

# ORAL HISTORY METHODOLOGY

2007

## ***SEPHIS Workshops in Vietnam and Philippines***

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### INTRODUCTION

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This paper is aimed at post-graduate students, and provides an overview of oral history methodology and gives specific instructional guidance on doing interviews and fieldwork. It is also specifically intended to serve as educational supplement to a series of workshops, over three days, conducted with students in Vietnam and the Philippines in 2007. Bear in mind, that it is impossible to provide comprehensive instructions on how to do oral history research here, but rather this paper aims to both guide students and motivate them to read more and to ultimately learn through the experience of **doing oral history** fieldwork. My focus is toward doing research fieldwork in post-authoritarian societies, where fieldworkers are more likely to confront interviewees living with painful emotions and memories of traumatic events.

A useful starting point is the simple observation by Portelli that oral historians should never forget they do not interview 'oral sources' but people (1991). In this encounter, the person who knows the most about their life stories and their community is not the interviewer/researcher but the interviewee. This argument is a conceptual break with perceiving researchers as 'experts', and rather approaches interviewees as having valuable life stories and localised forms of popular knowledge. I am therefore arguing that on the one hand, interviewees/communities' in-depth knowledge of themselves and their histories, and on the other hand, our relatively limited or lack of knowledge about them is central power/knowledge relationship that shapes the oral history interview. In a particular sense, we researchers are ignorant people. It is precisely because we are ignorant of the answers to particular questions that we do research. This does not mean we should deny the knowledge and training that professionals bring into research relationships. A key question becomes what strategies will build respectful and co-operative relationships between communities and researchers? How do we move from a 'them' and 'us' situation to, as Frisch (1990) puts it 'a shared authority' is reached?

The three day programme, will consist of three, two hour sessions on each day, and are structured as follows:

### **Session 1**

- What is oral history?
- Oral history dialogues and skills
- What is significant about life story interviewing?

### **Session 2**

- Designing an oral history project
- How does one design a life story interview guide?
- Brainstorm/design an interview guide

### **Session 3**

- Selecting equipment
- Preparing to Interview
- Access strategies and setting-up interviews

### **Sessions 4, 5 and 6**

- Practical Interviewing Workshops. Participants will interview each other with tape-recorders, and reflect on these experiences during the workshops. For these interviewing exercises to work, all participants need to be both self-reflective and sensitively critical.

### **Session 7**

- Negotiating emotions
- Labelling and Transcribing Interviews
- Interpreting Memories and Life Stories

### **Session 8**

- Disseminating oral histories to communities
- Contributing to Development

### **Session 9**

- A brief introduction to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). View the video documentary 'Between Joyce and Remembrance'. This documentary usually triggers discussion around the inter-connected issues of trauma, memory, the TRC and memorials and is a powerful way to end off the three days.

The sections below follow the order of the workshop sessions, but do not detail everything, as much will be added verbally through lectures and group discussions during the three days.

## WHAT IS ORAL HISTORY?

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Oral historians use a set of interviewing techniques to elicit and record people talking about their memories of past experiences. While oral history research was conducted prior to the 1960s, it was only during the 1960s that oral history became popular amongst university and non-governmental organisation (NGO) researchers in both 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries. This was partly due to the political struggles of the 1960s, and partly due to the arrival of mass marketed, affordable, portable tape recorders. Oral history emerged as a particular challenge to the domination of written historical sources, and their political and social biases towards ruling classes. Oral historians to this day tend to focus on marginalised peoples who are usually not heard, seen or recorded. However, oral historians do sometimes conduct interviews with elites, and often combine written and visual forms of history in their research.

Oral history then, in its narrow sense, is a research methodology that records oral stories drawn from living memory. While the work of oral traditionalists overlaps with that of oral historians, oral traditionalists are more specifically interested in stories, fables and legends that have been transmitted across generations, and go beyond the confines of living memory. Oral history, in its broader sense, is a cluster of research and life skills, which is constituted through several forms of practice:

Oral historians primarily use a set of interviewing techniques to elicit and record people talking about their memories of past experiences. However, I think it is problematic to define oral history simply as a form of interviewing. I want to offer some points about ways to see oral history, in its broader sense, as a cluster of research and life skills, which is constructed through several forms of practice:

**Lived practice:** We should never forget that long before the term ‘oral history’ was coined, people in various cultures and societies have used and perpetuated oral traditions and oral histories as a part of their daily lives. This remains true to this day for both rural and urban contexts, and for both formally uneducated and formally educated people. Oral histories are significant elements of living heritage. Moreover, many forms of talking such as casual conversations, gossip and report-backs draw on individual and collective memories. We usually do not refer to this as oral history but oral stories and memories are an indispensable part of the minutiae of our daily lives.

**Research practice:** As generations of oral historians have demonstrated oral history can do far more than just supplement the written historical record or fill in the gaps of the archive. Unfortunately this is a debate that South African oral historians still have to constantly engage in, especially with empiricist

historians and archivists. This supplementary approach to oral history relies on the primacy of the written word and does not fully acknowledge the significance of popular forms of knowledge (Nuttall and Coetzee, 1998). While I will not retrace the interpretative advances in oral history since the late 1980s a key point needs to be stressed: oral history has the research capacity to deliver new knowledge and to provide challenging insights into 'mainstream' forms of knowledge. Significant contributions to development work can be made through recognising and sensitively utilising the new insights of popular knowledge forms.

