ORAL HISTORY

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Historical Insights: Focus on Research
Oral History

Contents

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The photograph on the front cover is by Tim Smith (www.timsmithphotos.com) and is taken from the exhibition, *The Grand Trunk Road: from Delhi to the Khyber Pass.* Details can be found at www.mylearning.org/jpage.asp?journeyid=383&jpageid=1793. Thank you Tim.

Finally, I want to close these acknowledgements by warmly thanking the Institute of Historical Research and History at the Higher Education Academy for commissioning this guide.

An electronic version of this Historical Insights guide, with additional resources, can be found at www.historysubjectcentre.ac.uk/oralhistory

Introduction

> ... [History's] like a bottomless well ... So let's light a scrap of paper, and drop it down the well ... Our memory is like that burning scrap of paper. We use it to light up the past. First of all our own, then we ask old people to tell us what they remember.[1]

Few studies have been made exploring the use of oral history in higher education. This in part results from professional historians' past ambivalence towards it: ambivalence conceived by the coupling of a fixation with the written document and a misunderstanding of what oral history is about. This guide seeks to address some of this by suggesting how modern approaches to oral history, that are complex and challenging, could be used to contribute towards the broader aim of teaching history.

Some possible learning outcomes: using oral histories

➢ Demonstrate a critical understanding of appropriate literature and relevant historical scholarship
➢ Determine how eyewitness perspectives influence and affect historical understanding
➢ Evaluate the testimonies and recalled experiences of eyewitnesses to history
➢ Demonstrate the skills required to identify, analyse and use oral sources
➢ Develop language abilities, critical thinking skills and comprehension, and the understanding of identities

The first part of this guide is intended for use by a broad spectrum of students in higher education. It also aims to point the way to introducing oral history without tutors having to commit to the relatively resource-hungry demands of students undertaking oral history interviews. The activities described here are suitable for first and second year undergraduates. After considering how oral testimonies can be used, the guide goes on to cover the collection and archiving of testimonies, i.e., additional activities suitable for final year undergraduate study and postgraduates.

The growth and availability of archived oral histories means that it is now possible to engage with oral history evidence in learning and teaching *without* conducting interviews. And exposing students to such testimonies provides an opportunity to engage them in thinking about historical inquiry in a range of meaningful ways.

Hearing the voices of eyewitnesses who were personally involved in historical events often encourages the intrinsic motivation necessary for deeper learning. In part this

1   E. H. Gombrich, *A Little History of the World* (New Haven and London, 2008), p. 2.

is a result of the immediacy of the spoken word, but it also arises from the obvious partiality and subjectivity involved in remembering that makes oral testimonies both intriguing and challenging. This is especially so for those students whose early exposure to history has been of the type that suggests the past can be constructed in its own terms, or that evidence from documentary sources can be collated independently of any guiding hypothesis. Oral history can therefore challenge what Raphael Samuel described as the fetish of archive-based research that can be traced back to Ranke's counter-revolution.[2]

Making sense of the past through oral sources provides an opportunity to gain a greater appreciation of the multiple, often sharply contested, historical perspectives that exist in memory; especially when history matters.[3] Taught as a particular or peculiar source of evidence, oral history can also be used to explore relationships between present and past, memory and history, popular and critical discourses, and individual and group identities. In the process, gender and class stereotypes can be challenged and cross-cultural and cross-generational understanding promoted.

Listening to interviewees can encourage the questioning of assumptions, including supposition rooted in existing academic and public accounts of the past. In summary, using oral histories can engage the student-researcher in active learning, increasing involvement and developing insights into historical and biographical experiences and consciousness.

Some additional possible learning outcomes: doing oral histories

➤ Formulate research and interview questions about social history topics
➤ Identify appropriate interviewees
➤ Organise an interview or interviews
➤ Develop collaborative working practices
➤ Demonstrate the techniques of recording oral history (asking questions, listening, empathising and otherwise responding appropriately, applying historical knowledge, awareness of self and others, including showing an ability to acknowledge difference, and producing a high quality recording)
➤ Demonstrate an understanding of archiving requirements (including documentation)

2   Raphael Samuel, Alison Light, Sally Alexander and Gareth Stedman Jones, *Theatres of Memory. Island Stories: Unravelling Britain* (London, 1994), p. 3.

3   For example, a number of teachers have pointed out the usefulness of oral history in multicultural learning contexts, including Andy Hill, 'Oral history and multicultural education', *Oral History*, 15 (1987), 58–66.

However, *doing* oral history will result in significantly improved research skills. Conducting the interviews will extend learning, with the potential of assisting students to develop and use a wider range of skills associated with interpersonal communication, critical thought and reflexivity.

So the second half of the guide is about how students can be taught to undertake interviews and projects. The advice here is based on the practice of recorded interviews. Most oral historians do this on a one-to-one basis, arguing that group interviewing is much more difficult. There are exceptions, but group interviews do require additional techniques and skills which are not covered in this short introductory booklet.[4]

In undertaking interviews students will need to expend a great deal more thought on research processes than is generally required in studying history. Approaching oral history as a practice aiming at the collaborative production of evidence is of benefit as it raises awareness about the significance of (all) source creation and survival.

There are a number of different ways of integrating oral history interviewing into taught courses. Shorter courses, such as Royal Holloway's Voice of the Public (MA Public History), can simply involve students undertaking single in-depth life histories. Typically such courses aim to provide an understanding of the processes involved in collection and analysis, as well as demonstrating how a single interview might contribute to a greater understanding of the way that history is contested, constructed and revised.

Small-scale projects can also be carried out by students. Here the challenge is to find projects that can both be linked to interesting questions *and* are sufficiently focused to produce oral evidence that can be usefully compared and contrasted. If time and resources allow, fairly large-scale projects can be designed and executed by involving a student cohort in working collaboratively on an agreed topic. One approach, developed by Richard Bessel while at the Open University in the 1990s, provided undergraduates with a broad theme (such as 'childhood' or 'Second World War'). Students then designed a project that examined an aspect of the larger theme. The advantage was that students were given a great deal of support in getting to grips with the historiography before they attempted an interview. Such an approach is particularly suitable in working with large numbers of undergraduates.

Oral history projects can also be used in vocational courses to allow students to explore the professions they are training to join. Health and Human Science

4   See Graham Smith, 'Beyond individual/collective memory: women's transactive memories of food, family and conflict', *Oral History*, 35 (2007), 77–90.

undergraduates at Sheffield undertook oral history projects with members of health promotion teams, National Health Service (NHS) managers, medico-legal staff, clinicians, patient advocates and representatives of pharmaceutical firms. Not only were they able to examine what it might be like to work in particular professions, they could also further inform their career choices.[5]

At the University of North Carolina oral history has been used as a way of teaching ethics to law students. Staff found

> … that techniques used by oral historians are excellent tools for creating meaningful contexts for addressing ethical issues and … [as a result they] developed a seminar in which those techniques are combined with reflective practice and storytelling in order to foster a deeper learning.[6]

Exercise: **Comparing sources and thinking about oral testimonies**

A television documentary might serve as a starting point, such as *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (1981). Students would be asked to compare and contrast the different sources used in the documentary. They would then go on to discuss how the oral evidence was used, the role of narrative, memory and indeed the context in which the documentary was made.

In addition, it is only right to recognise some of the difficulties of learning and teaching oral history. To turn Ludmilla Jordanova's observation on its head: 'Oral history can … be widely practised, and is, in a number of senses, a democratising approach to history … nonetheless [it is] … potentially a highly sophisticated technique.'[7] Oral history practice always seems much simpler than it is, requiring an extensive range of attributes, skills and knowledge. It is History 'plus' and therefore likely to involve much more work than is usually anticipated. As already noted, it can seem counter-intuitive to students trained in strong positivism. It can take students out of their comfort zones. A minority of students may dread simply finding someone to interview. Some may even believe themselves incapable of interviewing.[8]

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5   Another example of this type of application can be seen in Sharon Topping, David Duhon and Stephen Bushardt, 'Oral history as a classroom tool: learning management theory from the evolution of an organization', *Journal of Management History*, 12 (2006), 154–66.

