discussions between the author and assistants have not revealed any major differences in the interactions between informants and any of

the three interviewers, or between the interviewers and informants of different sex. Performance differences have yet to be analysed.

What has been learned about volunteers? In the pilot study that preceded this project all volunteers (about 120) were 'known' to the author or her post-graduate students. Most of the interviews were collected by the latter as part of an assessment task. The result was that more than 20 per cent of the pilot-study informants had held professional positions, much higher than was typical of the workforce for the period 1920s-40s. It was thus important to avoid heavy reliance on networks for the main study if any sort of representativeness was to be achieved. The author and her team soon realized that the volunteers who responded to the main publicity immediately (some undertook much detective work to obtain the author's new home phone number) were very anxious to talk then but much less likely to be prepared to undergo a formal interview at a later date. There was very clearly a strong element of loneliness and a desire for company evident in the decision to volunteer. A factor that became even more evident during some visits. Other major reasons for volunteering included a strong interest in family and local history, a perception that their story seemed to be different to that of their acquaintances and thus worth telling, a need to 'unload', a belief that they had a good memory, a desire to make a point about education or youth today, or a desire to 'help out'. One couple, for example, wanted to repay the university for what they perceived was its help in assisting their children to good careers.

Ethics: A cautionary note for the confident

Few researchers today would be unaware of Ethics requirements in universities. There is a whole new stratum of public professionals concerned with ethics. In oral history concern about how information is collected and used is fairly well established, primarily because of the growth of oral archives over the past two decades. Thus in the Hunter study

each informant was notified before the interview of release procedures. A release form is offered for their signature after the interview. The form is read through with the informant and offers 'unconditional release' of the tapes for use in research or 'conditional release' (the conditions to be specified by the informant). It also asks for separate permission to archive the tapes. Each informant is also advised before and after the interview that they will receive a copy of their tape(s). Interestingly few have indicated

they have listened to their tapes and fewer still have made corrections. If photographs or memorabilia are borrowed a receipt is given and copies of the photographs are returned with the originals. The copied photographs have been very well received and have often been given to the informants' children as gifts, to local history groups, or even sent into the local papers, sometimes earning the informant a small amount of money. Only one informant has asked for confidentiality and nominated her own pseudonym), another withdrew before interview because she was concerned about maintaining anonymity and one other asked for a copy of the tape before signing the release.

The AARE has very recently commissioned Dr Martin Bibby to develop ethics guidelines for research in education. At one of the executive meeting discussions on the penultimate document the author raised the issue of the ageism evident in the document - the fact that elderly people were not recognised as the subjects of education research nor that they were likely to be subject to some of the same ethics concerns that spring to mind with respect to minors. If one takes the view of ethics guidelines as a means to protect both the researcher and the researched, then it is possible that one may deal with an elderly person who may seem well informed and aware of what the researcher is doing, but not really be in a mental state to give 'informed consent'. Mrs K provides a case in point. In this project the Chief research officer is usually the first point of contact. Mrs K, like many others, sent a letter offering to share her memories, including a few paragraphs to identify the form her schooling took, and some other items of interest.

The interview process is prone to tensions. Many informants are very talkative and happy until the tape is turned on, then there is usually a short, but sometimes prolonged, period of nervousness. A good interviewer can read the situation and use techniques to put the interviewee at their ease. Memories evoke powerful emotions, moreover they also remind the informant of their age. Talking about loved ones now dead, reminds them about their own life expectancy. A very few do cry, usually with the explanation that they do not know why they are crying. One gentleman warned me on first contact that he would cry, that he was prone to crying because of his age, and he did shed tears several times during the interview. To many the interview is a cathartic experience. A letter from one of my last interviewees likened me to a psychologist, even though she added she knew I was not, but she felt as if the interview (covering about 4 and a half hours in six) had 'stirred the pot' to the 'very bottom' also that the next day she was still 'floating between then

and now'. She then went on to say that it was a 'pleasant experience, for which I thank you deeply whether or not what you extracted is worthy of interest'. In either a planned or spontaneous way the informant may end up telling the interviewer what they have kept secret from their own families, or that which they have refused to remember until the point of interview. Most of the interviewees want to

talk. Thus even at the end of an interview which may have resulted in some tears, the typical comment is 'thank you for listening to me, it is a luxury to talk about myself for such a long time'. One of the research assistants has been kissed and hugged in a gesture of thanks while in almost every case positive body language and other indications have shown the interview to be appreciated at the time or soon after. The key concern is not the release form: 'I don't see how anyone can object', but whether or not, with hindsight, they have given the interviewers 'what you want'. Each team member is aware of the need to be gentle or sensitive and to treat the informant's well-being as more important than the data. The whole approach from the initial contact through to cards at Christmas and up-dates on the progress of the project attempts to create a feeling of community among those who participated.