**Teaching practice:** Oral history interviewing is best taught in a hands-on fashion, which focuses on fundamental skills such as listening, empathy, and ways of interpreting the spoken word. These skills have a value that stretches far beyond the research terrain, and can be used in a variety of professions. For example, such skills are centrally involved in reminiscence therapy as practised by social workers, epidemiological research, community drama and radio, and documentary filmmakers. By teaching oral history skills to communities and development workers and the various professions that do community work, oral history trainers have valuable contributions to make.

**Archival practice:** The archive is not a neutral place for deposits. Oral history and memory-work can help us think and work in ways that go beyond the custodial-mentality that dominates archival practice in most countries. The sound and audio-visual archive is a site of popular memory where the significance of our living heritage is continuously open to interpretation. The recordings conserved by archives constitute forms of intellectual and cultural capital that belong to communities but institutions have a key role to play as responsible custodians of peoples' stories. Oral histories and audio-visual archiving can help transform the image of 'the archive' as a static, dusty old place to a dynamic resource for communities, especially students, at all educational levels.

**Dissemination practice:** Contrary to the notion that oral history 'gives voice to the voiceless' I argue that marginalised people do have a voice, and in a multitude of ways they do speak out in their daily lives. The problem is rather that marginalised groups do not have a sufficiently strong public voice. The dissemination of peoples' memories through various media such as radio, television, books and community drama to different audiences can strengthen the public voice of marginalized communities. This, in part, has arisen because in South Africa there are insufficient good listeners and there has been an insufficient attention to the popular dissemination of people's stories after they have been recorded.

## **ORAL HISTORY DIALOGUES AND SKILLS**

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Contrary to the research object/agenda driven style of interviewing which dominates within most academic research models, I would recommend a style of interviewing, which strives for a balance between the aims/needs of the researcher and the aims/needs of the interviewee (Anderson and Jack 1991).

This style of interviewing (and the training of interviewers in this style) also works better within development-orientated research projects. This style of interviewing is informed by a dialogic understanding of research and knowledge. There are always power relations within fieldwork, and these power relations, shape what is said, how it is said and what is not said in the oral history interview. But there is no power free research utopia to be reached (Bhavnani, 1990). Therefore, the open and transparent negotiation of the researcher's aims and the benefits the interviewee might directly or indirectly derive from the exchange is crucial. In this approach, power relations are not something to be feared or negated, but an unavoidable part of research fieldwork that needs to be incorporated within the interpretation and presentation of oral histories.

In developing dialogues with interviewees and other informants, the interviewer can use many interviewing skills to make the interviewee feel more comfortable. The three central techniques are:

- Firstly, the interviewer needs to learn how to be an empathic listener i.e. to imagine themselves in the interviewees' shoes.
- Secondly, interviewers need to convey to the interviewee, through verbal and non-verbal cues, that they are really listening to their stories.
- Thirdly, the interviewer needs to learn how to ask questions in a simple, brief and sensitive way.

Interviewers should remember that the information they are requesting is often connected to intense feelings. Oral history interviewing is not the quick journalist or 'talk show' style of interviewing. Instead, oral history requires a patient and slow style that is sensitive and respectful to where the interviewee comes from, and to the mood the interviewee is in. This style of interviewing will help the interviewee to tell more intimate stories and details. These stories might not be meaningful to you or to others, but it is crucial to give interviewees the time to tell stories that are meaningful to them. In addition, this slower pace, allows time for the use of objects to trigger memories. For example, old photographs or visits to historically significant spaces are ways of eliciting stories.

All interviewers, be they experienced or inexperienced, make mistakes. Yet, the basis for a good oral history interview is less to do with right and wrong and more about building trust between the interviewer and the interviewee. In fact, if the interviewer succeeds in developing an open and trusting dialogue with the interviewee, the minor technical errors that often occur, have a negligible impact on the telling of the stories. If researchers deal with their mistakes in a sincere way, it might even benefit the relationship between interviewers and interviewees. However, if the inter-personal relationship between interviewee and interviewer does not work, then the minor technical errors tend to have an exaggerated negative effect on the process.

It follows, then, that doing oral history projects is not like undertaking a scientific experiment. Researchers are interviewing complex people with their

own memories, feelings and knowledge forms. If interviewees develop trust in researchers and the organisation they represent, they will gradually reveal meaningful stories that are helpful to both the interviewer and the interviewee. These are delicate processes in which worthwhile results cannot be guaranteed. But the slender threads of trust that interviewers create with interviewees are the beginning of a more open, honest and sustainable dialogue, which with patience and persistence can deliver more detailed and honest research results.

## **WHAT MAKES LIFE STORIES SO SIGNIFICANT?**

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The life story or history interviewing is the most common approach to oral history interviewing. It has been used to explore tensions between individual and collective forms of memory and how these can be represented through museum exhibitions, memorialization etc. However, while the detailed intricacies of individual life histories are a central strength of the method, this does not mean that life histories are simply about 'individuals' in the atomised sense. As British feminist historian Carolyn Steedman so succinctly put it,

The telling of a life story is a *confirmation* (her emphasis) of that self that stands there telling the story. History, on the other hand, might offer the chance of denying it (Steedman 1986).

