

Dig Where We Stand Workshop 1

Doing Historical Research

Oral History (1)



**Dr Andrew Flinn, Saturday 4th May
2013**

Today

- Introduction to Oral History - why do oral history?
- Planning an oral history project / interview
- Equipment - what recorders, microphones, etc
- Interviewing – questions, questions, questions?
- Interview practice
- Consent & ethics
- What happens next?

What is oral history?

- An interview, a conversation, a dialogue?
- Different from oral testimony, reminiscence, story-telling?
- A staged and recorded conversation about known events (in lifetime) between two individuals
- Oral history as **process** – reminiscence, well-being, inter-generational, skills and training, etc
- Oral history as **product** - Conscious, active creation of a historical source, created to be preserved and re-used by others
- **Why use oral history as a approach in historical / heritage project?**

Types of oral history

- Elite oral history – interviewing those with ‘significant’ lives
- History from below – capturing those histories / individuals otherwise absent from history
- ‘Every voice matters’ – empowerment of communities and individuals through self-representation
- Often used to capture communities going through significant change (gentrification, de-industrialisation and occupational decline, demographic change)
- Study of narrative and memory (not so much about what happened but what it meant / what it means now and relationship between individual and social memory)
- Process supporting mental and physical well-being (ie reminiscence therapy) – the value of remembering

“By recording your story you will have contributed to the history of this corner of London, not just for now but for ever. Your story will be part of tomorrow’s history, and your place in it will be assured.”

Waltham Forest Oral History Workshop “started *in 1983 and probably the longest-established oral history project in London*”
<http://www.wforalhistory.org.uk/>

Some examples

- The Living Memory of the Jewish Community: Testimony of Holocaust survivors - [Birkin, Edith](#)
- [London Voices](#), Museum of London
- Leicester Oral History Trail – [Pt 4 Markets](#)
- Listening Project – [On the picket line](#)

What is your oral history approach?

- What are you trying to achieve?
- Is it what happened or what it meant?
- Lives and stories or a thematic approach?
- **Think** – what does this mean for your interviews & your interview questions?
- **Think** – what will this mean for how you process, interpret and deposit your interviews?

Key to successful OH project – preparation and planning

- What type of project: clear objectives and priorities outlined in project plan
- Numbers & hours of interviews required appropriate to length of project
- Realistic assessment of equipment and resources needed
- Training needs
- Expected outcomes & dissemination (including transcription, required formats, etc)
- Preservation and future access

Planning the project: objectives

- Type of project (creation of historical materials, social / health related, community project) – is it concerned with process or product or both?
- Focus of project (local, community, occupational, elite, life histories, elite)
- Stand alone project – or part of / in addition to other activities or collections
- Benefits of project – what contribution does it make? How does it fit with existing projects?

Project budget headings

- Staff (project manager, interviewers, clerical, technology and publication support)
- Office space
- Recruitment & training budget
- Research time and costs
- Transcription and documentation
- Interview expenses (travel, per diems)
- Equipment (recorders, microphones, flash cards, playback, computer & drives for storage & back up, transcription and editing equipment, camera)
- Dissemination (publicity material, exhibition & web design, publications)
- Fixed costs & overheads
- Meetings
- Contingency (10% extra)

Equipment

- Audio or Video?
- Analogue or digital? All current OH is recorded and stored digitally
- Choice of recording media (generally solid state)
- Choice of format – uncompressed WAVE / WAV / AIFF (not proprietary or compressed) recommended
- Usually better to use separate not built-in microphone
- Recording kit includes recorder (plus spare?), separate microphone, headphones & playback facility, power supply (plus spare batteries), usb cable, hard-drive storage and editing software
- Practice and test before each use!

