

ICPHR: ORAL HISTORY PROTOCOLS

1 Individual Oral history projects

1.1 Introduction

There are a number of reasons why people may wish to undertake an oral history project. Most relate to wanting to capture the memories of people who have particular experiences considered as potentially enriching for those in current and future times. Oral history projects have been used to record everyday experiences of people in communities and in workplaces. They have been used to open up avenues for reconciliation by highlighting the experiences of oppressed people (for example, Field 2008). They have been used to bring to the fore the experiences of marginalised people in societies to allow their voices to be heard and to challenge the institutions and societal expectations and assumptions that suppress acknowledgement of these experiences (for example, Ramirez 2008). While oral histories have been undertaken with elite people in societies, most oral history projects have taken what is called a 'bottom up' approach. That is, it is a historical research design that is accessible to ordinary people, both as participants and as researchers. It is a research design that reveals experiences not evident in other archival or documentary sources. As such, oral history can be a powerful tool in challenging the status quo and in providing an avenue for the less powerful in societies to be valued and heard.

1.2 Establishing Purpose

Working out the purpose of any oral history project is an important step to do at the beginning because this will determine what questions need to be asked and who to interview. Oral histories are not life histories, although some can be. Rather, oral history projects generally have a more specific aim to direct interview questions as opposed to allowing participants to randomly relay their life experiences. For example, an oral history project on mid 20th century nursing practices may interview people who nursed in community and acute care settings at the time who will be asked to describe their working day and common procedures they undertook. They may be asked about the types of patients they nursed, but they won't be asked about what sort of recreational activities they undertook or who they socialised with. Being clear about the purpose of the project will ensure the questions being asked in the interviews are targeting what is being focused on and will help to decide who to invite to be interviewed.

Mary Larson (2007) describes four main genres of oral histories:

- a) Subject-orientated oral histories: one of the most common where a topic is explored, as in the example above.
- b) Life history: this is generally used for more famous and elite people. It can be the basis of single biographies or collective biography (for example, of a specific group of nurses in World War 1).
- c) Community history: local history is quite a popular pursuit of museums and historical societies, especially in smaller regional and rural communities, who are wanting to capture stories around important events in the community, or to capture 'their' way of life.

- d) Family history: older generations have often recorded their life experiences as memoirs. Oral history is another way of capturing these memories, primarily for current and future family members.

The theoretical approach one can take is related to each of these genres, which will be explored more in Interpretation and Using Oral Histories.

The ICPHR Oral History project's initial purpose was to interview people who had been instrumental in establishing the ICPHR and in moving the theory and practice of Participatory Health Research forward. This is an example of a subject-orientated project.

1.3 Ethics

Part of working through the design issues in regards to oral history projects is consideration of ethics: what are the benefits of the project; who benefits; what are the risks involved and how can these be minimised. Most oral history projects will require some sort of ethical clearance from a human ethic committee from within an institution, for example a university. Exceptions to this can be found in community histories undertaken by community members. However, even in these projects, it is good practice to work through the main ethical issues

1.3.1 Consent

People being interviewed should consent to the interview with complete understanding of what is going to be asked and how the data collected will be used. Participants will also generally be asked to assign copyright of the interview over to the researcher or organisation to allow for publication of parts of the interview if this is an outcome of the project. Release forms are also sought if the interview is to be stored in an archive so it can be accessed by other researchers. Because copyright and release are legal issues, it is best to seek out examples of these forms from individual national oral history sources. For example:

- USA: <http://www.oralhistory.org/>
 - UK: <http://www.ohs.org.uk/>
 - Australia: <http://www.oralhistoryaustralia.org.au/>
 - Canada: <http://www.canoha.ca/>
- (*Other national websites for different languages)*

1.3.2 Identification

Although most research projects seek to de-identify participants, it is usual practice in oral histories to identify the people who are interviewed, both in relation to the storing of the interview and transcript and in publications. Pseudonyms can be used if the participant so wishes and if the nature the project is particularly sensitive.

1.3.3 Who Benefits?

The beneficiaries of the majority of research in Western societies are the researcher and funding institutions. Oral histories can also fall into this category. However, because oral history interviews

are generally seen as creative works between the interviewer and the participant, greater emphasis is normally placed on ensuring benefits are gained by both. In some cases, where emancipation forms the purpose of the project, benefits should be clearly weighed in favour of those being interviewed: both at the time of the interview and in relation to any outcomes of the project.

1.3.4 What are the Risks?

Oral history projects can sometimes involve exploring aspects of experiences that can generate strong emotions, primarily for those being interviewed, but also for the interviewers. These projects should be prepared for carefully to ensure the interviewer has the communication skills to manage the situation and create a safe space for the interview. A counsellor may also be required to be readily available in some situations, including being present in the interview.

