

Oral History – Planning a project

If you are applying for Heritage Lottery Fund money the HLF oral history guidelines are essential:

<http://www.hlf.org.uk/HowToApply/goodpractice/Pages/Thinkingaboutoralhistory.aspx>.

In fact, anyone planning an oral history project would do well to consult these guidelines.

As with most projects it will help to have an idea of the following before you start:

- *Why are you doing it?*
- *What will the end result be?*
- *How many people are involved?*
- *How much time/money do you have?*
- *Who to interview?*

There is more detail on each of these points on the EMOHA website:

<http://www.le.ac.uk/emoha/training/session.html>

It is worth noting that not everyone enjoys interviewing/recording other people. In any group of community historians it is unlikely that everyone will want to be an interviewer. However, there are many other things for the group to do, as will become apparent as you read through these pages.

The main thing to bear in mind with oral history projects is that you are dealing with people rather than documents. People fall ill, they forget you are coming, or they go off on extended holidays. These sorts of projects can sometimes take quite a lot of time!

There are usually a few people in your community who you feel should be recorded as soon as possible, and you should certainly do this, but try not to exclude younger people from your project. A variety of viewpoints and memories usually leads to useful comparisons and contrasts.

Leaflets and fliers for your project are usually a good idea. They, or another information sheet, can contain useful information

for your interviewees. The four points you should always remember to mention to someone before you interview her/him are:

- *This will take around an hour of your time*
- *We will need a quiet place with no interruptions*
- *It will be recorded*
- *I will ask you to sign a release/consent form at the end*

This is a list of questions people might ask you. Ideally, you will know the answers to these questions before you start contacting anyone:

- *Where did you get my name from?* If it was from another member of the public you may want to let them know that you have followed up their suggestion. Goodwill is all.
- *Why are you doing this project?* Have background details, progress of project so far.
- *Why do you need to talk to me particularly?* Be prepared with a good explanation. Make it clear that you are interested in what they have to say.
- *How long will it take and where will it take place?* Be prepared to visit people in their homes if need be; if someone doesn't want to be interviewed in their home, be ready with a fall back location. Explain that this will take longer than 10 minutes (probably).
- *Will it be recorded?* This isn't an obvious question to ask, but you must make your intentions clear if you are going to record the interview using audio or video equipment. Is the interviewee happy for this to happen? Are you happy to only take notes if they object?
- *Will it be anonymous and confidential?* Explain about the extent to which you can make the information anonymous and confidential. You can keep people's details confidentially but you may not be able to guarantee anonymity (see later in this document). You will also need to explain about needing written consent.
- *Will I get a copy of the interview?* It is polite to offer a copy of the recording but you will need to make sure that you can do this (any computer should make CD copies of your recordings easily).
- *What will the end product be?* Be prepared to explain everything your project is aiming to do. If you want to use the recordings for other purposes in future your consent form should state these uses (see the section on paperwork).

- *Will I be paid?* Probably not, but can you pay expenses if you're asking someone to travel away from their home?

This is an example of an A5 flier created for the 'Migration Stories' project:

MIGRATION STORIES

People from all over the world have travelled to the East Midlands and made it their home. Whether moving to try and earn a living, escaping from persecution or war, or perhaps retiring to the coast, there are many reasons why people have come to live here.

Although people may have come from very different backgrounds, and for different reasons, there are often common themes running through their stories. While each story is unique, there will be elements which everybody who has travelled from one place to another can identify with. It is these stories which Migration Stories wants to capture.

We are working with communities and groups in the East Midlands who have stories of migration and want to talk about them. We will train and help people to record these stories and present them at exhibitions and on a website.