Digital Audio Recorders

- Zoom, Tascam, Marantz, Sony etc
- Entry level £150 - £350 / Professional £500 plus
- Solid state, flash card or hard drive memory, USB
- Mains & (re-chargeable) battery power
- Stereo recording – via external microphones
- CD / broadcast quality recording – PCM WAV
44.1kHz 16 bit or 48 kHz 16bit
- Be careful of memory / time (eg 3 hours of WAV
44.1kHz 16 bit = 2GB Compared with 30 hours
plus with compressed mp3 files)

Audio Recorders: under £200



Audio Recorders: under £500



High quality recorder – over £500



Recorder reviews and advice

- <http://www.le.ac.uk/emoha/training/equipment/solid.html>
- <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/askdoug/>
- <http://www.youtube.com/user/nunncenter>
- http://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org/archive/res_audioequip.htm
- <http://digitalomnium.com/category/digital-audio-recorders/>
- <http://transom.org/?cat=59>

Microphones & other recording equipment

- External microphones highly recommended (£100-£200)
- Use more sensitive condenser rather than dynamic microphones
- Make sure if require phantom (or alternative) power source to work
- Table mikes or lapel 'lavalier' mikes?
- Uni-directional, cardioid or omni-directional?
- XLR sockets support higher quality, cleaner more balanced recording
- Decisions about back-up (computer, gold CD-Rs, separate hard drive) & transcription equipment
- Other recording devices – ipods/ipads, mobile phones, dictaphones, laptops
- Recording and editing software such as Garageband or Audacity
- Source second hand / ebay equipment

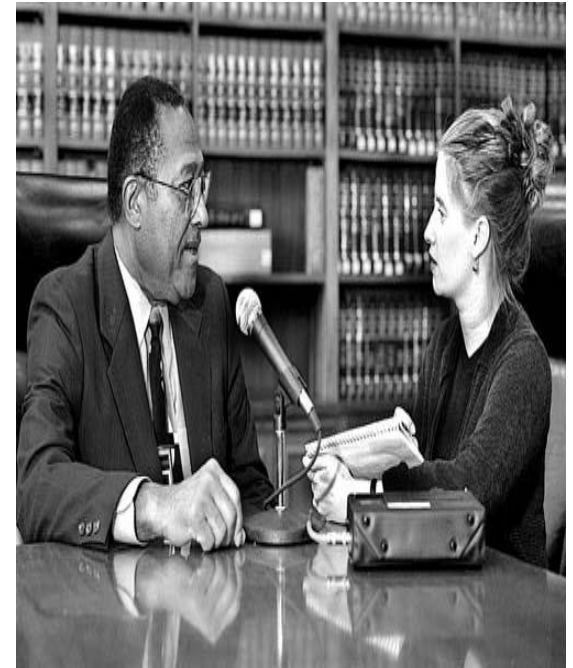
Planning for the future: access & preservation

- Should not just be after-thought (unlike many OH deposits) but considered from the start
- Museums, libraries, archives, universities all appropriate repositories
- Need to be able to store appropriately and provide access
- Obtain professional advice on formats and documentation required
- Think about the provision for preservation of originals and multiple copies for access
- Deposit agreements and consent agreements to include appropriate permissions
- Fate of other materials collected in course of project

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Oral history interviewing – preliminary research and interview guide

- Oral history interviewing does not usually take place without a framework
- Identify main focus of study and any topics of particular interest
- Research refines those areas of interest & specific topics into questions & interview guide
- Also indicates types of people & perhaps key individuals you need to interview for coverage
- Good research allows interviewer to respond appropriately in interview

The interview guide

- Provides a logical ('semi-structured') progression through subject – also map to return to if deviate – gives confidence to explore the unexpected
- If interviewing more than one person may combine 'core' questions to everyone and questions specifically tailored to individual / position
- Volunteers or trainees may find it harder to use looser guide than more structured questionnaire
- May include fully formed questions (at top level) plus topic lists for supplementary questions

Life history interviews – some suggested categories for the guide

- Family background
- Growing up
- Schooling
- Work
- Home life and family
- Leisure
- Place & community
- Looking back
- Reflections / experiences of significant historical events
- ???