Thus the process outlined above has been guided by concerns for the informant, no less than concern for good management and design. It is probably useful, however, to emphasise there are dangers no matter how much careful planning or concern are evident. To return to Mrs K, a decision was made to exclude her tape from the study after a series of events that cast doubt on her readiness or perhaps even her ability to give 'informed consent'. A whole article can be devoted to the incident. Suffice to say that Mrs K was upset during her interview and after it. It is very likely that loneliness caused her to make contact, or as she later told me, a desire to let young people 'how it was back then in post-colonial schools', either way she broke down very early in the interview and the research assistant promptly stopped the tape, but assessed, after positive feedback from a recovered informant, that the taping should go ahead. After several tearful episodes, each followed by the informant's insistence that she proceed, the session ended. Mrs K, made lunch and spent an extended period of time chatting with the research assistant. The conversation came around to a particular operation she was to have and her fears about it. Although worn, and somewhat concerned that she had let the interview proceed despite see-sawing emotions, the research assistant felt she had parted on good terms, especially as she had been pressed to borrow some certificates and photographs.

The author was advised of the emotions that surfaced during the interview, and encouraged the research assistant to write about them in her research journal. Within two weeks Mrs K contacted the author's department, spoke harshly enough to the secretary to reduce her to tears, and had claimed materials had been taken without her approval. As soon as the author found out she rang Mrs K, received a very moderate and pleasant reception on the phone, and offered to bring back the original tape plus the memorabilia immediately. Mrs K apologised for the fuss, said she was tying up loose ends before going to hospital, gave an address to forward the materials if she passed away, and was very critical of what she believed to be the research assistant's lack of understanding of what it was like in the past. Before Mrs K went to hospital, the author, concerned for her and feeling somewhat guilty that the research had added to her worries, rang to see if she was all right, and once again was well received. Mrs K's operation went smoothly and she phoned the author in jubilant mood to insist we could use her memorabilia as much as we liked. Notwithstanding, the materials were promptly returned by the author by hand after a call to Mrs K to say when they would be delivered. Although the visit was brief it was clear that Mrs K was generally distracted and emotionally 'pent-up'. She was cordial but hardly welcoming. Attention was drawn by the author to the items of memorabilia

being returned including the complimentary copies of the photographs. The material was acknowledged but drew no further comment. Within six weeks there was an angry phone call, whereby the research assistant was vilified in extreme language, and accused of stealing the materials the author had returned.

There is no third episode to date but the author is expecting one. Advice on the incident by a psychiatrist, and the author's own perceptions, suggest that Mrs K is in the early stages of dementia. Mrs K signed a release form but was it informed consent? A whole range of problems may surface that have not generally been considered in the area of education research, primarily because the key subjects of such research are pupils and teachers. A release or consent form covers the researcher legally, but ethically? If Mrs K pressed legal action on her imaginary loss, for example, should her tape be released as evidence when that was not the grounds for the consent? Researchers have to protect their informants, their assistants, their institution and themselves. Unwittingly, despite great care and thoughtful procedures research can trigger distress in its subjects. The fact that they give consent should not dull this realisation, lull the researcher into complacency and a false sense of security, or

exclude the expectation that data will, and should, under certain circumstances, be lost to a project.

#### The mechanics of the interviews

If the original contact with the project by an informant is by phone, or when a call is made by the author to follow up a letter, the author prompts the caller to share a few reminiscences and so establish the beginnings of rapport. Notes are made during that initial contact and postal details are verified so that a letter of acknowledgement, a brief survey sheet and details as to what the interviewers are interested in, as well as how the interview will proceed, can be sent out. Once a date is made for the interview, a brief phone call a day or so before confirms that the volunteer is still interested in being interviewed (see forms attached).

In the pilot study it was found that aspects of home life, and parent's feelings about education were very often volunteered, along with recollections about teachers, subjects, corporal punishment and feelings about school. Most people did not volunteer how they found their first job, whether they received formal vocational guidance and what, if any, expectations or desires they had about jobs. Such questions more frequently required a more probing approach. The pilot interviews attempted to avoid all even remotely leading questions about how a child proceeded through school and how decisions were made about schooling and job choice. It was hoped such an approach would pinpoint areas of a sensitive or threatening nature, as well as identify aspects of school life and transition not postulated by the literature or the author's previous research. The conclusions drawn from the pilot were that the areas of interest to the project posed little if any threat of discomfort to those interviewed, that most informants' memories of school were intensive rather than extensive, that teachers were mostly remembered for personality factors closely connected to disciplinary traits, and that family life and socio-economic status were raised in connection with the school experience. The latter was an important finding in that the author felt that it was possible to draw informants' attention to the impact of family on schooling without being unduly leading or risk threatening them. It was important that informants realised that the

whole scope of their young lives be discussed, but this would have been difficult to achieve if there had been a general reticence to discuss home circumstances.

