Cut the Ends Off the Roast: Examining the Role of the Individual in the Familial Oral Tradition

Charlotte Gill
University of Colorado Boulder
Cut the Ends Off the Roast: Examining the Role of the Individual in the Familial Oral Tradition

Charlotte Gill

General Honors Thesis
University of Colorado at Boulder

March 31st, 2014

Thesis Advisor
Dr. Daniel C. Jones | Honors Program

Committee Members
Dr. Robert Nauman | Art & Art History
Dr. Melinda Barlow | Film Studies
Abstract

This thesis project seeks to examine the role of the individual in the construction of family folklore by means of a creative photographic series. The overall goal of this autoethnographic project is to demonstrate how the individual alters the oral tradition through creative personal inquiry. A thorough investigation of neuroscientific research and cognitive theories will provide the framework through which I will engage in the recreation and photographic documentation of key family stories. I will explore how my own internal needs, emotions and values have shaped my family’s collective oral tradition, as well as investigate how my personal experience is part of a larger social phenomenon.
“A man who tells secrets or stories must think of who is hearing or reading, for a story has as many versions as it has readers. Everyone takes what he wants or can from it and thus changes it to his measure. Some pick out parts and reject the rest, some strain the story through their mesh of prejudice, some paint it with their own delight. A story must have some points of contact with the reader to make him feel at home in it. Only then can he accept wonders.”

-- John Steinbeck, The Winter of Our Discontent

---

1. Introduction

For three generations, women in my family have been making the roast the same way. Before being rolled in herbs and placed in a pan, the roast was trimmed slightly on both ends. Year in and year out for over a half a century, we have been diligently cutting off the ends of the roast, because, after all, that is how you make a roast. Or…. something like that. At some point someone in my family (who, again?) asked why the roast had to be trimmed. Turns out my great grandmother (it was her, right?) simply had too small of a pan and had to trim the roast to get it to fit, thus inspiring generations of women to unknowingly do the same. I’m pretty sure that’s how the story goes. I’ve never made a roast anyway; I’ve been a vegetarian since long before I learned to cook. But the story itself remains, and I’m almost certain that that is how it went.

I never needed to learn how to cook a roast, but through years of retelling I have kept the story nonetheless. It has been placed in a file cabinet in the back of my mind, ready to be called forward when the topic of roasts, family recipes or blindly following authority comes up. My mother has told her version of the story so many times it has become embedded in my mind.

The roast story is kept company by an almost endless supply of more family folktales. Stories have always been an indelible part of my upbringing. Streaming simultaneously with my current consciousness, family folklore seamlessly weaves in and out of my day-to-day life. It pops up at seemingly inconspicuous times and fades away just as quickly.

Stories on the whole are a pervasive part of our society, from media and marketing, to the sciences and humanities. Stories help us, guide us, lie to us and change our behavior. Of these stories, family folklore is of an exceptional variety. It is a particularly intimate and specific kind of storytelling relating to an individual family unit, which is further specialized through the cultural values of that particular group.
Both because of its uniquely personal quality and its ingrained presence in my own life, family folklore has long intrigued me. It wasn’t until I met my partner, however, that I realized how my family’s oral tradition has come full circle in my own life. The stories that have been passed down to me through the years suddenly took on new meaning as I began to recite them to the person I love, thus inducting him into the long line of listeners, and becoming a teller myself. The need to share these stories was inescapable. If he were to become part of my family, becoming familiar with these folktales would gain him access and make him part of the group.

As my understanding of my family’s oral tradition shifted, so did my questions about its inherent nature. What made these stories so valuable to me? How could I remember them so vividly? Why was it so important for me to participate in my family’s tradition? And perhaps most generally, what did these stories mean?

The following is my investigation into what makes the familial oral tradition so memorable and valuable, as well the individual’s role in its continuation.
Once a month, Ann Alexander performed a personal ritual: she would strip to her skivvies, eat an entire head of garlic and clean her entire apartment. She would scrub the floors, wash the windows and vacuum the rugs. Her husband Arthur had passed away years before, and being just the kind of woman she was, she moved from the comfortable suburbs into the bustle of the city. Now situated above downtown Toronto, the sweat of her hard work glistened over her body, smelling of the garlic that seeped through her pores. She claimed it detoxified her body.

Knowing she was unfit to take guests, she would hang a sign on her door, asking everyone to come back another day.

...
2. What is the Familial Oral Tradition?

