



INTRODUCTION
TO
ORAL HISTORY

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SECTION ONE THE PURPOSE OF ORAL HISTORY

Introduction

Oral history may have *different purposes*. It may have different purposes at the same time but usually one dominates. Before starting a oral history project, it is essential to be clear on its purpose. This will help to establish if, on completion of the project, its objectives have been achieved.

One can distinguish three main *types of purpose*: academic, developmental, educational. The outcome of oral history differs according to the type of purpose one has when doing oral history

1. Academic purpose

From an academic point of view, the purpose of oral history is to document the stories of *social actors usually neglected in historical research*. Oral history complements document-based history. It “fills the gaps”. This is the view commonly adopted in oral history research, including in South Africa.

In this perspective the *preservation* of the oral material is critically important. Oral historians may be sensitive to developmental issues, but these are not in the forefront. An interview transcript which is not available to researchers is virtually useless. There is, however, an important distinction to make. Oral history material can be collected in the context of a oral history project, under the auspices of an academic institution, a NGO, a church or any other group of individuals, or for private use, for a degree for instance or out of personal interest. Private researchers rarely make efforts to preserve the material they have gathered.

Examples: oral history of women, of black people, of workers, of refugees, of migrants

2. Developmental purpose

From a developmental point of view, the purpose of oral history is to *empower* interviewees and to help them to deal with their past. In some cases oral history can contribute to healing processes. Being interviewed sometimes helps to deal with *unfinished business*. Oral history contributes to the development of a sense of identity. It is affirming.

In this perspective, the *process* is more important than the result even though the fact that the conversation is recorded and preserved may help the process. What happens during the interview is very important. Oral historians need counselling skills. They need to be able to deal with traumatic situations.

Examples: TRC; Mpophomeni Eco-Museum; Greater Edendale Development Project;
Memory Box Programme

3. Educational purpose

From an educational point of view, the purpose of oral history is to *transfer skills* (eg listening, assessing evidence, developing a sense of chronology and to use a tape recorder and a computer) to learners, students, activists or community members.

In this perspective the most important thing is what the learners gain from the process. School projects can contribute to knowledge but that is only incidental. Similarly, the interviewees may benefit from the interviews, but that is not the main objective.

Examples: oral history in schools; museums and heritage projects

SECTION TWO ORAL HISTORY AS A PROCESS

1. The process is as important as the content

Oral history is more than an improved method of documenting the people's past. It is a *conversation*. A conversation is an exchange of information, but it is also a relationship. Two or more people enter into communication. Some conversations deal with trivial subjects and are soon forgotten. A conversation about the past is rarely insignificant, particularly when the past is laden with bad memories, as is often the case in South Africa.

Sometimes – not always – the fact of talking to each other about the past has a *healing effect*. It facilitates the grieving process. The interview situation gives the people who share their memories the opportunity to deal with unfinished business.

Oral history has the potential to *affirm and consolidate identities*, individual as well as collective, that have been repressed in the past.

When oral history is practised in this spirit, the *process* – the interaction between interviewer(s) and interviewee(s) before, during and immediately after the interview(s) – is as important as the results – recording and processing the interview(s).

Oral history does have an academic dimension. It needs to be conducted with rigour and criticality. But it is more, much more, than an academic exercise. It is an encounter between people about the past. Each life, *each story is unique*. It is no small matter to share one's story to outsiders, however empathetic they may be. After a successful interview things will never be the same.

2. What happens during an interview

An interview, as noted earlier, is a conversation. Three types of activities are involved in oral history: remembering, speaking, listening. Each of them is determined by the context in which the conversation takes place. One does not remember, speak or listen in a country affected by racial division, poverty and disease as one would do in a society characterised by affluence and (relatively) equal opportunities.

3. Remembering

Memory is one of the most common human activities. We remember all the time, often unconsciously. But so much happens in our lives that we cannot remember everything. We *select* what we remember.

Memory is, and has to be, a *dynamic process*. We remember what makes sense to us. Memory helps to construct – or reconstruct – a past which gives sense to the present. The process of ordering, discarding, selecting and combining means that memory is always a combination of the objective and subjective, and of facts, interpretations and opinions.

Memory does not operate in the same way in a safe and in a conflict-ridden environment. Traumatized people either repress their bad memories or are obsessed by them. When they tell their stories they try, consciously or not, to *make sense* of the painful events of the past in which they took part. Sometimes an interview is the first opportunity for a person to evoke a painful memory.

We do not necessarily choose to remember. The circumstances which prompt memory are not always under our control. Unconscious factors clearly play a role. To a large degree, however, memory can be said to be a voluntary act. We choose what we remember and what we forget.