The interview: selection and initial approaches

- Who is to be interviewed & why - how is your sample to be put together (stratified, purposive, snowballing?)
- Priorities & order of interviews
- First contact v. important. Beginning of process of explaining why, building trust and obtaining consent
- Overcome reluctance to speak ('not important')
- Possibly send outline of questions – but take care not to be too leading
- Establish how much time you have got
- Possibility of preliminary meeting before interview proper (set interviewee at ease, identify potential external sound problems)

Equipment

- Practice & test
- Bring spares (recorders, microphones, media, power supplies)
- Prepare for things going wrong with equipment? What will you do? What is your alternative?

Where to interview (1)

- Best – interviewee's own space - a safe space
 - convenience, at ease, at home!
- If convenient your work space or purpose-built recording space (formal) may also be suitable
- Avoid public spaces – too little control over environment
- Looking to identify:
 - Sources of background / ambient noise
 - Potential interruptions
- Unless intentional or necessary, try for one-to-one interviews

Where to interview (2)

- Sitting comfortable distance apart – but close enough to hear clearly & maintain good eye contact
- Directional microphone placed close to narrator – pointing at speaker
- Try to minimize noise transferred through table if used for microphone
- Maybe use lapel or lavalier microphones for interviewee & interviewer (good for picking up voice but may pick up other sounds while brushed)
- Although interview focused on interviewee need to make sure interviewer's questions and interventions also recorded

The interview relationship

- Be on time & prepared
- Review purpose of interview again
- Take time to establish rapport & initial relationship before beginning interview
- Locate and understand differences between you
 - If 'insider' – reflect on what may be difficult and what is taken for granted
 - If 'outsider' – think about your differences – how will these effect the interview – what might you do to overcome this? Are there advantages to being external?
- Think about appearance, manner, approach & how these may affect the interview / interviewee
- Practice your non-verbal communication (avoiding unnecessary and intrusive verbal acknowledgments or phatic sounds) but offering positive reinforcement

Interviewing

- Record an introduction
- Reduce anxiety by beginning with easy familiar biographical questions – move on to more difficult or challenging questions as relationship develops
- Offer re-assurance on value / usefulness of contribution
- Begin with simple & open-ended questions – open up discussion
- Avoid jargon, academic & multi-clause questions – adopt a more conversational approach?
- Avoid leading questions – suggesting answers or views / biases of interviewers
- Use short closed questions for purposes of information and clarification only
- Aim to go from general and open-ended to more specific & focused within each question area

Sharing authority - listening & questioning

- Slow pace – don't rush – especially during the silences, allow time for interviewees to pause for thought
- Don't speak over interviewees – be patient - make sure they have finished
- Make sure you listen carefully – don't be distracted by recording device, next question, etc
- 'Deep listening' - follow up on what has been said rather than moving on to your next question area
- **Careful follow up questions often key to good OH interviews (transform surface into depth)**
- More difficult issues:
 - Asking about those things not said or mentioned? Why not?
 - Explore inconsistencies or false memories?
 - Argue, cross-examine & dissect? Or just listen and record?
 - How do you deal with challenging or difficult views?
 - Remember often in their home – their safe space

Some strategies for follow-ups, difficult questions and some probes

- Use two stage questions – “I have heard that What was your experience of ...” – explains interest / context for question
- Probing – asking for more detail (what happened and why, how the person felt), questioning and challenging, keep asking questions in different ways
- Clarifications – fix details, make meanings clear
- Thinking questions - encourage reflection and comparison

Memory cues

- Photographs, letters, personal items – all very useful
- If opportunity arises, ask for these things & use them for discussion
- Frame your questions to place people in their past as well as or instead of recollecting from the present
- Informal, relaxed conversations, off-mike can be useful for triggering important memories that can be returned to in interview
- Ask about memories of well-known events, regular community activities, family holidays to trigger more personal or individual memories
- Keep alert for verbal and non-verbal suggestions that they are open to talking more about something

Ending the interview – what happens next?