Traditionally, the term “oral tradition” is used to describe the ballads, verse, and stories that are passed down over centuries and through multiple generations without written record.\(^2\) Familial oral traditions specifically relate to the folktales handed down through individual family lines over the course of generations. It is the stories families tell at family gatherings, the ones they hear since childhood and eventually repeat to their own children. Indeed, listening, memorizing, and retelling all play a crucial role in continuing the process of the familial oral tradition.

Although all ancient societies around the world were at some point based in a non-literate oral tradition, few of these societies survive today, replaced by cultures relying on the written word and recorded record keeping.\(^3\) Despite significant changes in its function and structure over time, the oral tradition still exists even in “advanced” societies in altered forms such as family folklore.\(^4\)

While the oral tradition has changed over time, interest in researching the subject itself has risen drastically over the last century. Since it’s increase in popularity, psychologists, sociologists, historians, and folklorists have been engaging in a large, cross-disciplinary discussion about the nature of the oral tradition.\(^5\)


\(^4\) Ibid.

\(^5\) Ibid.
The last century of research has revealed a plethora of functions related to the familial oral tradition. Those of us who grow up within a culture that values oral tradition can be said to inhabit a “community of memory”. These communities are defined by their shared folklore, as well as the values established in that particular tradition. These communities serve many purposes—they establish rules and norms through which we interpret the world, they create a sense of belonging and shared experience, and they make the chaotic nature of the universe seem more predictable and safe. They emotionally connect us to our fellow community members, whether across physical distance or through generations of time. They orient us and help us make decisions according to the preferences of the larger group. On the whole, research has repeatedly shown that communities of memory formed by familial oral tradition greatly enhance our collective and individual human experience.

In response to the overwhelming surge of interest in the subject, philosophers in the 20th century began to search for a term that would accurately identify this notion of cooperative memory keeping. Following in the footsteps of his mentor Emile Durkheim, French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs coined the term “collective memory” in the 1950s in order to

---


7 Ibid.


9 Gillis, 80.

describe the collective group memory-keeping inherent in the oral tradition.\textsuperscript{11} Thus emerging as one of the most prominent theorists in the field, Halbwachs argued that the memory of an individual is determined by the larger social values of the collective group they belong to, whether it be a family unit (as with the familial oral tradition), a religious group, or an entire nation.\textsuperscript{12} Widely accepted among scholars at the time, Halwachs’ theory erased the role of the individual out of the oral tradition almost entirely. What stories we pass down through generations, what meaning we find in stories, how we remember them, and why we remember them are all determined by our collective group—according to Halbwachs, the individual does not have an effect on this process.\textsuperscript{13}

When applied to my own family, Halbwachs’ theory would dictate that it is the collective mind of my family that determines what stories I find significant, altogether ruling out my individual preference. This means that the stories I find to be important are more or less the same stories my mother values, and my grandparents valued before her. My family unit determines what is significant, and then instills these notions in me.

Although Halbwachs’ theory was largely accepted at the time and is still supported by a number of scholars, recent developments in the field of cognitive science have pulled Halbwachs’ theory into question. Today, it seems highly unlikely that the individual has no impact on the formation of the oral tradition. In light of this, we must ask ourselves: what role might the individual play in the development lasting functions of the oral tradition?

\textsuperscript{11} Barbara Misztal, \textit{Theories of Social Remembering} (Maidenhead, Berkshire, England: Open University Press, 2003), 55.

\textsuperscript{12} Susan A. Crane, "Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory" (\textit{The American Historical Review} 102.5, 1997), 1376.

\textsuperscript{13} Misztal, 55.
Neil Alexander felt good this morning. He kissed his wife and three daughters as he left the house to head to work. Sporting a fancy new suit and tie, he climbed into his freshly cleaned car and pulled out of the driveway. He knew he looked good. As he slowed to a stop at a red light he saw a beautiful young woman in the car beside him, checking him out. He smiled and winked back. As he pulled to a stop at the next intersection the woman caught his eye again, waving excitedly. “I’ve really got it,” he thought to himself, and he accelerated once more. By now their cars drove side by side down the street, the woman gaping out her window, staring at him.

Somewhat alarmed and yet quite excited, he slowed to a stop next to her at the third light and rolled down his window. “Your garden hose! Your garden hose is trailing out of the back of your trunk!” she yelled. Sure enough, as Neil looked in his rear view mirror, he saw his garden hose trailing ten feet behind him. He turned his gaze back towards the woman in utter embarrassment, but she was already gone.