In the Hunter study the three interviewers were prepared

to spend longer than two hours with the informants, although ninety minutes of tape was the aim. About half of the interviews lasted more than two hours. The approach is only partially structured. The typical interview proceeds as follows: About 20 minutes to 40 minutes devoted to warming up, including checking the responses on the survey form and discussing memorabilia. The taped interview follows, usually without a break then the release form is signed and a receipt for any memorabilia is written. Allowing an informant plenty of leeway to develop their story in their own way, yet keeping them within the boundaries of the research requires careful listening and delicate manoeuvring. Thus most of the time the interviewer is engaged in assisting the informant to extend their memories chronologically or thematically. The interviews most frequently are more structured towards the start and the end. Specific questions about family or early schooling (either framed on the basis of the warm-up or the printed sheet) characterise the first short phase of the interview, followed in most cases by an extended phase characterised by minimal directedness, and then (when the informant indicates by tone, or word a desire to effect closure) finally by a short phase of highly directed questions focussing on the transition experience, such as 'what did you feel/experience when you left primary school and entered high school', 'what did you feel/experience when you left high school and entered your first job'. Can you remember being treated as grown up? When did you feel you had become an adult? What is your most vivid memory of school/ first job? Compare education/ work in your day and now. In the context of the study these are very likely to be leading questions, so for the sake of analysis they tend to be asked together at the end of the interview, even if they do cover ground previously covered by the informant in the less directed section of the interview. Several rules guide the interviewers in this project. the first is say as little as possible most of the time, but direct if necessary. If an informant has a lot to say, let them exhaust the topic unless it becomes clear that it is too far outside the parameters of the research. Listen actively and comment when and if it is appropriate. Use a research journal for reflections after the interview and for any ideas pertinent to the project generally. This approach is fully cognisant of the two way nature of the interview and also of the vagaries of memory and the unpredictable nature of remembering.

Full word-processor transcription of the tapes is the next step. The file contains the demographics collected in the survey (dates, schools attended and certificates gained), research journal comments, and the substance of any personal documentation (certificates, photographs and the like). The



transcripts are then indexed by sentence.

Final comments on the method and its potential

Most individuals are not authorities on every institution that has played a part in their lives, for example, education, the law, religion, or politics. They may have familiarity with, even expertise, on some aspects but not all. Moreover, they are selective about what they observe and even feel. This is even true even if they record a fresh experience. Add

the characteristics of memory: compression, non-linear time frame, decomposition and re-composition, to name a few and it becomes evident that individual recollections (while interesting in themselves) lack the potential to explain anything more than the features of that individual's life. Gathering together a large number of such individual stories with a regard to composing a picture of the past as well as understanding its elements, can yield much more meaningful information, especially when used in conjunction with other sources.

Thus the method in this project should yield a composite picture of transition experiences in the past upon which hypothesis building can begin in earnest. But what else can it yield? Firstly, there is information about memory. In a very recent paper the author examined perceptions of school discipline by informants in the previously mentioned pilot study and noted that recollections of teacher personality mirrored descriptions of disciplinary practice, and that only two main groups of teachers were identified. They were the 'strict' and the 'good/nice' teachers and there was some overlap between the groupings forming a hybrid group. Were such perceptions those of the children who experienced school in those years, or the function of compression and oversimplification in the course of remembering? Is the picture presented a construction of popular memory, ie, how teachers are generally remembered in our culture - the very inspiring or very mean stereotypes? The question is legitimate, but as the author argued in that paper the popular constructs were identifiable and applied to only a small proportion of teachers recalled (Holbrook 1993b). Just how close to the past can such composite pictures take us? A large number of interviews collected using the same method by the same team can provide the type of information that will go some way toward identifying how oral testimony can be most usefully analysed. At present oral testimony is either too often dismissed by historians or treated uncritically as a

treasure trove.

Secondly there is information about the whole process of collecting interview data. There is potential to determine something about the impact of design on the data collected, and in particular to be able to say something useful about informant types in projects that require volunteers. Most people are only prepared to give one interview. What does this mean for a project? Can more be said about validity and reliability of interview data than has already been covered in the literature?

In a major project such as the one described above the interviewer has to be prepared in a number of ways, firstly because of the nature of the interview; the format is not purely conversational nor interrogatory but there are elements of both. The interviewer has to be prepared with background information, prepared to learn, to explore, to go with the flow, to steer, and to stop when necessary. Secondly, they have to be prepared to negotiate different roles in the course of contact with the informant. Thus, each oral history interview is a special event with a special character collected in a specific context. The data has to be interpreted taking account of that context as indicated in the diagram previously. How then to best sum up the experience, and the limitations, along with the method? Perhaps a travel metaphor can assist. The oral history interviewer has to meld the roles of guide, tourist and native in a shifting mental landscape, while negotiating the roles of public professional

and private guest in real time.