- Final questions?
 - Anything that should have been asked?
 - Anything you wish to go back to / refresh
 - Check any details / spellings
- Explanations about what happens next (shared authority continues beyond the interview)
 - Consent & rights form
 - Approval of transcript
 - Copy of the recording
- Thanks & acknowledgement of the value of interview
- Ask about further interviewees, key contacts

Legal consent / permissions

- Legal framework essential to creation of useable historical record
- Defining quality of oral history – systematic & structured attempt to gather & preserve evidence
- Attempting to get full involvement of interviewees (full consent) to create a ‘record worthy of preservation’ (Stopes)
- Ensure that interview is fully useable by others

Informed consent

- Prior discussion with interviewee of everything s/he needs to know about the project, interview and planned use
- Subsequent agreement to be interviewed is given with knowledge of all the consequences / implications / rights
- Right to say no at any point
- Summarised in written documentation and acknowledged by signature (after the interview)
- Not one off: “it is understood that the informed consent process is dynamic and continuous; the process should be initiated in the project design and continue through implementation by way of dialogue and negotiation with those studied” (AAA Ethics)

Consent / release / clearance forms

- Without correct release forms – use and access to interview is restricted
- Copyright (created automatically) belongs to interviewee and interviewer
- If interview to be used, copied and published by researchers, etc makes sense to have copyright assigned from interviewee to project or repository
- Projects also need to ensure they obtain copyright from any interviewers used
- Retention of ownership /copyright – requiring permission for any use (beyond fair use)
- Retention of ownership allows closure and continued control over use
- Publication on the web (access transformed?)

Deposit / transfer agreement

- Transfer of recording / ownership / copyright of interview to repository
- Include transfer of rights to the repository or some retaining with interviewee
- Along with legal consent outline details of public use / access restrictions
- Benefit of prior arrangement with repository

Closure & confidentiality

- Matter of negotiation
- May only get an interview on basis of certain guarantees (weigh up advantages)
- Complete closure until death (But.....)
- Partial closure of elements
- Anonymity until death
- Limited ('research') access & publication
- Need to assess attitude of repositories to such closures
- Should interviewer advise interviewee to close parts of recording if danger of incriminating / damaging reputation (ethical duty of care)?
- **Be concerned with sensitivities of information given about other third persons**

Dangers of defamation / slander

- Interviewee, oral historian, repository and publishers may be liable if interview contains defamatory materials made available to others.
- Importance of consent & trust in reducing chances & increasing likelihood of narrator alerting interviewer of difficult material
- Solutions – remove sections from the available recording, destroy defamatory sections, close specific sections or whole interview until death
- Deposit agreement waive liability by project / interviewer of any legal proceedings arising out of the recording

Standards for ethical research

- Oral History Society Ethical Guidelines
<http://www.ohs.org.uk/ethics.php>
- Oral History Evaluation Guidelines (Oral History Association)
http://www.oralhistory.org/wiki/index.php/Evaluation_Guide
- British Sociological Association
<http://www.britsoc.co.uk/about/equality/statement-of-ethical-practice.aspx>
- Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth (ASA)
<http://www.theasa.org/ethics.shtml>

Resources & Guidance for Oral History

- Oral History Society,
<http://www.ohs.org.uk/practical-advice.php>
- HLF Guide, 'Thinking About Oral History',
- Oral History in the digital age <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/>
- Doug Boyd's Guidance on Digital Technology & Oral History,
<http://digitalomnium.com/tag/doug-boyd/>
- Transcom reviews of equipment,
<http://transom.org/?cat=59>
- Valerie Yow, *Recording Oral History*, 2005
- Doug Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 2003
- Perks and Thomson, *Oral History Reader* (2nd ed. 2006)