### **The main strengths of life stories:**

- The recognition that each individual has a life story to tell that is not only worthy of affirmative recognition but that also contributes to knowledge construction. This particularly relevant for marginalised groups in society and therefore it is not accidental that researchers working on gender and women's stories have been at the forefront of pioneering the method See for example, Gluck and Patai (1991).
- The life history method provides intricate details on many social and power relationships that have shaped this person life over time. In the actual telling of life stories people contextualise their lives and make links across different phases. For example, see Bozzoli (1991).
- By doing several life history interviews provides ways for researchers to link disparate life histories but those who have had shared experiences.
- An opportunity for people to tell their own stories in their own words and to review their life histories. In so doing, interviewees provide researchers with clues to interpreting people's lives in a grounded fashion that takes the lead from people's own social constructions.
- It is a powerful and sensitive tool for eliciting what people feel and to exploring the emotional dimensions of their lives.

### **Some Limitations:**

- Given that the life history method works best when conducted at considerable depth, means that it is rare that projects have sufficient time to conduct many life history interviews, which means that the life history method tends to be less representative. But all projects have to face the challenge of balancing 'width' and 'depth'.
- Doing life history interviews and transcription are labour intensive and also requires fieldworkers to be far more skilled at an inter-personal level.
- Life history and oral history methods are often accused of not being reliable because of the discursive nature of human memory and subjectivity. But if you want to understand human agency i.e. how and why people think, believe and act in the way they do, then 'scientific' approaches will give you parochial answers to these questions.

The life history method and semi-structured in-depth interview methods as used by sociologists have much in common, the key difference here is that the life history is placing greater emphasis on getting a reasonably 'whole picture' of the person's life, whereas the in-depth method tends to slice-up the interview in multiple themes. Also, the life history method in historical terms is placing emphasis on change over time or more specifically how this person has experienced and negotiated multiple forms of change over time, be these forms of change at a person level or relating to major moments in the trajectory of a community, institution or a country.

## **PLANNING AN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

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Before rushing into the interviews, you need to plan your oral history project. As a starting point, think carefully about what research topics really interest you, and then how to mould these into academic research goals, which can in turn be shaped into a feasible research project design. Rather have fewer realistic goals than many general goals. In your planning for the oral history interviews, use as much of the information you have already collected through secondary literature reading, documentary and photographic research and consultation with fellow researchers and of course your project supervisor. Remember also that the more you can consult with the community and potential interviewees about your potential research project before finalising the project design the better. As far as possible, your guiding aim should be to develop open and honest dialogues with interviewees and community residents from the beginning to the end of the oral history research process. Here are some questions to bear in mind when defining your project goals:

- Do you want to use oral history research to merely supplement previous research or is there a specific research problem that requires a qualitative research method like oral history interviewing?
- Are there people alive and capable of remembering and telling stories to meet your project focus?
- Will these potential interviewees be willing to tell their stories to you?

- What kinds of fears and silences might you encounter with these individuals?
- How do you envisage disseminating interviewee's stories beyond the point of recording?
- Are the goals of your project intellectually and practically feasible?

Think about how much time and resources are required to complete this project. Compile a budget for all your possible expenses, listing how you are going to pay for each. Write up a timetable with due dates for specific tasks and the final project completion. Remember, research is time consuming, so allow for more time and not less. Remember also that mistakes will happen - a research project without mistakes is impossible. Rather accept that problems will occur, and be able to develop quick, positive ways of resolving them. The design and implementation of effective oral history research plans are usually simple and flexible, and can adapt to changing circumstances.

## SELECTING EQUIPMENT

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Oral history interviews can be recorded by taking handwritten notes, but it is far more efficient to use either a tape-recorder or video camera. Carefully consider the advantages and disadvantages of both audio and video recording, and decide what will work best for your particular needs, budget and context:

**Audio recorders:** The cheapest option is to do audio interviews on a small portable tape-recorder. Portable tape-recorders are better for open-air interviews. However, the sound recording quality captured by the internal microphone of these machines is often poor, so we rather advise using an external handheld microphone. With audio taped interviews you can still use the visual stimuli of the site to help the person remember. You will not however have a visual record of the interviewee's body language and interaction with the site. When in-doors you can either use hand-held or a clip-on lapel microphone. If you are using analogue recorders then always use the normal size tape-cassettes (not the mini-cassettes) as they are more common and tend to be stronger. Use 60-minute chrome tapes instead of 90-minute tapes as these are less likely to stretch and will last longer. However, in the past few years digital recorders are preferred by most researchers as they are coming down in price and their recording quality is improving. For professional researchers the Marantz PMD-60, solid state recorder is recommend, which provides for easy down-loading of sound files onto your computer. Avoid MP3 recorders because they compress sound files and this is discouraged by sound archivists.

**Video recorders:** A video camera is better for conducting on site interviews. A portable video camera is best for open-air interviews where you are going to walk and interview at the same time. The main advantage of videotaped site interviews is that the interviewee can point to features of the site and tell stories about the site at the same time. A rifle microphone is recommended for open-air interviews. The visual stimuli of the actual site can act as a trigger

for the person's memories. If you and the interviewee are not going to move about too much, then rather use a video camera with a tripod. The tripod will provide a more stable picture of the interview.