In our experience the work of memory brings *positive results*. Some of the people we approached for an interview initially showed signs of resistance. We had to explain several

times the purpose of the interview. But once they began talking, they would not stop. They felt affirmed by the interview. In the end, they expressed gratitude for the opportunity of telling their story.

It must be pointed out, however, that memory does not always have a healing effect. There is always a risk of '*retraumatisation*'. Some people feel helpless when confronted with painful memories, especially if there is no hope of reparation. When dealing with sensitive issues, oral history practitioners have to measure the potential risks of their intervention.

4. Speaking

But oral history is not only about remembering. It is a conversation. An interview is *a very specific type of interaction between two person or groups of persons*: those who tell the story and those who listen to it. Key to that process is the decision of the person who remembers to speak.

Like remembering speaking is an active process. In normal circumstances we freely elect to speak. It is our decision. There can be circumstances, however, which force us to speak against our will. We sometimes speak under duress. In a more subtle way there are situations where we feel *obliged to speak*, knowing that we would run into problems if we kept silent. We speak under threat.

On certain occasions we speak to please the our interlocutor. We do not feel free to elude his question. We speak out of politeness. *Freedom of speech* is an essential quality in oral history.

To ensure quality interviews and also for ethical reasons oral history practitioners have to ensure that the people they interview give *informed consent*. They must verify that they fully understand the nature of the interviewing process and agree to it.

Let us now assume that the interviewee has given informed consent and speaks freely. The

decision to share one's memories is always *momentous*. Many people involved in a oral history project had never been interviewed before. They did not know that their stories would be of any interest to anybody.

In a context of racial, cultural, religious or socio-economic domination, interviews easily become emotional. The interviews must be prepared to handle *sensitive situations*. In these interviews the body language – long silences, tears, giggles, uneasy movements – 'speaks' as much as the words.

6. Listening

What is the point of talking if there is nobody to listen to what one has to say? A good oral history practitioner is an *active listener*. Many of interviewees abstain from sharing their memories because they think, rightly or wrongly, that nobody is interested in their stories.

Good interviewers are *sensitive and empathetic*. They indicate – by nodding or by asking further questions – that the stories they hear are important to them.

Oral history is more than an exchange of information. It is a *human encounter*. The sharing of memories has an impact on the two parties in presence: the person who speaks and the person who listens.

Good listening skills are particularly important when the person shares *painful memories*.

Good listeners are not people who keep their own emotions at a distance and remain 'objective'. This, in fact, is impossible. When listening to the interviewees's story, the interviewers's own past comes to the surface. Their own experience of the past shapes their way of listening.

This does not mean that oral historians should be led by their emotions uncritically and passively. All they have to do is to *acknowledge that they too have a past*. They must find a way of dealing with the emotions triggered by the story. By developing self-awareness they

will increase their capacity to listen. The result will be a quality interview.

7. Truth and reliability

People who do oral history, like any people who do historical research, try to find the truth about what happened in the past. This is a very honourable goal. We need to be very cautious, however, when we speak about the truth. Truth is not a product we can grasp at will as an apple or a bottle of beer.

All people have an understanding of the truth which deserves to be recorded. In every situation there are different viewpoints. All of these should be taken into account if we want to have a full picture of the past.

Everybody is shaped by a context. It is an illusion to think that some people – ourselves or others – can be neutral. We all belong somewhere. We all have a gender, a cultural background, a social status and a spiritual affiliation. This is true of the interviewers as it is of the interviewees.

To get a reliable account of a situation, one needs to interview several people or groups of people and cross check their stories with written documents whenever possible.

8. Gender

Even if this is rarely acknowledged, *most histories are gender-biased*. They are written by men for men. Women do not often feature in history books.

Women are often *reluctant to speak on their own*. They are brought up in the belief that they are not allowed to speak in public. Women avoid the first person and rarely mention personal accomplishments. They do not often place themselves at the centre of public events. They downplay their own activities and emphasise the role of other family members in their

recollections. They are culturally conditioned to let their husbands, boyfriends, employers or ministers to speak on their behalf.

In those circumstances, speaking can be extremely *liberating*. It can relieve these women from a burden which can be very heavy, especially after years of silence.

A *female interviewer* who has experienced discrimination in her own family will not react to a story of gender oppression in the same way as a male person who battle to understand what it is.