6   Walter H. Bennett, 'The University of North Carolina Intergenerational Legal Ethics Project: expanding the contexts for teaching professional ethics and values', *Law and Contemporary Problems*, 58 (1995), 177.

7   Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London, 2000), p. 53.

8   An example of school student disenchantment can be found on Facebook's 'I hate oral history' group, which involves some 62 students from an American High School. There are, of course, many more

Students who are expected to conduct interviews therefore need to be supported and trained in thinking about both the theories *and* practices of oral history. Some of this is explored below; however, this booklet is not a substitute for the body of work that oral historians have produced in the last 30 or so years (some key texts and resources can be found at the end of this booklet and there is more material available through the accompanying website).[9]

Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) are a useful way of presenting oral history materials. Sound and video files can be uploaded along with accompanying interview documentation. Students can be asked to analyse extracts from interviews or compare and contrast different types of interviews. Group and individual exercises can be incorporated, including blogs that can act as research diaries, and discussion groups that can be used to draw out points about theory and practice.

In North America, oral historians have been developing new approaches to teaching using a combination of new media and the application of collaborative action research. Rina Benmayor, for example, has experimented with a range of e-tools to facilitate collaborative student working. This has included providing online discussion groups. But Benmayor's major contribution to the teaching of oral history is to apply technology to reinforce distributive and constructive learning. By drawing upon the different perspectives of her students, Benmayor promotes joint working as an effective strategy, from questionnaire design through to interpretative analysis in groups and on to producing oral presentations and written work in teams.[10]

As already indicated, there are many ways of doing oral history and this guide should therefore be seen as an introduction: it is by no means definitive or complete. I am painfully aware of how much of the guide is devoted to material from Britain. However, I hope that this booklet marks the beginning of a collective effort to assemble a greater range of resources for learning and teaching this subject.

The recent history of oral history

Historians have come a long way from sterile debates about the relative accuracy of memory in comparison to written documents. Some 35 years separate A. J. P Taylor's[11]

student groups on Facebook in praise of oral history including the 'Dena'ina School Oral History Project'.

9   www.historysubjectcentre.ac.uk/oralhistory [accessed 1 Dec. 2010].

10   Rina Benmayor, 'Cyber-teaching in the oral history classroom', *Oral History*, 28 (2000), 83–91.

11   Taylor's often quoted disapproval of oral history as 'old men drooling about their youth' is seldom accompanied by a citation. Somewhat ironic, given that it most likely originates from a piece by Brian Harrison first published in *Oral History* and may well have been based on personal correspondence. (see Brian Harrison, 'Oral history and recent political history', *Oral History*, 1 (1972), 30–48).

hostility to oral history and Geoffrey Cubitt's[12] thought-provoking and thoughtful considerations of history and memory, which include an analysis of the contribution of oral history.

One way of exploring oral history theory is in the context of its recent past. Doing so has the additional benefit of providing an effective means of communicating how theory shapes practice. To summarise from *The Making of Oral History* website (http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/oral_history.html), the number of key developments that have been made in Britain include:

- aiming to collect 'history from below', influenced by labour historians in the 1960s and 1970s
- seeking to record experiences that were 'hidden from history', often inspired in part by women's history in the 1970s
- in the 1970s and 1980s, understanding the dynamics of power in research and 'shared authority', with feminist historians making considerable contributions
- identifying the significance of subjectivity, memory and narrative in how the past is remembered
- since 2000, representing and reusing oral evidencethe digital age and web 2.0 influencing archiving and interpretation[13]

History from below, hidden from history and shared authority

A great deal of oral history continues to be conducted as a means of addressing topics and experiences that are missing from existing archives or the historiography or both. The insight that resources are required to ensure that sources survive the dustbin of history was an early observation by modern oral historians, repeated subsequently by postmodernists and, more recently, by archivists, the latter understanding the nature of the socially constructed archive and in doing so seeking to capture the 'biographies of archives'.[14]

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12   Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory* (Manchester, 2007).

13   For a more detailed and complete history, see Graham Smith, 'The making of oral history' at www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/oral_history.html [accessed 1 Sept. 2010].

14   Mary Stewart, 'Unveiling the biography of the oral history archive', unpublished paper presented to 16th International Oral History Association Conference (Prague, 2010). See also Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford, 1978), p. 1; Keith Jenkins, *On 'What Is History?' From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White* (London, 1995), pp. 16–21; and Robert B. Perks, 'Messiah with a microphone? Oral historians, technology, and sound archives' in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Donald A. Ritchie (New York, 2010).

Those we might describe as missing from the historical record have to some extent changed over time. When oral history re-emerged in the second half of the 20th century, ethnic minorities, women, the working class and even large sections of the middle class tended to be absent. In recent times the question has become more complex because of the intervention of oral historians. The difference now is that is worth checking before claiming that a social group have not been the subject of an oral history study.

Amongst the people whose lives continue to be hidden from history are sections of the dispossessed, the vanquished and the marginalised. However, there are also other less obvious gaps. This includes scientists and engineers, as a British Library survey found. Oral historians have also begun to identify gaps within their own archives. This includes, for example, business oral history.[15] It is therefore still worth asking who is missing from existing historical accounts and why.

There also remain other reasons for continuing to collect the historical perspectives of those who might seem less interesting to historians. For example, the testimony of a laboratory technician might contextualise the working practices of a Nobel Prize winner. Or the ways in which 'great' politicians are recalled by the less enamoured, including former aides, can provide new insights into decision-making processes.

At the heart of oral history is the interview. This being so, oral historians understand that they have additional ethical responsibilities: if most historians are engaged with a 'perpetual dialogue with the dead', oral historians are occupied with the living.[16] Oral historians are also aware, however, that the ways in which interviews are conducted also shape the evidence that is recorded. Drawing lessons from psychoanalysis and social psychology, oral historians have long argued that the interview relationship should be acknowledged in interpreting the evidence.[17] The Popular Memory Group laid particular emphasis on the unequal relationship between interviewers and interviewees in oral history projects.[18] This was one of the reasons for greater consideration being given to intersubjectivity and the power relations between researchers and researched.

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15   Rob Perks, '"Corporations are people too!": business and corporate oral history in Britain', *Oral History*, 38 (2010), 36–54.

16   Iain Chambers, 'Migration, culture, identity', in *The Postmodern History Reader*, ed. Keith Jenkins (London, 1997), p. 77.

17   See, for example, Michael Roper, 'Analysing the analysed: transference and counter-transference in the oral history encounter', *Oral History*, 31 (2003), 20–32.

18   Popular Memory Group, 'Popular memory: theory, politics, method' in *Making Histories: Studies in History-Writing and Politics*, ed. Richard Johnson (Birmingham, 1982), p. 205.

It was out of such discussions that Michael Frisch developed the concept of 'shared authority'. Although subject to differing interpretations, 'shared authority' has provided the basis for working with individuals and groups, thinking about how evidence is made, and how it might be used. For Frisch:

> What is most compelling about oral and public history is a capacity to redefine and redistribute intellectual authority, so that this might be shared more broadly in historical research and communication rather than continuing to serve as an instrument of power and hierarchy.[19]

While there have been a number of critiques of 'shared authority', it remains an ideal that most oral historians aim towards. It also continues to provide a means of exploring how the interview relationship shapes testimonies.[20]

Memory and narrative

Reflecting on the Oral History Society's 1972 conference, the folklorist Tony Green argued for a greater understanding of the subjectivity of memory and for oral historians

> ... to concentrate much more on history as what people think happened, including the presentation of radically different accounts, in order to demonstrate ... that different individuals and groups experience the same event in totally different ways, and to analyse why this is so.[21]

Michael Frisch was also arguing, by the mid 1970s, that memory should become the object of study for oral historians and not simply another methodological concern.[22] This marked the beginning of a turn towards addressing subjectivities. In doing so, oral historians would point out that the very 'unreliability' of memory was actually the strength of oral history. Alessandro Portelli, in 'What makes oral history different', argued that oral histories could offer new ways of understanding the past, not just in what was recalled, but also with regard to the *meaning* given to events.[23]

19   Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (New York, 1990), p. xx.