When using a video camera for interviewing it is essential to have a cameraperson to do the recording, so that the interviewer can focus on the interviewing. The video camera is very effective in capturing the facial expressions and bodily mannerisms of the interviewee, but can make some interviewees feel uncomfortable. Therefore, avoid getting too close with your video camera and adjust your lens to obtain close-up images. It is preferable to use a digital video camera because digital recordings survive for more years than analogue recordings and are simpler to copy. Also, with digital video and current software packages such as Adobe Premier it is far easier and affordable to make your own documentaries.

**Transcribers:** For the transcription of your interviews you could use your tape-recorder or video camera but this is very time-consuming and costly. It is far more efficient to buy or loan a transcribing machine. A transcribing machine has headphones (for better listening), a foot pedal (to control the movement of the tape) and a speed control function. For digital recordings, burn your files to CDs and there software packages to help you regulate the speed of your transcription. Always make back-up copies of your interviews and rather work with your back-up copies than the originals, in case they get lost or damaged. Also, store all your tapes away from heat and dust, as this can damage the tape and your recording.

## SELECTING PEOPLE TO INTERVIEW

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Before you start interviewing, you need to decide whom you are going to interview. Usually there are more people to interview than there are time and resources available. So choices have to be made about interviewees. Here are some initial questions or criteria you will confront in selecting interviewees:

- How many years have they lived in the community or neighbourhood?
- How many years have they lived/worked/played on this site or in this institution?
- Will you select an equal number of male and female interviewees?
- Will you select interviewees according to race, ethnicity or culture?
- Will you select according to their class or economic position?

While oral history can be conducted with anyone with the capacity to remember and talk, it is usually elderly residents, which are the main priority for selection, as they tend to have the most memories and stories of interest to oral historians. However, you need to be even more specific than this:

- Are they in sufficiently good health to be interviewed?
- Are they able to speak freely in an interview, especially if you are using video?

It is preferable to find people who are comfortable with talking about themselves and others, and who have relatively clear memories of the past. Identify people who have the ability to give detailed descriptions (in words, sentences and stories) of the specific features of your project focus.

## **PREPARING FOR INTERVIEWS and INTERVIEW GUIDES**

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Researchers should prepare themselves as much as possible before they enter the interview or research situation. Read as much literature (i.e. books, articles, newspaper clippings, government documents etc.) as possible about your topic before you start interviewing. If available, collect old photographs of different historical periods or events that are relevant to your focus, and take these photographs to the interview. And/or if relevant ask the interviewee if they have photographs and other objects that might act as an aid to memories and story telling.

Then, before you start interviewing, write up an interview guide. The interview guide is not a fixed schedule, but should be seen as a checklist of all the key questions about the interviewee's life story, key themes or events you wish to explore in greater depth. The interview guide is a safety net to help you with asking questions. The questions on your guide should be simple and short, and should consist of a mixture of closed and open-ended questions.

- Closed-ended questions require short, factual-type answers, for example: where were you born? How many children do you have?
- With open-ended questions you are hoping to receive longer responses in the shape of stories, for example: describe your early childhood memories of growing up in this community?

When designing your interview guide avoid the following kind of questions:

- Leading questions: For example, how bad did you feel when you were forcibly removed from this community? A better way of asking the question would be: How did you feel when you were forcibly removed from this community?
- Asking more than one question at a time: For example, where and when were you born. Rather split these up into separate questions.
- Longwinded, academic, abstract questions, which are removed from people's daily lives. For example, could you analyse your political consciousness while living in this community with specific reference to the political system? A better way of beginning a discussion about these issues would be to ask specific questions about people's daily lives at the time.

The words you use to shape your questions and the way in which you ask the interview questions will help the interviewee to relax into a story-telling mood. It is also essential to ask questions that do not appear on your interview guide such as questions for clarification and questions that link with what the

interviewee has previously spoken about. This shows that you are really interested in what they have to say and will facilitate further storytelling.

Before going to interview, read your interview guide several times. Even try to read the questions out loud, so that you get a good sense of what they will sound like. And always check that your recording equipment is functioning correctly before you go to the interview and check the equipment again just before beginning the interview. After you have done three or four interviews, go back to your guide and do final revisions, as the best test of an interview guide is to ask the questions to real people. On the day of the interview make sure that you are well rested and that you have cleared your mind of other tasks or thoughts before you enter the interview. Interviewing is an enjoyable process, which requires energy, concentration and careful mental preparation.

## SETTING UP INTERVIEWS

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In setting-up and doing life history interviews it is absolutely crucial that the process is not approached as simply about 'content gathering' but is crucially involves facilitating a safe and containing process, which will allow interviewees to tell their stories in their words and at their pace (Anderson and Jack, 1991). When doing interviews in communities, it is necessary to first get permission from the community leaders. This is necessary because you need to show respect to them, and because they often control access to people and information. These might be the leaders of civic associations, political groups, traditional authorities, municipal councillors or local heritage organisations. Once permission is obtained, the researcher needs to find potential interviewees who are open and happy to be interviewed.

