

Oral History – Introduction

Oral history can be defined as the recording, preservation and interpretation of historical information, based on the personal experiences and opinions of the speaker. It may take the form of eye-witness evidence about the past, but can include folklore, myths, songs and stories passed down over the years by word of mouth. While it is an invaluable way of preserving the knowledge and understanding of older people, it can also involve interviewing younger generations.

Oral history is particularly useful for capturing stories from minority groups or small communities who will not often be represented in more formal histories. It is also useful when there is a lack of other sorts of evidence, whether written or visual.

For community historians it is a valuable tool for investigating what people did, what they thought they were doing at the time, and what they now think they did. As well as recording people's opinions and the meanings they attach to past events, it is also useful for recording community stories, songs, folklore etc.

Please note that throughout this resource we shall use the word 'recording' rather than 'interviewing' but will use 'interviewer' rather than 'recorder'. Experience has shown that people like the idea of having their memories recorded more than they do being 'interviewed', when there are too many thoughts of other sorts of interviews (job, radio, social services, TV, police etc.)

Have a look at 'The Making of Oral History' website for further information on the development of oral history in the UK:

http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/oral_history.html

Memory

Before you start recording people's memories it is useful to have a basic idea of how memory works. On an individual level, memory is the retention of and ability to recall information, personal experiences, and procedures (skills and habits). The reason we exist as we do is because of memory and language.

The idea that we record, and could remember, everything isn't supported by research. Memories are better thought of as a collage or jigsaw puzzle than an ongoing video. In the words of Daniel Schacter, Chair of Psychology at Harvard University:

'We do not record our experiences the way a camera records them. We extract key elements from our experiences and store them. We then reconstruct our experiences rather than retrieve copies of them... At the same time, however, countless studies have shown that seemingly lost information can be recovered by cues or hints that remind us of how we initially encoded an experience'.

(*The Times*, 25 October 03)

These cues might be the recall of an image, smell or emotion which is then associated with other memories – or perhaps just one word might trigger the memory. For this reason it can be very useful to have objects, photographs, documents etc. to stimulate the memories of the people you are recording. Sitting in someone's living room it is possible to look at family photographs and heirlooms and ask for stories about them.

To test your own memory, think about how well you remember the following occasions:

- The Sunday on which Diana Princess of Wales died
- The previous Sunday
- Your 18th or 21st birthday
- Your 15th birthday
- The release of Nelson Mandela from Prison
- Your first day at school

What can you remember about what you were doing on the days above? Can you put a date on them from memory? Consider how your memories of these events differ – and why. Which of these events might be remembered mainly through the media and which are more personal?

Generally, we are much more likely to remember:

- an exceptional or unique event, rather than one which is blurred by repetition
- one which produced strong emotions – shock, surprise, fear, pleasure – at the time, rather than little or no reaction
- if we have 'consolidated' a memory, where thinking and talking about an experience helps strong encoding
- if the subsequent course of things makes the event appear to be instrumental, or perceived as a turning point
- how we felt rather than precise details of dates
- if we have a key reference point from which to work other things out, e.g. your date of birth will enable you to work out the year of your 21st birthday

It is also worth bearing in mind that our memories are influenced by other factors. Individual memory may clash with group or political memories of an event; they may be influenced by the media (TV or films for example). Think of the relationship between individual and personal memories of 'public' events such as the Second World War, and a 'collective memory' that may be significantly different. Consider the public representations of the British Home Front during the war: the popular images of 'all pulling together', 'stiff upper lip' and so on, which exclude the contradictory stories of grief, exhaustion, crime and discord that were the individual reality for many people.

So, practically, what does all this mean for someone who is recording community oral histories?

- Don't worry too much if people can't remember dates. You can check these later.
- Use anything appropriate to stimulate people's memories.
- Be prepared for people to remember some things better than others – you may be able to help your interviewee remember less well encoded memories by the questions you ask, by providing cues, or referring to major life review points such as births, marriages or deaths.
- Listen for anything that agrees or disagrees with any commonly held beliefs or attitudes within your community. If appropriate, ask about these beliefs or attitudes and let your interviewee know that it is alright to disagree with everyone else (assuming it is)!
- Be aware that for big events that are well covered by the media there is a strong chance that the media will affect people's memories. There is less chance of this happening for more personal events. One example of this might be childhood memories of the Second World War, which will inevitably be influenced by the many conversations, family stories, books, television and radio programmes, and films that cover the subject.

This material is made available under a Creative Commons CC-BY-NC licence. You are free to use the material as you wish but should give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. Further information about this Creative Commons licence is available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>