20   As demonstrated by a number of oral historians in the *Oral History Review*, 30:1 (2003).

21   Tony Green, 'The Leicester Conference on Oral History: four impressions', *Oral History*, 1 (1971), 10.

22   Michael Frisch, 'Oral history and hard times', *The New York Times Magazine* (1975), pp. 9–10.

23   Alessandro Portelli, 'What makes oral history different', reprinted in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (2nd edn., London, 2006), pp. 32–43.

Key questions of concern to the members of the Popular Memory Group lay in the relationship between individual and social remembering. For Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson it was the 'myths we live by' that drew their attention. Luisa Passerini, Daniel Bertaux and Al Thomson have all highlighted how memories are shaped by ideologies, social relations and culture over time. Across the oral history movement greater attention began to be paid to the processes of remembering. This included the dialogical relationship between recollections of the past narrated in the present. Others, influenced by the work of Passerini in particular, include Penny Summerfield and Anna Green, who have developed this idea further, contributing to wider public history debates that consider the ways in which collective memory and grand narratives (or 'cultural scripts') frames or do not frame individual recall (what might be described as dis/composure).[24]

Accepting that selectivity of memory and hindsight in remembering are intrinsically part of oral history evidence does not undermine the value of that evidence. Indeed the opposite is the case, given the possibility of understanding memory as a social historical construction. Therefore, instead of thinking of memory as a repository of experiences waiting to be tapped into, it can be seen as a series of processes which involves recalling the past from the viewpoint of the present. The perception that hindsight is a major problem in life stories has therefore been recast. Since the late 1980s oral historians are also more likely to support the idea of making memory and narrative a focus for investigation.

'The narratives reported by all six interviewees, even given the possible memory gaps, and flaws, indicate that the trauma and destruction of the Blitz is still fresh in the minds of them all, even at a remove of sixty years. The effect on the trajectory of their lives was also apparent, both in the content and delivery of their stories.'

OU undergraduate, after interviewing survivors of the Clydebank Blitz

So, where's the history in oral history? The answer for some oral historians is the way that remembering (narrated memory) changes over time. This means carefully considering the ways in which the past is recalled, *and* the ways in which more recent events shape the recollection of earlier times. Or as Luisa Passerini put it, oral history provides a window into 'a subjective reality which enables us to write history from a novel dimension undiscovered by traditional historiography'.[25]

24   There is an excellent overview of memory and narrative in Anna Green, *Cultural History* (London, 2008).

25   Luisa Passerini, 'Work ideology and consensus under Italian Fascism', *History Workshop Journal*, 8 (1979), 82–108.

Subjectivity in oral historical research is expressed in the way people talk about the past. This provides a way of examining consciousness or frameworks of awareness that include language, behaviour and attitudes, as well as memory. All this raises the possibility of exploring the biographies and political histories of identity and consciousness: to discover how people perceive themselves and others in history. There are those who have made historical consciousness the centre of their studies, such as Ron Grele, who has described the interview as a process of 'bringing to consciousness'.[26]

Mary Chamberlain applied this approach to her research with Caribbean migrants, in which she points out that:

> The life story narratives reveal not only empirical data, of course, but are in themselves powerful imaginative structures which guide and interpret a life course. These structures are created by language into which class, race, religion and gender enter as inter-related components.[27]

By taking one of these elements, gender, Chamberlain explores the different ways in which Caribbean men and women recall their experiences as migrants. One conclusion she draws is that while men speak about themselves (and their careers), women locate themselves in relation to others in their life stories. Thus men frame their migration as 'adventurous ... bravado ... devil-may-care, a built-in explanation for failure, if it comes'. In contrast, the women's recollections are filled by family members, joint decisions and the contexts for migration. Yet the women, according to Chamberlain, are no less autonomous in migrating than the men. Indeed she raises a fascinating question: 'Could it be that men *expressed* their autonomy through migration; [while] women *achieved* theirs through migration?' Thus an exploration of how people make selective uses of memory can formulate research questions that can be tested through the further collection of evidence.

> '… one of the strengths of oral sources is the ability to understand how people make sense of their own lives, the way in which they perceive events and experiences, even if their recollections are not necessarily accurate.'
>
> **OU undergraduate, Reflective Essay**

26   Ronald J. Grele, *Envelopes of Sound: Art of Oral History* (2nd edn., Chicago, IL, 1985).

27   Mary Chamberlain, 'Identities. Gender and the narratives of migration', *History Workshop Journal*, 43 (1997), 88–9.

In all of this, memory and narrative are closely intertwined. Memory is made over time through the practice of remembering (whether in external or internal dialogues). What is said in an interview is often based on previous recounting. It may therefore be misleading to think of oral history simply as a search for deeper, unique truths within individual accounts. Instead, we might consider that the stories we collect almost always already exist as previously formed or at least partially formed accounts. As Samuel Schrager has indicated, this may seem disappointing, but should not be so:

> An account's previous tellings give it validity apart from the moment of the interview. If it belongs to the teller's repertoire of narrative, it is grounded in his or her life and in the social world in which that life is lived.

For Schrager, narratives (or the stories people tell from memory) are constructed in the social and historical. Of particular importance to Schrager's approach is the use of 'point of view', a literary concept drawn from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin that reveals the complicated relationship between the narrator and the contents of her or his life story. Relationships with a multitude of others are a central feature of life stories and their experiences are often represented in the narratives of individuals. These others can even be 'outside the human circle' and the narrator can take the part of 'an animal, a dwelling, a place'.[28] In other words a single oral history account can contain a multiplicity of represented viewpoints.[29]

This incomplete and partial review is intended to suggest that oral history can be used to address broader historical questions of identity, memory and narrative. It can, within a research setting, also provide a way of trying out the big questions that echo through the arts, humanities and social sciences.

(Re)using oral evidence

Oral histories are different from almost all other historical sources in that they are not *found*. Indeed most often testimonies are *created* to answer historical questions. A major reason for this, as already noted, is that much oral history is produced as a way of filling gaps in the historical record.

28   Samuel Schrager, 'What is social in oral history?', *International Journal of Oral History*, 4 (1983), 76–98. This approach also encourages a diversity of voices, as Wayne C. Booth noted in his introduction to Mikhail M. Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Manchester, 1984), p. xx.

29   For an example, see Graham Smith and Malcolm Nicolson, 'Re-expressing the division of British medicine under the NHS: the importance of locality in general practitioners' oral histories', *Social Science & Medicine*, 64 (2007), 938–48.

While most archived oral histories have accompanying documentation describing provenance, the extent of background information will vary between collections. It is however important to try to find out:

• what are the legal and ethical limitations, if any, in (re)using this evidence?
• when and where the interviews were recorded
• for what purposes were they undertaken? As part of a larger project?
• who was involved in the interviews? (Interviewers/any others in attendance/ interviewees/project team?)

Archives do not normally record previous usage, although there are exceptions and it is again worth checking.

There is a danger that researchers may be drawn to the evidence of particular interviewees, because of ease of accessibility, usability or familiarity. Identifying and utilising a frequently used source from an archive may tell us more about our lack of effort or our own current beliefs rather than the past we are investigating.

As Portelli has pointed out, oral sources are ... oral.[30] Too often researchers forget this, choosing to believe instead that interview transcripts or summaries are the primary documents. By consulting the original audio (or video) recording, researchers will have more information than could possibly be represented in transcriptions or summaries. This includes intonation and inflection which can give the spoken word meaning. Written representations should therefore be used as guides to the interview and researchers should always be encouraged to consult the complete audio or video recording. It has often seemed easier to record oral history than to use existing oral evidence. However, funding bodies increasingly expect researchers to archive their data and large and accessible archives are now available. There is also a maturing discussion about reuse.