While setting up and doing the interview, never forget that the interviewee has the information, which you the interviewer do not have. Therefore gaining permission to interview people must be done in a sensitive way and always present yourself in a confident but respectful manner. Bear in mind that interviewees are doing you a favour by giving up their time and telling their stories for your research project. Furthermore, as far as possible, try to involve the interviewees in making decisions about your project and especially in how their stories are going to be publicly presented. When talking to a potential or actual interviewee there are several issues to be explained:

**Firstly, introduce yourself:** Tell the person your name and the work you are doing. If you represent an organisation, tell the person briefly what organisation you represent and why its work is important. Remember to be brief in your explanations otherwise people might feel that you are wasting their time.

**Secondly, describe your project:** Describe what your project is about and its central aims. It is crucial that you explain this in accessible language that people at all educational levels can understand. By stressing that your project is contributing to a shared heritage of the community, you are more likely to get a co-operative response from potential interviewees.

**Thirdly, describe an oral history interview:** Most people have an idea about 'interviews', which is drawn from what they have seen on television or have experienced in job interviews. Even worse, some people think all interviews are like a police interrogation from previous historical periods. We need to explain to potential interviewees that oral history interviews are not like these kinds of interviewing. Oral history interviewing is far more gentle and slow. Interviewees should be also informed that they have the right to refuse to answer any specific questions or that they can end the interview at any time they choose. Interviewees should be encouraged to answer questions in their own way. Oral history interviewing is about giving ordinary people a safe space to tell their stories.

**Fourthly, decide on anonymity and confidentiality:** Once the person has agreed to being interviewed and before you start interviewing, it is important to obtain the interviewee's permission to use his or her name in your project. Alternatively, you must keep the interviewee's name anonymous, which means keeping his or her name completely separate from the information he or she expressed in the interview. Many interviewees feel more comfortable talking on tape when you are not going to use his or her name. But sometimes, if the interviewee is famous or well known in the community, this might not be possible. A confidential interview includes anonymity. However, this applies when the specific information provided by the interviewee must remain within the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee and cannot be used for dissemination purposes. Anonymity and confidentiality can relate to an entire interview or only specific sections of the interview.

**Fifthly, establish the language to be used in the interview:** The language to be spoken in the interview needs to be established during the setting up of the interview. Most interviewees prefer using their first language. It is preferable if the interviewer can speak the interviewee's first language. In situations where this is not possible, there are three options:

- Employ a translator
- Conduct the interview in the interviewee's second or third language
- Employ an interviewer who can speak the interviewee's first language.

All these options have their advantages and disadvantages. Employing people adds more costs to your budget. Also, the translator or interviewer might not have the depth of research knowledge that you have as the main researcher. The translator option also makes it more difficult to negotiate a closer relationship with the interviewee and quick translation is often inaccurate. And using the second or third language option is often uncomfortable for the interviewee and there can be misunderstandings about words or cultural practices.

The interviewee's first language is usually best for interviewing, but using a language like English is usually best for communicating people's stories to as many audiences as possible. The best solution is to do interviews in people's

first language and have immediate translations in the books, storyboards, radio programmes or whatever form of communication you use.

**Sixthly, explain what you are going to do with their information:**

Interviewees have a right to know what you are going to do with the words and stories that they are going to tell you. Be sure that the interviewee knows you will use quotations from their interviews in a book, exhibition, storyboard or other forms of presentation. We also highly recommend that you ensure that if the interview is deposited with an archive and the interviewee must agree to this.

**Seventhly, describe the release form to be signed:**

Before you conduct an interview you should tell the interviewee that after the interview you are going to ask them to sign a release form. A release form gives the researcher the legal permission to use people's stories and it gives interviewees' the option to put restrictions on the use of their stories. Interviewees may choose to allow their stories to only be used for educational or heritage purposes and not to be used for commercial purposes. The interviewees might also choose to restrict the whole interview or parts of the interview from publication for a certain number of years. You can design your own release form. For a template release form, visit [www.ohasa.org.za](http://www.ohasa.org.za).

**Eighthly, set up an appointment for the interview:**

The interview must happen at a venue and a time that best suits the interviewee. A minimum length for oral history interviews is about 30 minutes and the maximum for a single session is about two hours. So depending on how many questions you prepare for the interview, and how talkative the interviewee is, the length of the interview can vary widely. In cases where the interviewee talks freely and has much useful information, I would recommend several interview sessions, as opposed to one long session.

## DOING INTERVIEWS

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On the day of the interview, before going to the interview, make sure you have the following:

- The interview guide
- The recording equipment
- Sufficient audio or video cassettes or flash cards.
- Batteries (just in case there is no electricity at the venue)
- A pen and notepad (for writing brief reminders for yourself during and after the interview).

Also make sure that you know how to get to the venue and always be on time. Once at the interview, make sure that it is still convenient for the interviewee to do the interview at this time. As you set up the equipment, avoid silences or technical matters that might make the interviewee nervous. Rather put the interviewee at ease by talking about the weather or the surroundings of their

home. If the interviewee offers you something to drink or eat, accept this because a refusal might be seen as a sign of disrespect. However, if you cannot eat or drink particular items because of your own beliefs, then politely explain your reasons for refusing their offer.

Once the interview begins, make sure that your initial questions are simple and easy, such as the person's name, their address, where they were born and so on. During the interview, never forget that because most people tend to mainly think about the present, it takes mental concentration for the interviewee to remember specific experiences or places in the past. Therefore, the oral history interview usually works best at a slower, more relaxed pace. Interviewers should also remember that the information they are requesting is often connected to intense feelings. This is an additional reason for doing oral history interviews in a patient and slow style that is sensitive to the feelings, needs and culture of the interviewee, and the mood the interviewee is in at that specific moment. This style of interviewing will help the interviewee to tell more intimate stories and details.