Other risks relate to the interviewer, ensuring the place and participant are safe and that consideration is given to safe transport.

Finally, consideration should be given to ensuring the interview is allowed to develop in a space characterised by trust, openness and honesty with the focus being on the experiences of the participant. Perceived and real power differences between the interviewer and participant can result in participants saying what they think the interviewer wants to hear. In some extreme circumstances, a different interviewer may be needed to minimise power differentials. See Interview Protocols and Equipment for more details regarding establishing rapport and safe spaces for interviews.

Ethical clearance for the ICPHR Oral History Project was gained from Central Queensland University Human Research Ethics Committee. It was considered to be a 'low risk' project so required little more than a brief overview of the project and submission of an information sheet (to outline the project to participants), and a consent and release form (to be signed agreeing to be interviewed and for the transcripts and recordings to be placed with University of Alberta).

1.4 Interview Protocols and Equipment

While the interview may be considered by many to be the crux of the oral history project, careful preparation will ensure the interview phase is as productive as possible. Being clear about the purpose will allow the interviewer to craft a number of open ended questions necessary to guide the conversation within the interview. It is important that the focus stays relatively on topic but to allow the participant as much freedom within these boundaries as possible. {NB life histories may have very few constraints on topic}. Therefore, the prepared questions should be considered more as conversation starters and probes, as opposed to a structured survey. The aim is to generate a free flowing conversation where the participant does most of the talking. Interviewers therefore need to be careful to not lead the participant to a particular viewpoint or to close off discussions that may be contrary to one's own perspective. This requires interviewers being able to reflect critically on their own assumptions and world views and to be open to the world views of others. Taking a relatively objective and neutral approach can be particularly helpful but there are circumstances where a more partial approach may be appropriate; for example, expressing emotion when listening to particularly abusive or oppressive stories. Overall, being human is often the most effective way to establish a safe space for open dialogue to occur.

1.4.1 Setting up Interviews

Finding relevant people to interview can be undertaken in a variety of ways:

- a) Word of mouth: sometimes the most effective way of finding appropriate people, but the limitations may be that only those with similar world views are interviewed, missing out on key people who can challenge these world views.
- b) Advertising: either in newspapers, journals or via social media. The avenue depends on the project.
- c) 'Cold calls': sometimes it is necessary to contact key people who have been identified as important for the project.

1.4.2 Place and Time

Beyond the questions, it is important consideration be given to:

- a) Where to conduct the interview: it is best to choose a place that is comfortable and convenient to the participant but negotiation may be required. Somewhere quiet and without interruption is also a prime consideration.
- b) When to conduct the interview: as above, normally interviewers aim to conduct the interview at a time that is convenient for the participant, but it is also important to be aware of one's own commitments, schedule and energy rhythms. Interviews can be time consuming and energy intensive. It is best to not try and fit too much else into days when interviews are being undertaken. It is also good practice to allow plenty of time beforehand to establish rapport and to ease out of the interview situation. For example, when interviewing some older adults in their own homes, it may be necessary to allow time to have a cup of tea and to shuffle through photograph albums. It may also be appropriate with older and frail people to limit the time for interviews and to do a number of shorter interviews.

While most interviews are undertaken in a face-to-face context, it is possible to undertake interviews via multimedia, such as telephone and videoconferencing. The advantage of using such technology is being able to access people from across the globe at very little expense and inconvenience. The disadvantage relates to not being able to read body language and facial cues as readily. The quality of the sound can also be problematic. In some cases, turning off the video ensures better sound but means all visual cues are eliminated. It is best not to go down this path with a complete stranger but sometimes that is unavoidable.

1.4.3 Equipment

Digital recording has never been so easy or accessible. Most modern mobile phones can download recording apps. However, it may be wise to have a back-up, that is a digital recorder operating at the same time as the interview is taking place to avoid technological related disasters (for example, the recorder not working properly, and inability to download the file in an appropriate format, or the file being too large to email from the app). Videos are increasingly used in oral histories. Recording can also be undertaken with software attached to videoconferencing. Sound quality is paramount in order to hear the conversation later on (hence quiet spaces), but also consider positioning of the

recording devices to best capture voices. As much as possible ensure recording devices are relatively inconspicuous to minimise them distracting the participants. It is also important the interviewer is familiar with the recording devices beforehand to avoid mishaps. Finally, recorders pick up all sorts of sounds, so don't flick paper or click pens (or do any other distracting actions) while interviewing.