As well as concerns about the ways in which extracting evidence from a single interview can cut across the life story of the interviewee, there are broader questions about using archived oral histories. This is especially so when the aims of reuse are different from those of the original project participants. In the growing body of literature on reusing oral evidence, Joanna Bornat, amongst others, has explored the methodological and ethical challenges of reusing oral history interviews. She has argued, in a series of publications, that researchers should be 'aware of the social and historical contexts of data, both original and subsequent, when revisiting oral history interview material'.[31]

30   Alessandro Portelli, 'What makes oral history different', p. 32.

31   Joanna Bornat, 'Recycling the evidence: different approaches to the reanalysis of gerontological data', *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research (*2005), www.qualitative-research.net/

Existing sources of oral evidence

The large numbers of local history collections that exist are of variable quality, but are nevertheless all worth investigating. Some, such as those created by the East Midlands Oral History Archive and the Bradford Heritage Recording Unit, are valuable resources. Local studies librarians and local authority archivists should be able to offer advice on accessing oral history collections.

Sound archives in museums, such as the one at St Fagans in Wales, have become more common in recent decades. The collections of the Museum of London and Imperial War Museum (with an archive of over 21,000 recordings) are also valuable. And there are important centres of museum oral history elsewhere such as those in Birmingham, Newcastle and Southampton's Oral History Unit.

The British Library Sound Archive's (BLSA) oral history collection is the largest and best known of the national archives. With a dedicated staff, the section collects recordings of national interest as well as commissioning projects as part of National Life Stories. The collection includes broad compilations, such as the huge Millennium Memory Bank (MMB), as well as smaller, more-focused materials, such as the History of the Common Cold Unit. In Scotland, the School of Scottish Studies archive combines both ethnographic and oral history approaches.

Digital interviews on the web

Tracking down complete recordings has become easier with so many catalogues accessible online. The BLSA has led the way in making materials accessible with an extensive online index to its own oral history collections. But, perhaps more significantly, full life story interviews can also be downloaded from the BLSA website following the Library's mass digitisation and web-access project. In 2003 the British Library Sound Archive began systematically to extend its web presence. The Way We Speak project presents over 650 comparative extracts from the Survey of English Dialects, collected between 1951

> 'What is quite intriguing is the way in which different people remembered what were officially recorded as similar experiences, in a very different way.'
>
> **OU undergraduate dissertation**

index.php/fqs/article/viewArticle/504/1084 [accessed 28 July 2010]; Joanna Bornat, 'A second take: revisiting interviews with a different purpose', *Oral History*, 31 (2003), 47; J. Bornat, L. Henry and P. Raghuram, '"Don't mix race with the specialty": interviewing South Asian overseas-trained geriatricians', *Oral History*, 37 (2009), 74–84. See also, Niamh Moore, '(Re)Using qualitative data?', *Sociological Research Online*, 12 (2007), www.socresonline.org.uk/12/3/1.html [accessed 23 Aug. 2010].

and 1961, along with recordings made in the late 1990s as part of the Millennium Memory Bank. A second digitisation for web-access project followed between 2004 and 2006. This included over 3,000 hours of unmediated interviews with artists, sculptors, photographers, architects, designers, jazz musicians and scientists among others. These recordings, and the details of many more, can be found through the Sound Archive catalogue at the British Library.

Extracts from Paul Thompson's 'Edwardians' interviews are available from the Economic and Social Data Service's Qualidata website.[32] And the Imperial War Museum has approximately 340 short extracts that can be listened to online. Indexed by keyword(s), nationality and name, the collection includes recorded memories of the First World War.

A number of smaller specialist organisations

'Bella Keyzer, born in 1922, was a jute weaver, a munitions worker, an assembly line worker, but most famously a welder. I came across an oral history interview with her recorded in 1985 as part of the Dundee Oral History Project (in which respondents were interviewed by local unemployed young people who had been trained by academics pioneering oral history) which I thought was really inspirational …The transcripts and tapes of the interviews recorded as part of 'Dundee Oral History Project' are held in Dundee Central Library and are available to all.'

Dr Valerie Wright, Post-Doctoral Research Fellow on Women's History Network Blog, June 9 2010 http://womenshistorynetwork. org/blog/?tag=oral-history [accessed 28 July 2010]

also provide both transcripts and audio files. For example, the Diabetes Stories site contains audio recordings of the life stories of 50 people diagnosed with diabetes between 1927 and 1997. Community-based activities that have resulted in archives and exemplary online materials are also available, such as Another Space's Auschwitz to Ambleside, Panos's Life History Collection and the Refugee Communities History Project.

Analysing, interpreting evidence and using oral historical evidence

There are many different ways of interpreting and using oral historical evidence. Some of these might be crudely categorised as follows: narrative, consciousness, memory

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32   The complete interviews are available at the BLSA as 'Family life and work experience before 1918', C707/01-518.

and public history. Such categories are far from being mutually exclusive and are only intended as a starting point.

Narrative analysis could be seen to include the work of Daniel Bertaux on 'family trajectories' and Mary Chamberlain on migration.[33] Numerous other examples exist, often overlapping into other disciplines including sociology, literary studies and social psychology. Such studies often seek to examine the making of identities.

Closely associated with narrative-based interpretation are projects examining the relationship between memory and grand narratives (or cultural scripts), often through the recollections of major events such as political upheaval, war or genocide. One example would be Thomson's examination of Anzac memories[34] and along the same continuum the work of Graham Dawson and others, including Robert Gildea, which examines the ways in which consciousness interacts with personal memory and public history.[35]

Testimonies can be used in several different ways when writing history. The first and most common approach is to supplement existing interpretations and sources, often for illustrative purposes. In addition, oral histories, intended to explore the stories of people who have been hidden from history or who offer perspectives 'from below', often act as correctives to existing accounts.[36] Then there are those who seek to make more use of oral history's 'peculiarities' by attempting to understand how participants have made sense of the past and thus arguing that 'false' oral sources do not exist. Rather, these 'tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did.'[37] And new

33   D. Bertaux and M. Kohli, 'The life story approach: a continental view', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 10 (1984), 215–37; D. Bertaux and C. Delcroix, 'Case histories of families and social processes: enriching sociology', in *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Sciences: Comparative Issues and Examples*, ed. P. Chamberlayne, J. Bornat and T. Wengraf (London, 2000), pp. 72–89; Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson, *Narrative and Genre* (London, 1997); Mary Chamberlain, *Narratives of Exile and Return* (New York, 2004).

34   Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend* (Oxford, 1994); see also Anna Green, 'Individual remembering and "collective memory": theoretical presuppositions and contemporary debates', *Oral History*, 32 (2004), 35–44. In addition to the work of Portelli and Passerini, see Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf.

35   Graham Dawson, *Making Peace with the Past? Memory, Trauma and the Irish Troubles* (Manchester, 2007). See also Michelle Mouton and Helena Pohlandt-McCormick, 'Boundary crossings: oral history of Nazi Germany and Apartheid South Africa', *History Workshop Journal*, 48 (1999), 41–63 and Robert Gildea, 'The long march of oral history: around 1968 in France', *Oral History*, 38 (2010), 68–80.

36   Classic examples could include: Elizabeth Roberts, *Women's Work 1840–1940* (Basingstoke, 1988); George Ewart Evans, *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay* (London, 1962); and any book by Studs Terkel, including *The Studs Terkel Reader: my American Century* (New York, 2007).

37   Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (New York, 1991) p. 48. See also Luisa Passerini, *Autobiography of a Generation* (London, 1996).

ways of using oral history from disciplines beyond history have emerged, for example human geographers have encouraged explorations of space and place in oral history.[38]

Whatever the interpretative approaches or the uses to which oral testimonies are put, oral history provides historians with a sophisticated means of investigating not only the past, but also how that past is understood.