The most difficult part of an interview is usually the opening 10 to 20 minutes. During this period, both you and the interviewee will tend to feel a bit nervous and you will both be assessing each other. However, once this nervousness is over, and the interviewee is in a relaxed story-telling mode, interviews are often filled with various emotions such as joy, excitement, happiness, sadness, pain, anger and shame. It is a privilege, and requires strength at times, for the oral history interviewer to listen to these stories filled with emotions from the past and present. Never forget that for all interviewers, whether you are experienced or inexperienced, interviewing is always a learning process, in which you will make mistakes. Here are some common mistakes made by interviewers:

- Arriving late
- Asking complicated questions
- Asking insensitive questions
- Interrupting the interviewee
- Talking too much
- Trying to solve the interviewee's problems
- Interrogating the interviewee
- Arguing with the interviewee.

A good oral history interview is less to do with right and wrong and more about building trust between yourself and the interviewee. As stated before, accept that you will make mistakes and be ready to acknowledge your mistakes. Honest apologies and constructive solutions for your mistakes have the potential to strengthen your relationship with the interviewee. So by trying to build a respectful, open and honest relationship with interviewees, they will begin to trust you more and will tell more meaningful stories that are helpful to both them and you.

Once the interview is completed, remember to verbally thank the interviewee for their time and stories, and then follow this up with a formal thank you letter.

If necessary, go back to the interviewee to check specific details or for further information. It is also helpful to offer interviewees some token of your appreciation; we recommend a copy of the interview tape or tapes.

## LABELLING INTERVIEWS

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It is absolutely essential to label your tape cassette and tape cover with as much detail as possible. Incorrect or insufficient labelling will make it more difficult to find specific information you might require later in the project. Make sure that you keep the original tape cassettes (and copies), in a safe place during your research. Detailed labelling is also essential for the appropriate archiving of your recordings.

The actual tape/cassette must have the name of the interviewee and the date the interview happened. If the interview took up more than one tape, number your tapes clearly. And if you are using digital files, the same principles apply. Also make sure the cassette cover contains the following information:

- The title of your project
- Interviewee's name
- Interviewee's contact details
- Interviewer's name
- Interviewer's contact details
- The date of the interview
- Where the interview took place
- The duration of the interview.

## TRANSCRIBING INTERVIEWS

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This is probably the most time-consuming part of doing oral history research. Even with a transcribing machine, it is reasonable to expect one hour of interviewing time to take four to seven hours of typing time to be transcribed. This typing time will mostly depend on the quality of your sound or audio-visual recording. You must decide whether you need a complete transcript of each interview. If your aim is to get a detailed community record, then verbatim transcripts (where every word is transcribed) are important. If your aims are more limited, selective transcripts of the sections or responses you intend analysing or quoting for your project are sufficient.

While transcribing your interviews, it is important to be aware that people do not speak as they write. Therefore oral history should not be transcribed according to the rules of written language. A transcriber creatively uses written words to describe the sounds, expressions and words spoken by the interviewee. The transcriber should also explore ways of describing non-verbal sounds and the mood of the interview dialogue. It is useful if the interviewer is also the transcriber because this helps the interviewer to gain a deeper understanding of the interviewee's stories. Professional typists or

transcribers will probably do the job more neatly and quickly, but this will be an added financial cost.

## NEGOTIATING EMOTIONS

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Bearing in mind the broad range of feelings that might be evoked within the oral history dialogue, I now turn to focussing on the potentially disruptive emotions of pain, hurt and traumatic affects. Enabling students to negotiate disruptive emotions in the oral history dialogue is the central motive here. These emotions are not only difficult to confront because of the acute sensitivity involved but also because traumatic experiences are often beyond the comprehension of both interviewee and interviewer. The traumatic impact of violent events punctures the victim/survivor's pre-existing social, cultural and intellectual forms of comprehension. It is people's frequent inability to understand the events they experienced, and others lack of comprehension or sensitivity that makes living with post-traumatic legacies so difficult.

**'What can I do when the interviewee cries?'**: A common interviewer concern as the first interview is approached with an interviewee is that (even if we know the interviewee): Can I know what emotions will be evoked in this specific interviewee dialogue? In short, the answer is no. It is this unpredictability of oral history that makes many interviewers and interviewees feel 'nervous' - or more appropriately it is called anxiety – in the early stages of the dialogue. While this anxiety in general terms is often about how we might perform in the interviewing situation, it is often more specifically about not knowing whether this interviewee will cry or not?

Sometimes this anxiety is felt because students think asking about emotions is not academically relevant. Sometimes this anxiety is evoked because listening to others peoples' sadness, pain and related emotions is an understandably difficult challenge to face. Sometimes this anxiety is evoked because the prospect of negotiating these emotions on your own as a young interviewer listening to the anguish of an older story-teller is a scary prospect. On the one hand, I would recommend that interviewer's acknowledge these anxious feelings as legitimate and not be self-critical for feeling this way. On the other hand, interviewers need to work at ways to not allow their anxiety to be visible to the interviewee. Our anxieties can make it more difficult for interviewee to feel at ease. Often the best way to practise keeping your own anxieties contained within you is by doing practise interviews with friends and then of course the actual experience of doing more and more oral history interviews is the best learning experience. The main advantage that young interviewers have when working with older interviewees is that the interviewee is more likely to be considerate and patient with a student who is learning the skills of their trade. But all interviewers over time need to develop a calm and humble confidence to listen to whatever the interviewee expresses to us.