SECTION THREE THE PRACTICE OF ORAL HISTORY

1 Planning the interviews

When an individual person or a community decides to embark on a oral history project, they are advised to follow the following steps:

- a) Identifying the topic of the research and clarify the research question
- b) Taking cognisance of the secondary literature so as to document the topic of the interview and improve the quality of questions
- c) Identifying potential interviewees
- d) Choosing a type of interview (individual vs team interview)
- e) Planning and scheduling the interviews
- f) Drafting a questionnaire
- e) Planning the logistics of the project

A successful oral history project requires the following resources

- a) Human resources: research managers, field workers, transcribers, translators etc.
- b) Knowledge of the local language
- c) Familiarity with the local culture

- d) Time
- e) Equipment (eg tape recorders / digital audio-recorders / computers / transcribers)
- f) Transport facilities
- g) Finance

To be successful an oral history project needs to be carefully managed:

- a) Clear objectives
- b) Regular team meetings
- c) Encouraging and motivating the participants
- d) Good filing system
- e) Quality control
- e) Closure

When drafting a questionnaire, the following elements need to be taken into consideration:

- a) Choosing the right type of questions (structured, semi-structures or open)
- b) Short, clear and unambiguous questions
- c) Never pre-empting answers

- c) Avoiding double-barrelled questions
- d) Focusing on firsthand experiences rather than general opinions
- e) Attention to impressions and feelings
- f) Avoiding embarrassing questions
- g) Appropriate sequence of questions

A good questionnaire does not replace interviewing skills.

- a) Do not adhere too rigidly to your questionnaire. Use it as a guideline, not as a set of prescriptions.
- b) When an interesting issue is raised, do some probing. Ask follow-up questions.
- c) If possible, memorise the questionnaire to avoid giving the impression that you submit the interviewee to an examination.

2. Preparing the interviews

Each interview needs to be prepared carefully. It is recommended to take the following steps:

- a) Obtaining access to the interviewee(s) and gaining his (their) trust:
 - through a preliminary visit
 - by phone, by letter or by e-mail

– through an intermediary when the rules of respect (*ukuhlonipha*) or the particular structure of the organisation demand it.

- b) Ensuring that the interviewee(s) fully understand the purpose of the interview and give an informed consent
- c) Agreeing with the interviewee(s) on the conditions of the interview (time, venue, type of questions, participants).
- d) Pre-interview (optional).

It is crucial for the interviewers to understand the cultural background of the interviewees:

- a) In some cultures it is inappropriate to talk to somebody without intermediaries
- b) People do not live alone: when interviewed, they take into account, consciously or not, their families and their communities.
- c) Sometimes, it takes a long time to gain access to a person or a community. Trust needs to be built first.

3. Conducting the interview(s)

When conducting the interview, an interviewer should pay attention to the following:

- a) Technical preparation: functionality of the tape recorder or digital audio-recorder, batteries or power supply, etc.
- b) Right environment: no outside interference, no noise, proper seating, correct distance between interviewer and interviewees

- c) Appropriate questions (see above)
- d) Listening skills
- e) Empathy
- f) Sensitivity to gender, age and culture

4. Processing the interviews

Depending on the circumstances, the budget and the circumstances of the project the interviews will be processed differently:

- a) Note-taking
- b) Verbatim transcription (from the tape recorder)
- c) Video-recording

It is comparatively easy to prepare and conduct an interview. But that is not enough. For an oral history project to be successful the following steps need to be taken. Many oral history projects fail to achieve any results because the project managers were not able to complete the process.

- a) labelling of tape
- b) release agreement
- c) fieldwork report (optional)

- d) transcription
- e) translation (optional)
- f) storage

5. Dissemination

There are various ways of disseminating the results of an oral history project:

- a) Report back to the interviewees
- b) Publication (book, booklet, newspaper articles)
- c) Exhibition
- d) Interview catalogue
- e) Digitalisation

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APPENDIX 1

EXAMPLE OF A RELEASE FORM

This agreement ensures that your interview is added to the archived collections of the Centre for Popular Memory in accordance with your wishes.

I _____ (interviewee) hereby authorise _____ (interviewer) to record my name, likeness, image and voice on tape, film or otherwise to be used in the archives collections of the Centre for Popular Memory

In consideration of my participation in said recording, I agree that:

- The 'original' recording will be conserved at the University of Cape Town. Copies will be held and made available as a public reference resource for possible use in research, teaching, publication, electronic media (such as the Internet or the World Wide Web) and broadcasting (such as radio or television). Copies may be made available, in whole or in part, in any and all media, in perpetuity, throughout the world, subject to limitations stated below.
- All public use is made in strict accordance with the uses and restrictions mentioned below.
- All public use is made in strict accordance with copyright law and 'fair use' provisions.
- The Centre for Popular Memory, and thereby the University of Cape Town, shall hold the copyright in this recording and I hereby cede any copy-right that I may have in my contribution to it.
- Any and all revenue acquired from this recording will be used to subsidise future research and archival projects of the Centre for Popular Memory.
- This agreement represents the entire understanding of the parties and may not be amended unless agreed to by both parties in writing.