...
3. How Individuals Alter the Oral Tradition

Although the research pertaining to the various communal effects of the oral tradition is prolific, significantly less research has been dedicated towards investigating the role of the individual in regards to this larger social phenomenon. This is especially striking, considering the number of duties the individual is responsible for in the process of the oral tradition: the individual listener translates a family story as it is told to them in order to make sense of it, stores it in their memory, then, acting as a storyteller themselves, the individual reweaves the story once more as they tell it, emphasizing and deemphasizing and adding and removing information according to what they remember and their current values, emotions, and purposes. As current cognitive science investigates the various roles individuals play, it seems even more unrealistic to erase the importance of individual values.

This continual reworking on the part of listeners and tellers in the family oral tradition reveals the individual variance that warps a story over time. In many oral traditions, the role of the storyteller is focused on this reweaving—the story itself is secondary. The variation through which a storyteller alters their story is complex—word choice, narrative style, timing, audience, and venue all greatly affect the eventual story that is told, thus altering the familial tradition itself.

In order to better understand the role of the individual listener and the role of the individual storyteller, we must understand how the human brain actually processes, remembers, and eventually transfers stories to another person. The method through which the human mind engages in the oral tradition can be broken down into three essential cognitive components: the

---

14 Ross, 173.

15 Ibid.
transmission function, the translation function, and the long-term memory function. Together, these mental functions make the practice of oral tradition possible.

The transmission function refers to the process through which individuals communicate stories to one another, namely, how the individual chooses to share a story. It is through this process that a story becomes part of our personal repertoire. Our perceived perception of another individual’s experience becomes imprinted in almost the same way as if it were us that were experiencing it due to mirror neurons our brain. We can be told a story and relate to it because of these neurons, whose function is to mimic the thoughts and emotions of the storyteller in the mind of the listener. This ability to accurately conceptualize another’s experience is commonly defined as empathy. In cognitive science, however, it is referred to as having a “theory of mind”. In this way, an individual experience can outlive the person who experiences it firsthand—by being repeated over and over, individuals separated across distances and throughout time can experience shockingly analogous experiences.

For centuries scholars have been debating whether or not humans can truly experience the mind of another. Descartes famously proclaimed that there is only the self, and we are only privileged to experiencing our own mind. While Italian philosopher Vico argued that it is this

---


17 Ross, 184-187.

18 Ibid.


20 Ross, 171.
capacity to empathize with another that makes us human.\textsuperscript{21} While the debate over having a true “theory of mind” still rages today, the evidence of mirror neurons show us that at the very least, we can experience an emotion that is quite similar to another family member, simply by hearing a family story.

In addition to mirror neurons, the transmission function further alters the family tradition through the ways in which individuals creatively imagine the story. The means in which oral narrative is transferred to the aesthetic imagination is complex and debatable. Most prominent of these theories is Elaine Scarry’s argument that during retelling, the storyteller either intentionally or instinctively activates visual receptor points in the brain of the listener that are linked to visual perception. In this process, portions of the listener’s temporal cortex that are adjacent to those involved in visual formation are activated, thus simulating the process through which an individual visually perceives their surroundings.\textsuperscript{22}

PET scans have largely supported Scarry’s hypothesis, showing that when individuals read words associated with colors, the brain activates areas in close proximity to those associated with color perception.\textsuperscript{23} Other scientists have applied Scarry’s hypothesis to other areas of art, specifically visual art. Semir Zeki has found that visual artists activate the same visual receptor points as Scarry’s storytellers.\textsuperscript{24}

When applied to familial oral traditions, Scarry’s argument implies that in order for the listener to create a mental image of the story, they must be prompted to do so by the storyteller.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 172.
\textsuperscript{22} Modell, 114.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 115.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
As my family has passed down stories, they have also passed down their essential visual components as well. According to Scarry’s theory, the brown poop smeared across my mother’s shirt resonates within my brain as I construct a visual image around it. Sigmund Freud himself declared that the varying ways individuals visualize a story are more indicative of the state of unconscious mind than our choice of words and what stories we tell.  

The second cognitive function related to the familial oral tradition is the translation function. The translation function refers to the brain’s encoding of this transferred material into a personally usable form, in other words, how we interpret the stories that are told to us. This is best understood through looking at the various ways individuals experience objective reality. 