If you would like to take part in Migration Stories, or would like more information, contact Colin Hyde of the East Midlands Oral History Archive at emoha@le.ac.uk or 0116 2525065. Website: www.le.ac.uk/emoha

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IGNITING AMBITION IN THE EAST MIDLANDS

Questions and themes – a village history, a work history, a migration history

General advice is to structure the topics chronologically so that people can talk about the past in the form of a story – beginning, middle, now – with all the dramatic points, heroes and villains that this implies. Use open questions beginning with ‘who, what, where, when, why, how’ and follow up with ‘Tell me more about...’, ‘Describe’, ‘Explain’, ‘Give me some examples’ (see asking the questions for more information on this).

Sets of topics and questions are usually called ‘topic guides’ or ‘schedules’, but rarely ‘questionnaires’ as they are only supposed to be guidelines. One of the joys of oral history is when people start telling you something completely unexpected!

Having said this, many people like to write down a lot of questions if they haven’t done any recording before. This is a good idea and you will find that as you get a few recordings under your belt you won’t need the full set of questions as much.

It is often fun to create these guides as part of a group so you can bounce ideas off each other and comment on whether the issues and questions you want to ask about will work well.

Use the topic guide as a note pad – or have a separate pad – and make notes as you go along.

Taking three possible community projects, these are some basic ideas for the sorts of topics you might want to ask about. Remember, these are the broad headings and there could be several bullet points under each heading that lead to follow up questions:

Village Life

Grandparents’ & parents’ generations. Family connections.

Childhood/Family life

School

Employment/unemployment

Leisure

Courting/starting a family

Class, social structure, politics, gender issues

Incomers/natives

Middle age

Later life and retirement

.....And always ask about change over time.

Work history

Grandparents & parents generations. Family connections.

Ambitions when young

First paid work/first job/first day at work

Pay and conditions/rules and regulations

Friends/work mates/social life

Daily routine

Tools/equipment used

Workplace hierarchies – management/shop floor, union/non-union

Gender differences

Changes over time

Retirement/Reflection

This is a list of many work questions compiled at an EMOHA oral history day:

http://www.le.ac.uk/emoha/news/ohday_2010.html

Migration history

Grandparents' and parents' generations. Family connections.

Reasons for moving – what is the story?

The journey

The destination – what was imagined, what was found?

Settling in – issues of making a home, finding a job, dealing with authorities etc.

Other issues – language, customs, attitudes, identity, gender etc.

Later life/retirement

Returning 'home'/changing perceptions of 'home'

The next generations and how things are different for them

This example from Paul Thompson's Edwardian Lives project is not typical of what a community group would put together but it does give an idea of the huge number of questions that can be asked of people:

<http://www.qualidata.ac.uk/edwardians/original/interview.asp>

Other issues for heritage groups

Local knowledge

If you are part of the group whose history you are hoping to record then there is the possibility that you know more about the history of the area/subject/group than the person you are recording (although you won't know their particular story, which is what you are there to record). This is useful because your knowledge can make for well-informed follow up questions and prompts. However, there is always the possibility that if you start correcting people or giving them the impression that you know more than they do, your informants won't want to talk to you. Wear your knowledge lightly.

If you know your interviewee there is also the possibility that your recording will turn into a chat, or conversation, rather than concentrating on the interviewee. While this might be interesting for future listeners, is it really what you're trying to record? You can record group conversations separately if need be as they can provide useful information.

Anonymity

Another issue is that of anonymity and confidentiality. While all personal details should be kept confidential – contact details for example – in a small community or group it may prove to be very difficult to make someone anonymous. Don't promise anonymity unless you are sure it can be done – the rule of thumb should be that the well-being of the interviewee comes first.

Where to record?

You will probably conduct most of your recordings in people's houses (and this is usually the best place), but there may be times when people don't want you to come into their homes. Have you another venue you could use? This is something to think about at the start of the project.

Recording in pairs

Whether for reasons of safety or because it is easier for one person to ask the questions and another to make notes and keep an eye on the sound recorder, you may prefer to use people in pairs to make the recordings. While this changes the dynamic of the recording situation slightly, it is quite common.

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