Computer programmes aimed at assisting interpretation have been developed. Marketed as qualitative analysis packages, their central feature tends to be the coding of texts or transcripts, although some now claim to be able to handle different sorts of data. The learning curve is such that only larger projects really benefit from the use of such software. It should also be recognised that they can encourage particular interpretative approaches that might not reflect the strengths of oral history.

In Montreal, Steven High and his team at Concordia's Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling have been developing new oral history friendly software. Their main application, 'Stories Matter', allows for video oral histories to be archived and analysed. This is a cross between creating databases and the provision of work areas for interpretation. 'Stories Matter', open source software that is free to download, has the potential to allow students to work online, either individually or in groups.[39] Even more exciting is the way that it could offer a means of extending interpretative collaboration to interviewees, thereby strengthening shared authority.

Collecting oral history

Legal and ethical

Every university has research ethics and governance bodies and processes. Normally such things are of little concern to historians; however, oral history interviews will attract ethics oversight, so it is best to be prepared to engage with ethics at an early stage.

In any case, prior to conducting an interview, oral historians need to think through the legal and ethical implications. The Oral History Society has produced an easy-to-follow set of Legal and Ethical Guidelines and will also advise members on ethics (another important source of guidance is available from the UK Data Archive). The

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38   See, for example, Toby Butler, 'Memoryscape: how audio walks can deepen our sense of place by integrating art, oral history and cultural geography', *Geography Compass,* 1 (2007), 360–72.

39   See http://storytelling.concordia.ca/storiesmatter/?page_id=898 [accessed 13 July 2010] and www.historiesdeviemontreal.ca/en/home-acceuil [accessed 13 July 2010].

Guidelines should be consulted by teachers and learners prior to undertaking an oral history course.

The key aspects of this advice involve:

•   informed consent
•   and copyright

In addition, the guidelines cover defamation, confidentiality and disclosure, and moral rights.

Unfortunately some university research committees still have little experience of oral history research; indeed, little understanding of qualitative research. Medical research models tend to prevail, and it might take a little effort to persuade ethics committee members that interviewing people about their pasts does not entail the same risks as conducting medical experiments. Similarly, there may be a need to inform local ethics committees that oral history research has its own ethical concerns and legal frameworks, making reference to the Society's Legal and Ethical Guidelines. Fortunately, there is a growing body of oral history research conducted by university staff and students and with it an increasing experience of working with university ethics committees.

> Exercise: **Ethical and legal scenarios** discussed in small groups are an effective way of learning not only some of the ways in which oral historians have informed their methods of working, but also that applying ethics and the law involves complex and nuanced thinking which does not always lead to clear-cut or even satisfactory conclusions.

Ethics for most oral historians is not a box-ticking exercise. Oral historians normally seek to use ethical concerns to inform all aspects of their practice. Pragmatically, we need to discuss the aims of our research with the people whose lives we are researching. We need to say how the research will be used and to gain written permission to use the material we collect. We might also consider how to share our findings with interviewees who have given up their time and energies, and better still engage them in the interpretative and analytical processes.

Preparing for interviewing

Before rushing out to conduct interviews, students must thoroughly research the subject – to know what questions to ask, to assist the interviewee's

memory (since people often have trouble remembering specific names and dates), and to understand exactly what the interviewee is telling them.[40]

It is too often assumed that little preparation is required prior to interviewing. In part this is because the interview has become a familiar feature of our daily lives, with television and radio presenters almost always making interviews seem effortless. However, preparation prior to the interview, including researching relevant topics and preparing appropriate questions, is always necessary. The same problem can also arise when students are asked to reflect on interview materials. It should be noted (again) that students can draw upon the many case studies that are available.[41]

Before starting out, it is worth thinking about how the recordings will be used. In addition to the traditional history essay, oral history evidence can be utilised and presented in a variety of ways. Currently, oral history courses in Britain, especially those with an awareness of public history, are encouraging students to produce videos, sound essays, web pages and exhibitions. Planned outputs, factored in at the design stage, can have the advantage of encouraging more focused work.

'Previous studies of people's learning of mathematics have focused on those who had been unsuccessful, fearful or disinterested … Yet there are those who enjoy the subject …'

OU undergraduate commenting on her project in which she interviewed retired mathematicians

'… their combat effectiveness increases until a point (which varies for every individual) when soldiers either crack up or become overconfident and believe they are never likely to be killed … the interviewees all believed that luck played a huge part in their survival and this has to be factored in to the strategies of keeping fear in proportion.'

OU undergraduate and serving soldier reflecting on his interviews with World War Two veterans in an investigation of the history of fear

Choosing a topic

As Michael Frisch has pointed out, few oral historians should believe that they are aiming to produce 'history as it really was'.[42] We can continue to learn analytical techniques from large-scale projects, but the interest in subjectivities has encouraged investigations that involve the collection

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40   Donald A. Ritchie, 'Teaching the Cold War through oral history', *Magazine of History*, 8 (1994), 11.

41   The *Oral History* journal is a good starting point for identifying suitable case studies.

42   Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority*, p. 188.

and interpretation of a smaller number of interviews. By collecting fewer and more complete life stories a greater understanding of the relationship between history and memory, including hindsight and the selectivity of memory, can be gained.

The choice of research topic requires a great deal of thought and reflection. The projects that have the greatest potential for making a useful contribution to existing knowledge are often those that are narrow in scope, but capable of addressing wider issues.

Students should have an input into what the focus of the dialogue will be and who they will interview. Not only will this provide motivation and encourage independent learning, but compelling a student to undertake an interview he or she cares little about is likely to end in frustration for all and, more significantly, an unsatisfactory experience for the interviewee.

The first questions researchers should ask themselves are:

- what do I want to find out about?
- who do I want to interview?
- and why do I want to interview them?

'... my feelings about him [an uncle] are those of affection and my motives for interviewing him were to find out more about his life and to allow him to talk ... The question of my reaction to his testimony was one I was worried about, because what if, as Yow warns, I liked him too much to ask difficult questions? ... He had given me permission for me to inform my parents about the interview. My father expressed worry that my uncle would tell me things that would change my view of my grandmother.'

RHUL postgraduate, MA Public History Reflective Essay

A good understanding of relevant secondary and primary materials is important. Using oral history offers the opportunity to contribute to contemporary debates. And, as already indicated, new evidence can be collected from individuals and social groups who have been excluded from dominant interpretations.

The search for other relevant material should not end once the topic choice has been made since the boundaries of research are likely to change as the interviews are conducted. New areas of interest will be generated and new potential areas of research will emerge.

Above all else topics need to be do-able, so this inductive aspect of oral history work needs to be managed. Project planning also means recognising resource limitations,

including whether there are sufficient numbers of living, willing and available interviewees.

Finding people to interview

Recruiting interviewees can either cause anxiety to students or be of so little import that the result is invariably a failure to secure people. It is worth spending time discussing recruitment at an early stage, pointing out that some people will be difficult or impossible to reach.

Various methods can be used to find interviewees; however, some recruitment strategies will introduce new complications. Contacting clinicians or patients through the NHS, for example, will require ethical approval not just from the ethics committee of the home institution, but also from a national body. Similarly, recruiting children will also pose additional challenges that are probably beyond the grasp of most student projects.

Appeals for potential interviewees can be made through local newspapers, residential homes, local history centres and archives, and community projects, as well as religious and political organisations. They should be sensitively and carefully handled as the importance of identifying interviewees is likely to be greater in the minds of the course participants than it is in the everyday work of archivists, organisers and care workers. However, if deftly handled, courses can develop close affinities with local organisations and reciprocal partnership working.