There is no perfect formula but these guidelines have reasonably high degree of success in interviewing moments, where sadness is evoked. If the interviewee shows signs of crying, but continues talking then continue to

listen. Continue to listen to their emotions. Interruption or changing the topic at this moment is very inappropriate. When the interviewee stops talking and there is a natural pause, it is imperative that the interviewer do two things:

Firstly, sensitively acknowledge the interviewee's sadness and/or tears. Simple words like, 'I notice you have been crying or had tears in your eyes while telling that story'. Secondly, the interviewer should offer the interviewee the option to pause or temporarily withdraw from the interview. Immediately after acknowledging their sadness, suggest this offer but it must be them that chooses what will happen next. By hearing this offer, the interviewee usually regains some sense of control, in a moment when their feelings, probably is being experienced as 'out-of-control'. In my experience, interviewees usually opt to continue or to take a few minutes to compose themselves by getting a tissue or going to the toilet.

If the interviewee remains unsettled or tearful after the interview is over, remain behind to listen to their stories. While it is not our job to cure or heal interviewees painful or disruptive emotions, we do need to take responsibility for the fact that our interview questions and interventions have re-evoked these memories laden with particular emotions. If the interviewer is operating in an ethical and sensitive manner, it is doubtful that he or she would have made the interviewee feel worse. But rather by raising our questions we are providing a safe space for these emotions that are beneath the surface to be expressed openly. Paradoxically, it is at those moments of vulnerability that sadness surfaces that the interviewee is consciously or unconsciously beginning to trust the interviewer. Suggesting psychotherapy is sometimes appropriate but must be carefully articulated to avoid making the interviewee feel stigmatised as 'mentally ill', a common misperception of psychotherapy in many communities. At very least, the interviewee can be encouraged to draw on the support of family, friends, elders or respected people in the community such as doctors, teachers religious leaders.

Ultimately there are no guarantees in dealing with people's emotions but if we as researchers display the emotional strength to bear what is often unbearable emotions for the interviewee then we are doing a profoundly important and helpful task. But what we promise interviewees, at any point in the process, must be very realistic and we should not portray ourselves as having the power to remove people's pain and trauma. We must also be realistic in our own expectations of what is possible in the oral history dialogue. Most oral historians in my experience have an understandably, altruistic desire to help others in pain, but we must not promise either explicitly or implicitly more than we can deliver. And to repeat a crucial reminder, we cannot take away their pain and trauma in fact even therapists cannot entirely remove the pain attached to traumatic events of the past.

In emotional moments, oral history interviewing resembles psychotherapy. And both oral historians and psychotherapists share an emphasis on the importance of attentive listening and empathy. It is quite clear that oral historians can learn much from the experiences of psychotherapists. But we are researchers recording and analysing information and processes, and are

not trained to attend to the psychological problems of 'patients' as are counsellors and psychotherapists.

**'What can I do when I feel like crying in the interview?':** The interviewer needs to maintain a gentle calmness in the interview situation. This means that as far as possible interviewers should not express their emotions in the interview situation. In short, as much as the hurt and sadness of interviewees might evoke much emotion in us, we should not cry in the interview. Students often find this a difficult point to accept. Even though we are an important part of the construction of the dialogue the oral history dialogue is the interviewees' space to express their stories and emotions not ours. If we cry, it might distract the interview from dealing with their complex emotions. If we cry, the interviewee might be drawn to comforting us, when it is the interviewers who should be comforting them. But most significantly of all, if we cry, the interviewee might consciously or unconsciously perceive their own emotions as unbearable to us, which then directly contradicts our central responsibility of having to bear witness to the interviewee's emotions.

If the interviewer is struggling with their feelings during the interview, it is useful to establish an internal mental dialogue with one's emotions, aimed at delaying not denying these emotions. If this fails, then the interviewer needs to reflect on their feelings and why they could not contain themselves within this specific interview. Sometimes, after doing many interviews with trauma survivors, there is a risk of 'interviewer burn-out'. This may be reflected in moodiness, inability to stay focused, depression and suicidal fantasies. Therefore it is crucial that after leaving the interview situation, we must not 'bottle-up our feelings inside' and rather find ways to express our emotions through talking to someone else such as a therapist, partner, family member, friend or emotional confidant. At very least the interviewer can write out their emotions in a diary.

In teaching situations, at schools, colleges and universities, it is imperative that teachers and research supervisors see their role to include listening to the post-interview emotions of their learners. While teachers and lecturers are not therapists, we have an ethical responsibility to listen sensitively, in a debriefing sense, to the post-interview emotions and issues that learners express to us. Furthermore, students can develop support networks or mentoring roles with more senior students to help each other through the emotional challenges of doing oral history fieldwork with trauma survivors.