The ICPHR Oral History project interviews were undertaken primarily using Skype with the video turned off (not ideal). The questions included:

1. Would you give me a brief background to your career (discipline and research interests)?
2. How did you start to become interested in PHR (include exploration of the why as well)?
3. Whose work/whose work has influenced your thinking about PHR? In what way?
4. How has your participatory research changed over the years or across various projects you have been involved in? What has contributed to these changes?
5. What do you see PHR offering that is different/valuable to other research methods?
6. What role can a network such as ICPHR offer to researchers interested in PHR?
7. What challenges have you experienced in regards to PHR and what challenges do you see that lie ahead?

1.5 Transcribing

All that is required for transcribing is a mechanism to hear the recorded interview, to be able to readily stop and start it, and a means of writing; all of which can be undertaken on personal computers. The aim is to write down the words verbatim. Obviously for this reason transcripts lose much of the richness of the interview. Some projects attempt to capture as much of the quality as possible by including pauses and mutterings in the transcript. For other projects, this is not as important as the words themselves. There is some debate as to whether or not pauses and mumbles or other aspects of 'speech' be captured in the transcript. To a large extent, this depends on the project and how much these contribute to the meaning of words spoken.

There is a lot of value in doing one's own transcriptions because it affords the opportunity to really listen to the interview. However, for many funded projects, transcription services are used. An alternative is to use voice recognition software, such as Dragon. These normally have to be 'trained' to be able to accurately 'hear' the words and as such don't cope with interviews very well. However, by listening to the interview through a headset and repeating the words out loud, the voice recognition software can be a relatively cheap alternative to professional transcription services.

A small internal research budget was gained through Central Queensland University to pay a private provider of transcription services. However, as this person was in another town, and the files were too big to email, the interviews needed to be sent on a USB.

1.6 Interpretation and Using Oral History Data

Oral history is about collecting stories for a purpose. However, collecting the stories is only part of the project, normally, unless the sole purpose is to just collect interviews as some museums have done in the past, and still may do. Most projects do something with the stories: present extracts as

the basis of a museum display; use extracts as the basis of a book or other publication. There has been a lot of theorising around this aspect of oral histories over the past couple of decades and indeed, the way oral histories are now used is quite different to the way they were used in the 1970s when oral histories began to increase in popularity. One of the most influential contributors to this changed way of thinking is Michael Frisch (1990) who developed the idea that the interview as a shared creative venture between the interviewer and the participant and that any products derived from an oral history should recognise this shared origin – a ‘shared author-ity’.

The implications of this way of thinking is an increased responsibility on the part of the researcher – normally the interviewer – or the research team, to present the words and views of those interviewed in a way that is consistent with the same intent and meaning with which they were spoken. There is a responsibility to ‘get it right’ and not use the words for the researcher’s own purposes. As such, it is normal practice in oral histories to provide the transcripts to the participants to check the meaning and to open up the opportunity for any additional information to be provided. It is also usual practice to shared products of research with participants to again check they are happy with how their words have been represented.

One of the issues with oral histories is the ‘fallibility’ of memory. In the early years of oral histories, memories were considered in a more problematic light and it was assumed by interviewing many people, a certain ‘truth’ would emerge, one that was beyond the fickleness of individual memories. Now there is a tendency to recognise memory is not so great with some things – like chronological events – but that the experiences of people, as they have been perceived and preserved in individual memories, are themselves a rich source of data; as long as one is aware of issues of memory and the researcher doesn’t try to use oral history as a type of living documentation of events. Memories that are preserved best relate to common activities, where the person undertook the same activities on a regular basis over a number of years. For example, trainee nurses are able to describe hygiene procedures in detail some 50 years after they finished nursing. Alternatively, a dramatic event may forever etch the features of the time into one’s memory; for example, living through a severe natural disaster.

The issues surrounding memory means that researchers need to be cognisant of the broader context of the time and place under review. Interpreting the stories gained through oral histories therefore must be done within the context of the broader events. Few oral historians would not refer to secondary historical sources or archival sources when making sense of the interview data.

The other issue that sometimes arises is that of individual memories and collective memories. There is often an interplay between what is remembered individually and what is portrayed and generated within a social narrative, leading to social memories. Over time there can be a convergence of individual and collective memories, particularly in local history projects where stories intermingle over time. Sometimes this means people ‘remember’ events at which they were not actually present. Again, understanding the nature of memory and the reasons oral history is being used allows such memories to be considered for what they are.