The use of the recording is subject to the following restrictions (if any):

1. I require my name to be kept confidential and anonymity to be preserved. YES - NO

2. Other restrictions

Interviewee signature: _____

Signed at: _____

Date: _____

In the presence of (interviewer): _____

Administrative Use Only

Interviewee details

Full names: _____

Home address: _____

Home telephone: _____ Work _____ Mobile _____

Work address: _____

Fax number: _____ E-mail address: _____

Interviewer and project details

Full names: _____

Research Project title _____

Location of interview (s): _____

Number of tapes: _____ Total length of interview(s): _____

Transcribed by: _____

Additional _____ comments:

APPENDIX 2 OUTLINE OF ORAL HISTORY WORKSHOP**DAY ONE**

- 9:30 Registration
- 10:00 Opening
- 10:15 Exercise 1: Needs and expectations (small groups)
- 11:00 Tea
- 11.15 Report back and discussion
- 11:45 Presentation – Part 1: General Introduction to Oral History (PowerPoint presentation)
- 13:00 Lunch
- 13:45 Presentation – Part 2: The Ethics of Oral History (PowerPoint presentation)
- 15:00 Tea
- 15:15 Presentation – Part 3: The Practice of Oral History (PowerPoint Presentation)
- 15:45 Evaluation
- 16:00 Closure

DAY TWO

- 8:30 Opening
- 8:45 Exercise 2: Planning an oral history project (small groups)
- 9:30 Report back and discussion
- 10:30 Tea
- 10:45 Exercise 3: Preparing a questionnaire (individually)
- 11:15 Report back and discussion
- 12:30 Discussion
- 13:00 Lunch
- 13:45 Presentation – Part 4: Oral History and Culture
- 15:00 Tea
- 15:15 “The Dos and Don’ts in Oral History” (DVD)
- 15:45 Evaluation
- 16:00 Closure

DAY THREE

- 8:30 Opening
- 8:45 Presentation – Part 5: Conducting an interview
- 9:15 Exercise 4: Conducting and recording an interview (groups of three with individual reporting)
- 10:30 Tea
- 10:45 Continuation of Exercise 4
- 12:00 Report back and discussion
- 13:00 Lunch
- 13:45 Exercise 5: Implementation (small groups)
- 14:30 Feedback and discussion
- 15:00 Tea
- 15:15 General evaluation
- 16:00 Closure

APPENDIX 3 OUTLINE OF A CODE OF ETHICS FOR ORAL HISTORY PRACTITIONERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

When planning an oral history project

1. Considering any possible harm that the interview process may cause to the interviewee's feelings or reputation or his/her community
2. Acquiring sufficient technical knowledge to conduct an interview of the best possible standard.
3. Obtaining the best possible knowledge on the culture and habits of the interviewee and his/her community.

Before the interview

4. Following a culturally-appropriate protocol when approaching the interviewee and requesting an interview.
- 5 Informing the interviewee of the purpose for which the interview is to be carried out and ensuring that he or she has understood this.
6. Agreeing on the place, time and circumstances of the interview.
7. Agreeing on whether or not the interview should remain confidential and on where and how the interview material will be stored and disseminated. This should be done in writing (release form) or verbally with a record on tape.
8. Agreeing on how the interviewee will benefit from the interview (eg receiving a copy of the tape and transcript / a community celebration). Ensuring that the interviewee do not have no false expectations.

During the interview

9. Respecting the interviewee's style of personal interaction (language, posture, dress, eye contact, etc).
10. Being gender sensitive.
11. Dealing appropriately with painful and emotional issues.

12. Verifying that the interviewee remains comfortable with the interview process and, when necessary, granting him/her the right to withdraw.

When processing the interview

13. Ensuring that the interview is transcribed, indexed, catalogued and made available as agreed with the interviewee.

14. Ensuring that all possible measures are taken to preserve the interview material.

15. Informing the interviewee of any change regarding the storage or dissemination of the interview.

16. Verifying that no part of the interview has a defamatory content.

On completion of the project

17. Reporting back to the interviewee or his/her community and giving them a copy of the recording if an undertaking to do so has been given.

18. Acknowledging the contribution of the interviewee and his/her community in any form of subsequent publication.

19. (Where applicable) Sharing with the interviewee or his/her community any form of financial benefit which may accrue to the interviewer.