Objective experience is the common reality shared between multiple individuals. A father and son sitting in the same room share fixed units of their reality: the couch they are sitting on, the brightness of the light in the room, and the snoring of the dog in front of them. Beyond this objective experience, however, is an individually perceived reality, commonly referred to as autocentric perception. Within this more selective inner world, the mind of the individual is focused according to internal interests and values. These values are a collection of individual emotions, memories, and motivations, which alter the way an individual perceives a shared space. While the father and son share a common experience in the room, their individual

---

25 Ross, 59.  
26 Ibid.  
27 Modell, 179  
28 Ibid, 180.  
29 Ibid, 181.
experiences differ according to their internal climate—the father’s stress about work, the son’s desire to wake the dog up to play.

In addition to these two fields of experiential perception, we can add a third. Known among scientists as the “analytic third” and among literary critics as the “dialogical mode”, this final form of human experience refers to the intersubjectivity between individuals—namely a crossing of two individual’s subjective perceptions. The son chooses not to wake the dog because his father expressed his exhaustion and desire for peace and quiet.

This is translation function is what allows individuals to interpret the stories they are told. When my mother retells a family story, she is first volunteering the objective facts of the story, as they were told to her. Into this she adds her own subjective experiences, according to her current mood or her personal values. As I receive the story, my own internal values meet with hers, creating an entirely new, intersubjective experience. It is not completely my mothers, nor is it completely mine. I encode her story differently than she told it to me, due to the fact that I add in my own personal values and emotional states.

The last cognitive function necessary in the oral tradition is the long-term memory function, where in the mind effectively warehouses the information it has been given until it is later needed, at which time the information will be translated and transmitted once more. It is well documented that individuals often fail to recall memories accurately, instead adapting them to fit their current mood and value system. In other words, “we remember what we remember

30 Ibid, 182.
31 Schwarz & Sudman, 40.
32 Roger C. Schank Tell Me a Story: Narrative and Intelligence (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 120.
because we believe what we believe.” This implies that when an individual recalls a family story in order to tell it to another individual, they are retelling a fragmented version, one that has been altered by their own personal memory.

In addition to his contributions to how individuals transfer aesthetic images to one another, Semi Zeki’s work has also highlighted the connection between visual imagining and the calculated method by which the brain remembers visual stimuli. First, he argues, the brain recognizes color, then form, and finally, movement. As such, it is presumed that we are more likely to remember color attributes of a story before more specific aesthetic components, such as form and movement.

In these ways we can clearly see that family stories not only transform from one generation to the next, but within a generation itself. The evidence surrounding process by which an individual’s memories are shaped and molded through time and various environmental factors is substantial. The stories I know from my childhood are not the same stories that I recited to myself as a child, or that I recited to myself last year. They have been transformed just as I have been transformed throughout the moments, days, months, and years.

Now that we understand how the individual brain alters the stories that comprise their familial oral tradition, it is important to investigate why it does so.

---


34 Modell, 115.

35 Ibid.
Bob Gill and Bolly Henry had been together off and on for a few months, going to the movies and out with their friends. One day, Bolly abruptly chose to stop taking Bob’s calls. She simply decided wasn’t interested anymore. Noticing this, Bolly’s father asked her why he never saw Bob around anymore-- he always really liked Bob. Bolly didn’t have a good answer. As she lay in bed that night, Bolly struggled to sleep, her father’s words running through her mind, wondering if she was supposed to be with Bob. She climbed back out of her bed and kneeled on the floor to pray. She asked God, “God, should I be with Bob?” And suddenly she knew. From that day forward, Bolly was always sure to take Bob’s calls.
4. A Necessary Altering

This inherent variable quality of human memory is what makes familial oral tradition so vibrant. Family stories are not static and unchanging. In addition to varying from individual to individual, they also vary from moment to moment.\(^{36}\) The way we remember our grandmother’s house one day will very likely be different the next, depending on our emotional state and our present needs. Family lore is in a continual state of development, oftentimes unbeknownst to those who share it. It is this individual altering that makes family folklore resonate across generations. Without it, family stories would simply be facts, and those facts would quickly be forgotten.\(^{37}\)

The reasons for individual variation in the familial oral tradition are abundant: we alter stories during translation in order to conceptualize the story and relate to new information in a way that is meaningful to us.\(^{38}\) We naturally alter a story in order to find meaning that resonates according to our own value system, and we catalog it in the same way.\(^{39}\) As we grow older, we adapt our memories to fit our changes in maturity and understanding.\(^{40}\) Even our individual aesthetic imagining is performed as a means help us recall the stories that are told to us.\(^{41}\)

---

\(^{36}\) Schank, 128.


\(^{38}\) Ibid, 57 & 120.

\(^{39}\) Schank, 118.