Students often choose to interview relatives, especially when faced with their first interviews. However, this can cause a number of difficulties. Although familiarity with an interviewee's biography may seem advantageous, it often leads to the problems faced by 'insider' interviewers. Assumptions can be made about shared attributes, values and beliefs, and obvious questions can be missed. They can be reluctant to ask and answer around a range of subjects and there can be emotional challenges, with a great potential for embarrassment. Students also take the risk that existing relationships will be changed in unpredictable ways. Subsequent analysis can also be a cause of conflict.[43] This is not to say that students should be prevented from interviewing relatives, but that they should be aware of the potential pitfalls.

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43   See, for example, Katherine Borland, '"That's not what I said": interpretative conflict in oral narrative research', in Perks and Thomson, pp. 310–21. See also Valerie Yow, 'Ethics and interpersonal relationships in oral history research', *Oral History Review*, 22 (1995), 51–66; and Akemi Kikumura, 'Family life histories: a collaborative venture', *Oral History Review*, 14 (1986), 1–7.

More systematic ways of choosing interviewees, saturation and does size matter?

Snowball sampling, i.e., asking interviewees to recommend others for interview, remains a tried and tested means of identifying potential interviewees. Some awareness of who might be missing from recommendations to interview is useful here as it is likely that snowball sampling will reproduce pre-existing networks (which of course could make a possibly interesting topic of study).

If the problem of using records like Census Enumerator Books (CEBs) is a paucity of evidence, the opposite is the case for oral evidence. Oral history generates rich and complex data, especially if the researcher follows the recommendation to collect information exploring whole lives and not just aspects of lives. This very richness can be too much of a good thing. It is therefore better to interview people whose past experiences are likely to be similar. People of the same generation, gender and social origin therefore tend to make a better basis for this type of research than diverse individuals, as attempting to compare and contrast lives that are obviously different (even before the research begins) can be too challenging.

The number of interviews should be agreed in advance, with ambitions in terms of topic scope and interview numbers kept under control. A student undertaking an MA dissertation, who is investigating a well-designed topic, could manage to complete up to 10 interviews. This model has been tried in a number of institutions including the University of Essex's original MA in Social History and the University of Huddersfield's MA in Oral History.

Excellent oral histories have, of course, been based on a single interviewee and equally interesting work has emerged from projects undertaking interviews with over 400 people.[44] What matters more than numbers is the quality of evidence *and* how that evidence fits the research question. This was realised in the early 1980s and well expressed in an essay by Daniel Bertaux, who complained that 'positivists' were too concerned with representativity and sampling. In doing so, he noted that, after collecting 30 life stories among people involved in the French bakery trade, the point was reached when each new life story simply confirmed the researchers' findings about how family life interacted with occupation. He called this process 'a saturation of knowledge'.[45] Good project design should therefore take 'saturation'

[44]   See, for example, Arthur Harding and Raphael Samuel, *East End Underworld: Chapters in the Life of Arthur Harding* (London, 1981); and Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians* (London, 1975).

[45]   Daniel Bertaux, 'From the life-history approach to the transformation of sociological practice', in *Biography and Society: the Life History Approach in the Social Sciences*, ed. Daniel Bertaux (Beverly Hills, CA, 1981), p. 37.

into consideration. It can be argued that, by moving away from sampling and towards saturation, it is more likely a better understanding will be gained of how memory is constructed and the part that hindsight and selectivity play in that construction.

Commonality or differences in how accounts are shaped by hindsight would be another way of using the concept of saturation, if the narratives of similar people were recorded. A fine example of a small, focused project that makes use of differences in hindsight and saturation can be found in the work of the social scientist Gabriele Rosenthal. Rosenthal examines, in one of her studies, how two seemingly similar women, both Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, reconstruct their life stories. One woman talks of coming to live in Israel in the context of her cultural identity, especially of immigrating as a Jew. In contrast, the second woman continues to see herself as a Hungarian, who is living in Israel, rather than as Israeli or Jewish. This analysis of just two highly similar life histories forms the basis for some important insights into the relationship between biography and family history. It includes understanding that people's definitions of themselves are subject to biographical change throughout their lives and are not simply determined forever in childhood.[46] The conclusion could also be drawn that memories change over time – hindsight itself is subject to change (hindsight just ain't what it used to be).

Interview approaches

… this isn't an inquisition. It's an exploration …[47]

There are two basic approaches to oral history interviewing, the first being 'topical', i.e., seeking information on particular questions, topics or events. It is common for this method to involve well designed questionnaires or schedules, readily allowing for information to be compared and contrasted between different interviewees. Although some topical interviews will be more interviewee responsive than others, the basic premise is that in such cases the tendency is to proceed in the direction the interviewer wants.

In contrast, collecting a life story involves a more open-ended approach, through which the researcher and interviewee develop a relationship where the latter is more likely to influence the direction of the interview. Here, the central aim is to encourage the interviewee to set his or her own agenda, making the analyses of

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46   Gabriele Rosenthal, 'National identity or multicultural autobiography: theoretical concepts of biographical constitution grounded in case reconstructions', *Narrative Study of Lives*, 5 (1997), 21–39.

47   For an entertaining and informative introduction on how to conduct an oral history interview, see Studs Terkel with Tony Parker, 'Interviewing an interviewer', in Perks and Thomson, p. 125.

structures of remembering and historical consciousness much more possible than if the interviewer is constantly directing and setting the pace.

The relative merits of the 'topical' and the life story approaches have been subject to debate. Some feminist historians, for example, have argued that the life story approach reinforces class and gender bias, while anthropologists have suggested that life stories are Eurocentric.[48]

Whatever approach is taken, it is always a good idea to prepare questions in advance. It should also be recognised that participants may be offered the opportunity to be interviewed only once in their lives. If the interviews are to be archived, and good arguments have been made that they should (see below), then covering aspects of an interviewee's life beyond the immediate interest of the interviewer is likely to add value to the interview. In any case, it is a surprisingly all too frequent occurrence that seemingly insignificant information later turns about to be important.

Indeed, instead of making a choice between the two methods, oral historians should be flexible and skilled enough to make use of both approaches. During the interview an attempt should be made to get a sense of how the interviewee wants to tell his or her story and which approach best fits the interviewee's 'style'.

One strategy is to begin with general life history type questions, but be prepared to ask additional more focused questions and to prompt for further details. Be willing to engage in an interview, but be sensitive to the directions the interviewee might want to go in. Encourage them to reflect on their past and to say what is important and *significant for them* in their lives before asking for specifics.

All of this has to be balanced by the interviewer's overriding responsibility to obtain biographical information. This means that at points it will be necessary to redirect the interviewee or to ask them to refocus on key questions. There is an element of judgement here that will be framed by the power relationship between interviewee and interviewer, but it should not be assumed that even the most powerful interviewees are averse to being politely probed for more details or their recollections.[49]

48   See Rosemary Sayigh's discussion in 'Engendered exile: Palestinian camp women tell their lives', *Oral History*, 25 (1997), 39–48.

49   It should be noted that different chronological interview methodologies should be adopted depending upon cultural contexts. For example, for non-Western contexts, see Hugo Slim and Paul Thompson, with Olivia Bennett and Nigel Cross, 'Ways of listening', in Perks and Thomson, pp. 143–54; and Nigel Cross and Rhiannon Barker, 'The Sahel Oral History Project', in Perks and Thomson, pp. 538–48.

The student's impulse may be to complete the interview as quickly as possible, especially when it is a set task in course work, but as in most things such instrumentality is likely to be self-defeating, leading to the production of anxious, awkward and unsatisfactory interviews that are simply too short and superficial. Most interviews should therefore be carried out over multiple sessions. Two, three or more meetings will make the interview a process rather than a one-off event. Questions that were missed on earlier occasions, or subjects that require expanding upon, can be covered subsequently. Multiple session interviews are also less likely to be influenced by mood and performance anxieties. Overall, an interview conducted over several sessions will take pressure off the interviewer and interviewee (be aware though this is not an excuse to conduct a series of short meetings).