The ICPHR Oral History project interviewed people who were intimately involved in events that were relatively recent. While various participants remember different aspects, and some were better at remembering certain details, most issues of memory were not relevant in this project. Participants were provided with copies of the transcripts and offered to be involved in writing of final product.

1.7 Storage and Archiving

Unlike a lot of other research data that is destroyed after a certain period of time, oral histories are normally preserved for posterity and made available to other researchers. This is generally through the services of a library or museum. It is important that researchers become familiar with the protocols of the individual libraries or museums they are intending to lodge the interviews with before the data collections begins to ensure the correct forms are completed and the interviews are collected in accordance with their requirements. Normally the recording and transcripts are lodged. This is to allow future researchers the opportunity to hear the words and ways of speech after the participant is no longer available or has died. In some projects which are focusing on preserving oral traditions and languages of groups whose cultural ways are disappearing, hearing the words is particularly necessary.

Recordings and transcripts for the ICPHR Oral History project will be lodged with University of Alberta.

1.8 Budgets

Oral histories can be a very cheap way of undertaking research if the researcher has a lot of time. Equipment is minimal – a digital recorder. Transcriptions can be time consuming (allow approximately 6 hours of transcribing for every hour of recording) but if done oneself, is just a matter of time. Many of us do not have the time to do our own transcriptions so getting someone else to do these is often the most expensive component of the project, if travel is not needed. Professional transcription services are often quick and convenient (digital recordings can be loaded online) but they can be expensive (the equivalent of a cup of coffee per minute and a half!). Private transcribers (people working from home) are often cheaper but may need to work around family responsibilities. These latter transcribers don't usually advertise and may need to be provided with recordings on a USB (recordings are often too big to email).

2 Community Oral History Projects

All of the above information is generally applicable to community oral history projects. However, community oral history projects, like all participatory projects, can sometimes be more time consuming because of the shared decision making process in determining the purpose, the questions and the products. In addition, deciding how various roles and responsibilities are undertaken may take some negotiating. However, the process can be one that brings community members together and can contribute to community resilience through the increased awareness of the past as well as consolidating and extending relationships in the present.

If no members of the community have any research or project experience, it may be worthwhile collaborating with an oral historian (from a museum or university). The particular issues to be aware of are:

- a) Clarity of purpose and focus: this is especially important if multiple people are going to be doing the interviews so there is some coherence across interviews.
- b) Organisation: ensuring multiple people don't ask the same person to be interviewed is one reason the community group needs organisation, but also in terms of providing time frames around projects so the various tasks are completed in ways that retain enthusiasm of the volunteers.
- c) Effective communication and decision making processes: this is relevant to all stages, but particularly in regards to the next point regarding whose story is told.
- d) Being aware of whose story is being told: community oral histories that are not guided by a professional can easily assume the people they interview and the stories that emerge are representative of the broader community. This is rarely the case. Furthermore, some community members may feel they should have a more prominent place in the final product, or some will be disappointed the story they shared as part of an interview wasn't included, or some will be disappointed they were not interviewed. Negotiating whose story is heard and how the collective story is portrayed needs to be approached with a great deal of sensitivity. This is especially the case when the purpose of the project is to include marginalised people or to use the project to aid reconciliation between groups with a community.

3 Resources

There are many resources to help design and conduct an oral history, including resources available online by various oral history societies. The following is a small selection.

Abrams, L 2010, *Oral history theory*, Routledge, Oxon.

Charlton, TL, Myers, L & Sharpless, R (Eds) 2007, *History of oral history: foundations and methodology*, AltaMira Press, Lanham.

Frisch, M 1990, *A shared authority: essays on the craft and meaning of oral and public history*, State University of New York Press, Albany.

Hamilton, P & Shopes, L 2008, *Oral history and public memories*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia.

Jenkins, L 1999, *Talking together: a guide to community oral history projects*, Oral History Association of Australia, Queensland Inc., Brisbane.

Mercer, L & Buckendorf, M 2007, *Using oral history in community history projects*, Oral History Association, USA.

Ritchie, D (Ed) 2011, *The Oxford Handbook of oral history*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

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Field, S 2008, 'Imagining communities: memory, loss and resilience in post-Apartheid Cape Town', in P Hamilton & L Shopes (Eds), *Oral history and public memories*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, pp. 107-124.

Larson, M 2007, 'Research design and strategies', in T Charlton, L Myers & R Sharpless (Eds), *History of oral history: foundations and methodology*, AltaMira Press, Lanham, pp. 95-124.

Ramirez, HNR 2008, 'Memory and mourning: living oral history with queer Latinos and Latinas in San Francisco', in P Hamilton & L Shopes (Eds), *Oral history and public memories*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, pp. 165-186.