On a final note, most oral historians wax lyrical about the joys of experiencing living history but to the author perhaps the most striking feature of the process is that people invite complete strangers into their homes and are prepared to exert themselves to try and call up aspects of their past that may be difficult or even painful to recall. They demonstrate an innate appreciation of the importance of history and its transmission, for they have seen many changes in their own lifetimes and are constantly trying to make sense of that changing world by drawing on past experience. The empowering value of history is encapsulated in every person's story.

## References

Blakers, C. (1990) *Youth and Society: The Two Transitions*, Melbourne, ACER.

Connell, W.F. (1987) 'Research and Writing in the History of Education', in J.Keeves Australian Education: Review of Recent Research, Sydney, Allen & Unwin.

Cultural Studies University of Birmingham (1991) Education Limited: Schooling and Training and the New Right Since 1979, London, Unwin Hyman.

Eichengreen, B. (1987) 'Juvenile Unemployment in Twentieth-Century Britain: the Emergence of a Problem', Social Research, vol. 54, no.2, pp. 273-301.

Finkelstein, B. (1992) 'Historians as Mythmakers', Review of Research in Education 18, Washington, AERA, pp. 255-98.

Holbrook, A. (1987) 'Slotting Them in the Right Niche: Adolescence and Vocational Guidance in the 1920s and 1930s', in Bessant, B. (ed.), Mother State and Her Little Ones, Melbourne, Phillip Institute Centre for Youth and Community Studies, pp. 167-99.

Holbrook, A. (1990) 'Apathetic Parents and Wilful Children? Vocational Guidance in the 1930s', in M.J. Theobald and R.J.W. Selleck (eds), Family, School and State in Australian History, Sydney, Allen and Unwin, pp. 134-53.

Holbrook A., & Bessant, B. (1987) 'Responses to Youth Unemployment in the 1930s and 1980s', Unicorn, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 40-50.

Holbrook, A. (1991) 'From School to Work: The Impact of School Experience on Vocational Aspirations 1930s - 1940s, paper presented at the Annual ANZHES Conference, University of Wollongong, October 3-6.

Holbrook, A.P. (1992a) 'The Training and Initial School Experiences of Women Teachers in the Fifties', Annual ANZHES Conference, St Mark's College, Adelaide, 1-4 October.

Holbrook, A.P. (1992b) 'The Integrity, Profile and Potential of Oral History in Education Research', AARE Conference, Deakin University, Geelong, 22-26 November.

Holbrook, A. (1993a) 'Pressure to Train and Pressed into Training: The Findings of the 1937 Victorian Youth

Employment Survey and Subsequent Training Initiatives',

Journal of Australian Studies. (in press).

Holbrook, A. (1993b) 'Children's Perceptions of Classroom Discipline in New South Wales 1920-1950: An Oral History Approach', Paper presented at the Issues in Australian Childhood Conference, Brisbane, 23-25 September, 1993.

Holbrook, A.P. (1994) 'A Chorus of Condemnation: Memories of NSW Teacher's Colleges 1940-1950s', Oral History Association of Australia Journal (in press)

Kaestle, C.F. (1988) 'Recent Methodological Developments in the History of American Education', in R.M. Jaeger, Complementary Methods for Research In Education, Washington, AERA.

Kaestle, C.F. (1992) 'Standards of Evidence in Historical Research: How Do We Know When We Know?', History of Education Quarterly, vol.32, no.3, pp. 361-6.

Keyssar, A. (1987) 'Unemployment before and After the Great Depression', Social Research, vol.54, no.2, pp. 201-21.

Kincheloe, J.L. (1991) 'Educational Historiographical Meta-analysis: Rethinking Methodology in the 1990s', Qualitative Studies in Education, vol.4, no.3, pp. 231-45.

Miller, P. & Davey I, (1990) 'Family Formation, Schooling and the Patriarchal State' in M. Theobald & R.J.W. Selleck (eds), Family, School and State, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, pp. 1-24.

Mishler, E.G. (1986) Research Interviewing: Context and Narrative, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

Rosenbaum, J.E., Kariya, T., Settersten, R. & Maier, T. (1990) 'Market and Network Theories of the Transition from High School to Work: Their Application to Industrialised Societies', Annual Review of Sociology, vol.16, pp. 263-99.

Samuel, R. & Thompson, P. (1990) The Myths We Live By, London, Routledge.

Silver, H. (1992) 'Knowing and Not Knowing in the History of Education', History of Education, vol. 21, no.1, pp. 97-108.

Stricker, P. & Sheehan, P. (1981) Hidden Unemployment,

Melbourne, Institute of Applied Economic and Social  
Research University of Melbourne.