A series of sessions also allows the possibility of utilising both life history and topical approaches. The interviewer might, for example, start with a life story approach and then ask for more specific information in the interview encounters that follow.

Designing questions

Oral history interviews and projects are inductive, i.e., the information collected will inspire new questions and the original research questions will be further refined in the process of recording interviews. However, this should not be an excuse for failing to prepare interview questions; rather, it is an appeal for flexibility in interviewing and for reviewing each session before conducting the next.

Whatever approach is taken, it is important that every interview contains a basic biographical profile of the interviewee. *Basic profile questions* should elicit the following minimum information:

- date and place of birth
- occupational histories of mother and father
- marital status and, if married, age at marriage
- education
- occupation and career histories

Beyond this, basic profile questions about siblings (and birth order), places lived, grandparents and children should be considered. Ideological beliefs and leisure interests might also be investigated depending on the project.

All questions should be understandable and an interviewee should be able to answer them. The interview is NOT a test of knowledge nor is it an opportunity

for the interviewer to sound clever. Above all else questions should act as a way of encouraging interviewees to remember their past experiences.

Questions should also be:

* open – to encourage the interviewee to talk
* simple – to avoid misinterpretation and confusion
* neutral – so as not to lead responses or suggest that there are 'correct' answers

There should be a mix of the broad questions (Tell me something about …) and precise enquiries (Could you please tell me your date of birth?). This mix should include questions that bring a topic into focus by asking who, what, when questions.

An interview guide or schedule should also include more *reflective overview* questions that can signal the opening and closing of sub-topics: 'What was the best about this or that period or activity?' It is also worth asking interviewees how they felt about a particular incident, person or experience, or period in their life. Similarly, they should be asked for their opinions. Sometimes the answer can confound earlier impressions, indicating how complex meaning can be in narratives of remembering.

Anchoring point questions that allow the dating of events will prove essential in a subsequent analysis. Although most people attempt to recall their lives in a chronological way, chronological order is invariably broken as connections are made across time. In addition, few people can date their lives by year but, rather, often do so by connecting their age to significant life moments, or by historical events that are perceived as exceptional. So, to produce anchoring points, ask for the interviewee's age at the time of significant events. For example, how old were they when:

* they left school
* started their first job
* moved house
* got married
* had children when a parent died – and how old the parent was when he or she died
* retired

If we have the date of birth, the date that the event took place can easily be calculated in a later reconstruction of the biographical narrative. By sorting out the chronology post-interview, a better sense will be gained of the historical contexts in which an individual has lived her or his life.

Dialogical questions encourage further reflection by asking the interviewee to compare different periods in his or her life. For example, 'How did this or that practice change after a particular life event?' My favourite in this category remains 'In what way was your upbringing different from that of your children's?' Such questions often work best towards the end of a sub-topic.

A range of *prompts* can also be developed. The most useful and common is the simple, but effective 'Can you please tell me more about that?' or 'That is interesting could you say more about that?'

Occasionally interviewees may subject student interviewers to a history lecture. It takes skill and tact to redirect them

'He [the interviewee] also felt the need to provide me with a generalized history of the time, often in some detail, which led him away from telling his own personal story. With hindsight I should have guided him and encouraged him to speak more of his own experiences.'

RHUL postgraduate, MA Public History Reflective Essay

into telling their own story. It is therefore a good idea at the question design stage to add a number of prompts such as 'That is very interesting, but please tell me more about your own involvement in ...'

It is also worth thinking about *bridging (or navigational) questions* that can gently move the interview between themes. So, to move from childhood to a first job ask about any casual work while the interviewee was still in full-time education. Or to move from work to leisure ask about how the interviewee spent their spare time when not working. Interviews should flow. Seamlessly and tactfully changing themes in a way that doesn't limit testimony takes practice, but it will be made easier with a little forethought and planning.

A few positive pre-prepared reflective questions provide a way of closing an interview session. One example would be 'What has been the best thing about your life/career/family life so far?' The final question might be 'If I think of anything else to ask would it be all right for us to meet again?'

The interview

Undertaking an interview for the first time can be intimidating but, if adequately prepared, an undergraduate should be able to conduct one of at least 90 minutes. He or she may wish to do this over two separate sessions – interviews of longer than a

Exercise: **Interviewing 1**

Ask students to conduct practice interviews with one another. Everyone should gain experience of interviewing and being interviewed. Then collectively assess in a group discussion:

Positives	Negatives
What was good about being an interviewer?	What was bad about being an interviewer?
What was good about being interviewed?	What was bad about being interviewed?

The result should be a list that then can be worked on in order to accentuate the positives and reduce the negatives.

couple of hours at one sitting are not only difficult for an interviewer to sustain, but are likely to become uncomfortable for interviewees.

It is good practice for the interviewer to contact the interviewee in order to confirm arrangements and to allow any concerns to be raised by the interviewee prior to meeting. Tutors should be available at this stage to address any anxieties by students and their potential interview partners.

Exercise: **Interviewing 2**

Ask students in pairs to prepare and present a short nightmare interview. These can be video or web cam recorded and then discussed in greater detail.

An interview, with its own particular interaction between question, prompts and answers, should as it develops settle into a rhythm and pace. An understanding should grow between both parties. Having framed the type of information and established the depth of detail being asked for, the interviewer should allow the interviewee to express themselves in their own way. The settling-in period might take anywhere up to 20 minutes during the first encounter, but the aim is to draw out long answers that detail personal experiences, relationships, reflection and recalled observations and feelings.

As the session proceeds the interviewer should be prepared to prompt for more detail, especially when time in the interviewee's narrative becomes telescoped or when significant events are dealt with overly quickly. This should be handled with a degree of sensitivity as there may be psychological reasons why a particular narrative

has become condensed or minimised. It could be just as likely, however, that the interviewee thinks that the interviewer is simply not interested in this period or aspect of his or her recollections.

The interviewee should enjoy spontaneously talking about his or her memories – most people like talking about their pasts in this way. A good interviewer, however, will listen out for information that needs to be examined in more depth, either in the current or in a subsequent session. Similarly, an interviewer should aim to seek for details that further examine generalisations and stereotypes that interviewees may use in their narratives.

Interviewers should dress appropriately for the interview depending on who the interviewee is. However, as a general rule it is best to avoid wearing clothing and badges that indicate a political affiliation or that could otherwise cause offence.

> Exercise: **Equipment**
>
> Ensure that there has been time for interviewers to become familiar with equipment. If lending equipment, this means allowing sufficient time for it to be taken away and practised with as well as for the interview itself.

It is always a good idea for interviewers to carry identification or failing that at least a copy of a letter that has been sent to the interviewee confirming the time, date and place of the interview.

In general interviewers should:

- **show interest:** by active listening, looking interested (nodding and smiling rather than making verbal sounds of appreciation), picking up on what has been said when it is appropriate and in natural breaks in the talk
- **maintain eye contact:** although beware that this is subject to cultural contexts
- **reassure:** that what is being said is interesting, even when it might not seem so; it is surprising how often what seems to be mundane information during an interview turns out to have significance when the evidence is subsequently analysed
- **empathise when appropriate:** be compassionate, but try to avoid empathising with experiences that are simply outside of the interviewer's ken
- **avoid making assumptions:** try to ask questions to test assumptions. If information seems ambiguous find ways of asking for clarification
- **avoid disagreeing or arguing:** interviewees can have values and beliefs that are at odds with the interviewer, but the session is about the

interviewee's life, including their ideological orientations. It is not about the interviewer's prejudices, assumptions and beliefs (no matter how seemingly politically correct they might be at the time of the meeting)

- **be relaxed and measured:** avoid hurrying through the interview and skipping from topic to topic – think about the interview flow and keep questions and prompts short and clear
- **use emotional intelligence:** to connect to the interviewee and fine tune when, which and how questions should be asked.[50]

Equipment and making a good recording

Of course recordings can be made on cheap digital Dictaphones or older analogue recorders, but the likelihood of a poorer quality recording is greater and could lead to further difficulties if copy extracts are required for public presentations and a near certainty of problems when it comes to archiving (see below). Whether audio or video recorders are to be used, there is up-to-date guidance on the Oral History Society website. Further advice can be obtained from the BLSA. An interview equipment pack should include the recorder, microphones, necessary cables, mains supply pack, batteries, a notebook and spares (especially batteries, and if possible spare microphones).