As a general rule, I would argue that it is essential for oral historians and related qualitative research interviewers who do work on traumatic and painful subjects to develop their capacity to be self-reflexive. The more we understand, in the first instance, what motivates us to do this kind of research, the better we will be at containing both our own and other's emotions. We need to continually reflect on and work through our emotions and emotional investment in oral history work. Denying your feelings or pretending to be 'stronger' will undermine your capacity to approach the interview with sensitivity and openness. The more open and honest the interviewee senses you are the more they are likely to trust you and disclose their stories.

## INTERPRETING MEMORIES AND LIFE STORIES

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There is insufficient space here or in the workshops to detail the many different approaches to interpreting and analysing oral history interviews. This is particularly the case because oral history methodology is attractive to a wide range of researchers from multiple disciplines. However, in the workshop session I will present key points about interpretation of memories and life stories as are practised by leading oral historians such as Alessandro Portelli and others.

Oral history interviews are best utilised in exploring questions of subjectivity, identity and power. This also reinforces the argument for using the life history method, which provides researchers with a myriad of clues to how people have negotiated their lives over time and how people respond to the significant 'watersheds' in their lives. A key linking issue being **how people make decisions or have decisions imposed** on them (and various versions thereof) at different points in the past and present. In short, if you want to understand the intricacies of agency or a lack of agency then life history interviews are a key method in my view.

The terrain of individual and collective memory construction has also become central to the interpretation of oral histories, and in this regard the Green (2004) article provides a very useful overview of these oral history and memory debates. Since the 1980s investigating the intersections between memory and myth, have become central to many oral history studies, and in this respect I recommend the seminal work by Samuel and Thompson (1990). But probably the most influential oral history work, as concerns the interpretation of memory and narrative, is the brilliant Alessandro Portelli, 'Luigi Trastulli' book (1991). The best oral history anthology for teaching all aspects is in my view by Rob Perks and Al Thomson (1991; 2006). I would highly recommend the seminal Portelli article entitled, 'What makes oral history different', which appears in both of these collections. These works decisively shifted debates from parochial discussions about the reliability or unreliability of memory, to analysing memories and narratives, in its complexities as central to developing convincing historical explanations on a range of topics.

## DISSEMINATING ORAL HISTORIES

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The dissemination of oral histories as it represents a pragmatic way of 'giving back' to the communities and individuals from whom these memories and stories were recorded. For example the Centre for Popular Memory utilises the following mediums of dissemination:

- Popular and academic history books
- Community radio programmes
- Travelling audio-visual exhibitions

- Video documentaries
- Internet websites (visit [www.popularmemory.org](http://www.popularmemory.org))

In communities, especially as concerns memorial sites or heritage sites of significance oral histories on site can be communicated in the following ways:

- Storyboards
- Audio-visual exhibitions
- Guided tours
- Self-guided tours, with portable tape-players
- Oral performances.

Oral histories on and off site can educate broader audiences and attract more people to visit a centre or community. While the written medium is useful, we strongly recommend that you use the audio or visual mediums so that oral histories can be heard or seen by as many other people as possible. Also, if we are serious about the 'oral' in oral history, then the audio or audio-visual media have the most exciting potential for the dissemination of oral histories. By using audio and audio-visual ways of communicating people's stories about the site, its social, cultural and emotional significance to local and foreign visitors will be enhanced. Oral and visual histories can help attract more tourists into communities, and this might increase income-generating opportunities for communities.

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## CONTRIBUTING TO DEVELOPMENT

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How, then, can the training, recording and disseminating of oral histories best harness people's stories to bring about constructive change? Here are some of the small but significant ways in which oral history work can make a difference.

Through **training** community members as oral history researchers they can learn the following:

- How to design and conduct a research project
- How to design and use an interview guide
- How to listen in different ways
- How to empathise with others
- How to sensitively ask questions and elicit information
- How to read and respond to verbal and non-verbal cues
- How to help people to process their feelings.

Through **interviewing**, the following benefits might be experienced by interviewees:

- Partly help people to link and understand fragmented memories
- Partly help to locate their memories in the context of their life stories
- Partly help to review and re-value their memories

- Partly help to hear reflections and affirmations of their sense of self
- Partly help to release burdensome feelings from the past
- Partly help to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of past decision-making.

And, through the **dissemination** of stories, the following possibilities open-up:

- Partly help people to redefine themselves by seeing and hearing their stories in the public realm
- Partly help people to see that they are not alone and that they have shared memories, which connect them with others
- Partly help people to learn more about the stories and heritage of other ethnic, political or religious (and many other) groups that make-up their community
- Partly help people to rebuild a sense of collectivity and community pride through participating in and witnessing the sounds and images of their community heritage.

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## CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that if you conduct your oral history project in a carefully planned and sensitive manner, in close consultation with your community and relevant local organisations, it is possible to make history project or heritage sites more people-orientated. Oral history projects around other themes such as family, community or individual life histories are a useful teaching for university and high school students. Once your oral history project has been completed, remember to lodge your tapes, transcript and other materials with an archive, museum or your local heritage organisation. Especially try to place your interviews in a sound or audio-visual archive, where the tapes can be listened to and used by researchers and other members of the community. Finally, by recording and publicly disseminating oral histories communities, who are usually marginalised from academia and mass media, will potentially be affirmed, listened to and publicly recognised as having memories and stories that are of historical value to their community, educational and heritage institutions.

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