An Introduction to Oral History

Oral History Guide: Part 1

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Part 1: An Introduction to Oral History
What is oral history? When is it useful? How is it done? This section summarizes the basics of oral history.

Part 2: Formulating a Research Question
The first step in any oral history project is to identify your research topic and question(s).

Part 3: Planning Your Project
Before you begin an oral history project, you must create an outline for all the necessary steps for each part of the project.

Part 4: Legal and Ethical Concerns
Because your research is about people, you must consider general research ethics, copyright laws, and the forms you have to complete in order for a repository to accept your materials.
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Part 5: The IRB Process
Understanding the requirements of the Institutional Review Board is ESSENTIAL! Your research project may require IRB approval.

Part 6: Methods for Recording and Equipment
Learn how to use and where to find necessary AV equipment for your interviews.

Part 7: The Interview: Procedure and Considerations
If you aren’t sure about how to ask the right questions, refer to this section for interviewing tips.

Part 8: Transcribing the Interview
Transcription may be an optional part of your project, but if you choose to transcribe your interviews, you will need to understand the general guidelines for accuracy and thoroughness.
Part 9: After the Project: Publishing and Presenting the Results
Learn how to write about the results of your oral history interviews and/or creatively share your experience with others.

Part 10: Preservation and Curation
For information about what happens to oral histories at the end of your project and how archives function, refer to this section.

Part 11: Mining Existing Oral History Collections
Instead of conducting your own interviews, you may decide to interpret or reinterpret existing oral histories. This section explains how to locate and access archived oral history collections.

Part 12: Resource Guide
This section presents a list of relevant literature available at FLC, local people who specialize in oral history, and local organizations that may be able to help you with your project.
General Information
Here are some competing definitions of oral history:

♦ “[a collection of] memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews.”
  - Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide by Donald A. Ritchie, p. 19

♦ “…the practice of soliciting and recording spoken stories... that sometimes amount to richly detailed and emotional accounts of individual lives.”
  - The Oral History Workshop by Cynthia Hart, p. viii

♦ “Primary source material created in an interview setting with a witness to or a participant in an event or a way of life for the purpose of preserving the information and making it available to others. The term refers both to the process and the interview itself.... A research methodology with a clear and defined process that supports the interview as the active collecting step.”
  - The Oral History Manual by Barbara W. Sommer, p. 1, 4
Clarification

There may be some confusion concerning the differences between histories that are presented orally. The following definitions should help you understand oral history and how it differs from related fields.

♦ **Oral History**: Recording the past personal experiences of an individual. Although dependent on memory, these stories are presumed fact.

♦ **Storytelling**: Good storytelling relies on the audience more than memory. New audiences create different meanings. All oral presentation has a performance aspect, which can be affected by the audience or setting.

Folklore: The collection of traditional stories, songs, poetry, and other expressions of a community/culture. These stories can be fact or fiction.

Oral Traditions: These are cultural stories told through generations. Historians also call these “living stories.” Sometimes they are told in first-person, but they can be hundreds of years old, and may include cultural rules for storytelling (ceremonies, specific audience, etc.).

Journalistic Interviews: Complete recorded interviews, transcriptions, and notes are not the focal point of journalism. Excerpts are taken from interviews for news stories and books, and the original interviews are most often kept in personal files.

Oral History: A Cross-Disciplinary Field of Study
Cultural Resource Management

- The National Historical Preservation Act of 1966 requires federal agencies to determine the effects of development on cultural resources.
  - Cultural Resource Management (CRM) teams conduct comprehensive surveys on the effects of modern human development on cultural resources.

- CRM archaeologists rely on oral histories, especially in historical archaeology, to...
  - Identify artifacts and their uses and relate them to each other
  - Locate sites, such as cemeteries, mass graves, burnt-down buildings, and other unrecorded structures
  - Deepen understanding of archaeological findings
  - Determine the extent of the effects of modern construction on historical and prehistoric sites
  - Assess the meaning and wider historical significance of sites

Ritchie 2003: 225-226
Possibly one of the most popular uses of oral history is researching family origins.

Although information via documents, marriage certificates, and other public records may exist on your family members, the real stories come from the individuals.

What often drives people to collect oral histories from family members is that after they are gone, there may only be artifacts and possessions left—oral histories help families remember their loved ones in greater detail and preserve their memories.
Communities & Historic Preservation

- Communities often propose oral history projects to connect with each other, better understand their past, and learn about forgotten events or places that helped to define the community.
  - *Katrina’s Jewish Voices*
  - *Bremond Polish Oral History Project*
  - *K’iche’ Maya Oral History Project*
  - *Hellenic-American Oral History Project*
  - *South Asian Oral History Project*

- Museum displays often focus more on facts and objects than on people and personal experiences. However, multi-dimensional displays including audio/video sounds clips from oral history interviews can make an otherwise stale display an interactive and engaging learning experience. Moreover, it can connect the visitor with not just artifacts but people from the past.

Written historical documents cannot always be taken as fact.

- Especially in formerly colonized areas of the world, history has been written by imperialists; therefore, it does not include the perspectives of conquered peoples.
- In areas of government oppression or civil war, victims’ voices can be heard through oral history interviews.
- In order to rediscover cultural identities, hear previously unheard voices, and/or enact a sense of justice, communities conduct oral history projects.
- Women are another example of historically suppressed voices. Interviews with women suggest gender plays a role in how people recall events, and their perspectives can fill in gaps made by gender inequality and differences.

Here are some examples:

- A personal experience with racial inequality in 1950s-60s Alabama
- A collection of interviews with Ukrainian survivors of the government-initiated famine in the 1930s
- The Oklahoma Women’s Hall of Fame Oral History Project

Ritchie 2003: 23, 231-232
Education

♦ Oral history can be taught not only in history-specific classes, but also in journalism, theatre, English, etc.

♦ One example of applying oral history to the classroom is the *Foxfire* program, which combines oral history, folklore, and writing into an innovative learning experience for high-school students in the Appalachian region of Georgia.

♦ When used in public education, oral history programs can help create stronger connections between students and their communities.

Hart 2003: 199-206
Popular Culture

♦ Radio is a common form of presenting oral history, because it can reach a large audience

♦ Examples of radio programs that have integrated oral history into produced stories include:
  ♦ *Working Lives*: Stories of the black community in Birmingham Alabama in the 1920s
  ♦ *The Original Down Home Blues Show*
  ♦ *This American Life*
  ♦ *Will the Circle be Unbroken?*: A 13-hour series of stories from the Civil Rights Movement
Oral history projects can be presented in a number of ways, and expressing people’s stories through the arts is often more descriptive than written interpretation.

- Theatre and dance are popular forms of presenting because they attract and entertain a large audience.
- Libraries and archives contain most original oral histories and books, thereby attracting researchers more often than the general public. Through performance, oral history becomes more available to the public.

Here are some examples:

- Ubu and the Truth Commission
- Sham Shui Po Community Theatre Oral History Project
References Cited

Hart, Cynthia, Lisa Samson

Ritchie, Donald A.

Sommer, Barbara W., Mary Kay Quinlan