Interviews should be conducted in a location with as little external noise as possible. The hubbub caused by radios, televisions, chiming clocks, budgerigars, barking dogs and rooms with hard reflective surfaces should, if possible, be avoided.

The interviewer should try to make a judgement about how much personal space an interviewee is comfortable with and get close, but not uncomfortably close. Again, engage emotional intelligence.

All mobile phones should be turned off: not only can they ring during an interview, but they recurrently emit signals to contact their home network which may seriously interfere with recordings. The *dit, dit-dit, dit-dit* noises emitted by a mobile every so often may only be apparent during replay. The only certain way of avoiding this interference is to switch them off and, if this is not possible, at least ensure they are located as far away from the microphones, recorder and cabling as possible.

The recorder should be placed unobtrusively so as to allow the interviewer sight of recording level meters and access to the controls. Microphones should be set at the correct distance ensuring they are not being touched or tapped during recording.

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50   All of this is contingent on the cultural context. For how different things can be, see Susan K. Burton, 'Issues in cross-cultural interviewing: Japanese women in England', *Oral History*, 31 (2003), 38–46.

Microphone and mains cables should not become tripping hazards. Equipment should also be tested prior to interviewing.

A note on safety

As in all safety matters a realistic risk assessment is prudent. Oral history interviews are normally conducted at venues chosen by interviewees, however this might not always be appropriate and good sense should be applied.

Students going to conduct an interview should carry mobile phones. While a number of universities suggest that researchers keep their mobiles switched on during interviewing, this is likely to be impossible for technical reasons as noted above.

It is therefore even more important that a low-tech lone working system is adopted.[51] Course leaders might, for example, insist that students when conducting off-campus interviews should maintain contact with a nominated staff member. The student should ensure the nominated colleague knows the following:

*   name, address and telephone contact details of interviewee
*   a note of interview location
*   interviewer's mobile number
*   mode of transport to interview location (car registration if appropriate)
*   time and expected duration of interview

Additionally, students might be asked to contact the nominated staff member when they arrive at the interview location. In the presence of the interviewee, the student could inform their nominated colleague where they are and who they are with. Once the interview has been completed, the student should contact the nominated staff member at an agreed time to let them know they have safely left the interview location.

This variation, adapted from Loughborough University's advice to lone researchers,[52] can be tailored to suit, but it is important to have a workable and easy to follow system in place. Most importantly, students should be encouraged to talk through any safety concerns they might have.

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51   See, for example, www.suzylamplugh.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/GUIDANCE-ON-CHOOSING-A-LONE-WORKER-SYSTEM.pdf [accessed 26 July 2010].

52   See www.lboro.ac.uk/admin/committees/ethical/gn/ciwa.htm [accessed 26 July 2010].

Archiving oral history

It is sensible to establish a relationship with an archive prior to generating oral histories as this will allow archivists time to prepare and set out specific requirements. Given that universities normally have a great deal of digital storage capacity and archive experience, opportunities abound to persuade institutions to establish their own oral history archives. In addition, local authority record offices and national organisations may be prepared to archive oral history depending on the content.

The argument for archiving

> Exercise: **Transcribing**
>
> Play a short (two- or three-minute) audio extract and ask students individually to attempt to transcribe it. Compare and contrast results looking not only at mistakes in transcription, but also at the range of different transcribing styles.

Good arguments can be made for archiving to be considered an intrinsic part of any oral history project, including those conducted by students, so it somehow seems odd to have to make a case for it. However, experience suggests that, while academic historians are enthusiastic users of archives, they are less taken by the idea of depositing the materials they have generated.

Archiving material means that future researchers can make use of evidence that is likely to gain in significance over time. This is one reason research councils and other funders have begun to insist that researchers archive interviews. In addition, as the amount of accessible archived oral history increases, the possibilities of asking new research questions, by drawing on testimonies from across multiple collections, also grow.

A stated archiving policy will impact on the quality of life histories collected. An interviewee who knows that his or her testimony is to be archived for future use is more likely to approach the interviewing process with a great deal of thought and care. Academics from other disciplines often express surprise about the commitment of interviewees in undertaking oral histories. The key is that the archive provides the interviewee with the possibility of being an eyewitness to history – one whose narrative will be stored for the use of future researchers. That is completely different from the types of interviews normally carried out by sociologists, psychologists, management scientists or health service researchers. Creating a historical source for archiving can focus the mind of the student interviewer.

Archiving should be at the heart of good practice for historians. We would not accept histories that could not reference sources. Archiving oral history materials not only provides the means for reuse, but also allows other historians to examine the original data and make judgements about our interpretations and conclusions.

General archiving requirements

Archivists are most likely to reject material that is of poor quality, fails to meet other archive standards, is undocumented, or lacks proper copyright clearance. It is therefore important that archivists are assured that each of these criteria will be met.

Documentation should include the basic details of the interview, including:

- project and/or course information
- participant details
- some basic information about the interviewee
- recording dates and venues
- length and type of recording
- any restrictions on the reuse of the interview
- a statement of copyright ownership

'The student admits that in all of the interviews she became so engrossed in the narratives that she forgot to ask some of her questions.'

OU undergraduate, final project report

A summary of the interview will provide future users with a guide to its content. Making a summary requires a great deal of skill and is worth practising. The alternative – the interview transcript – will be beyond most people's abilities and resources.

Some thought also needs to be given to data management. This includes adopting a sensible indexing system for individual interviews and collections. Back-up copies of recordings should be made and these should be stored in different locations. Current practice is to store digital recordings on at least two hard drives. Again up-to-date advice is available from the Oral History Society.

Evaluating the interview

Students should be encouraged to evaluate the interviews they conduct. Such evaluations can be undertaken as individual, peer or group exercises and can also be used in both summative and formative assessments.

Most evaluations are based on appraising the effectiveness of the interviewer *and* the quality of the recording. If evaluation is to be part of assessment, then it can be

included as part of a larger reflective piece in which students are encouraged to identify how they might have improved their interviews.[53]

Conclusion

Oral history can be utilised as a source and a method in both undergraduate and postgraduate studies, and to both reinforce existing learning and extend skills and attributes. I have suggested strongly that in earlier undergraduate years it should be used as a source in the first instance. This is in large part because of the resource demands involved in collecting oral evidence; however, it is also in recognition of the current lack of understanding among some historians in higher education of what oral history is. Unfortunately, the case remains that it is not just students who have yet to grasp the differences between oral history and other sources, for even some colleagues continue vacuously to declare that hindsight and selectivity of memory are sufficient reasons to ignore its advantages to the historian. There are also, of course, implications about social power here. Are professional historians, for example, willing to contribute to making sense and use of the past with more generosity through the sharing of authority? One would hope so, and perhaps that this modest introduction will encourage us all to learn more.

> It is one thing to learn about history from books, and quite another to experience it oneself. That is what I wanted to remind you of just now when I likened a glimpse into the past of mankind to the view seen from an aeroplane flying at a great height. All we can make out are a few details on the bank of time. But when seen from close up, with the waves coming towards us one by one, the river looks quite different. Some things are much clearer, while others are barely visible. And that's how I found it.[54]

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53   Examples of evaluation checklists can be found on the accompanying website at www. historysubjectcentre.ac.uk/oralhistory [accessed 1 Dec. 2010].

54   Gombrich, p. 273.

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Please see the website at www.historysubjectcentre.ac.uk/oralhistory for a more complete bibliography.

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