\(^{40}\) Horsdal, 52.

Studies have shown that visualization and visual cues are often more likely elicit the recollection of an implicit memory than facts and words alone.\textsuperscript{42}

Even Maurice Halbwachs himself, who based his entire theory around the collaborative, group mind of storytelling, briefly accounts for individual presentivism—the alterations in a story that are called for in order to meet the present needs of the individual storyteller.\textsuperscript{43} Based off of our individual needs at any given moment, Halbwachs believed, we could abandon our family’s imposed structure and shape our memory according to our own needs.\textsuperscript{44} If, when I retell the my great grandmother’s pot roast story, I am retelling it to someone as an example of blindly following authority, I will emphasize those parts that highlight the absurdity of slicing the ends off the roast. If I am recalling the story to myself while I am feeling lonely, I will most strongly remember the portions of the story that make me connected to my matrilineal heritage. These memories change according to what I need them for, and this internal variance is entirely my own.

As we can see, our minds naturally take great care in ensuring that we remember stories, even if it is at the cost of accuracy. But why does the mind make such an enormous effort? According to schema theory, we conceptualize the world by fitting outside interactions into our personal stories.\textsuperscript{45} When we hear a story we actively add it into our mental framework, whether it is to make a prediction about how an individual will act, or to teach ourselves how to act in the future. We remember these stories and relate to them because they help us translate the world

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{43} Misztal, 55-56.

\textsuperscript{44} Schank, 227.

around us. In strict terms of the individual and our biological needs, our collective community needs may not be the central driving force in our relentless cataloging of stories. Instead, it is an individual need to make sense of our world. The familial oral tradition provides a veritable mine of stories to add to our internal index.

Motivated by our thirst for stories, the individual mind ignores consistency and historical accuracy in the oral tradition in exchange for the ability to relate to, make sense of, and make use of the stories it provides.
Debbie and Kim always used to joke around with Patti. The youngest of the three, she was always a step or two behind her older sisters. On a sunny day the girls were playing outside. Noticing the family dog had just defecated on the lawn, Debbie and Kim conspired to swing Patti by her arms and legs over the pile of poop. Smelling the stench beneath her, Patti begged her sisters to let her go. Debbie and Kim swung her once more and abruptly laid her down on the grass. Patti could feel the warm, unpleasant sensation of the poop beneath her back. Furiously horrified, she rolled over in an effort to escape the mess they laid her in. As she did so, she suddenly realized she had made a terrible mistake—Debbie and Kim had laid her about a foot away from the pile—in her own daring escape, she smeared the pile of poop across the front of her shirt. It was the one with the ribbons sewn on the front, now thoroughly caked in poop. She cried and ran to find her mother.
5. Statement & Conclusions

When I first started to consider the nature of my family’s oral tradition I focused my mind on the stories that seem to appear most frequently in my day to day consciousness: my great grandmother eating heads of raw garlic, my grandmother asking God if she should be with my grandfather, my grandfather’s garden hose story, my mother rolling in a pile of poop. In the soundtrack of my family’s oral tradition, these stories are my greatest hits. As I rolled over these memories in my mind, I realized that the scenes of these stories are familiar to me regardless of the fact that I did not directly experience any of them.

This is because transfer of stories from elder to child transfers with them the memory’s intellectual property. My great grandmother’s personal rituals, my grandfather’s embarrassment, my grandmother’s prayers and my mother’s horror, through years of retelling and personal alteration, have become my own memories. The process of memory transfer and intersubjectivity brings with it an essential altering of the original stories, bringing with it personal meaning, value and significance.

The most natural way for me to understand complexities of the familial oral tradition was through actually making the abstract images in my mind a reality. In doing so, I could play with the tension between the individual and the collective family tradition, as well as between historical truth and imagined reality. In regards to my photographic series, this paradox is shown through the self-portrayal of the protagonist’s role. When I retell these stories they have become my own property. My values and beliefs merge with what I have been told, leaving the meaning and emphasis of the story up to me. Using my family’s oral tradition as a structure, I have essentially altered it to include myself—my own personal values, emotions, and beliefs. In my photographic series, this inclusion of myself takes a literal form.
Over the last century, the individual has been largely written out of the familial oral tradition. New cognitive studies, however, are turning the tide on this misassumption. Not only do we see the essential roles the self plays in the process, we can also see how individual variation makes the oral tradition meaningful and worth remembering. By understanding what key roles the individual plays in the continuation of family folklore, we are better able to understand its nature as well as the nature of the human mind.
Bibliography


