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Oral History as a Social Justice Project: Issues for the Qualitative Researcher

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Oral History as a Social Justice Project: Issues for the Qualitative Researcher

Abstract

I am writing this to assist researchers in training and experienced researchers in understanding ways to view oral history as a social justice project. This paper will illuminate the importance of oral history in terms of enriching the knowledge base of qualitative research methods as well. Oral history provides us with an avenue of thick description, analysis, and interpretation of people's lives through probing the past in order to understand the present. The postmodern appreciation of the study of people and their stories, those stories from persons generally on the outside or periphery of society, offer a unique opportunity to view and conduct oral history as a social justice project.

Keywords

Oral history, Social Justice, and Qualitative Research

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Oral History as a Social Justice Project: Issues for the Qualitative Researcher

Valerie J. Janesick

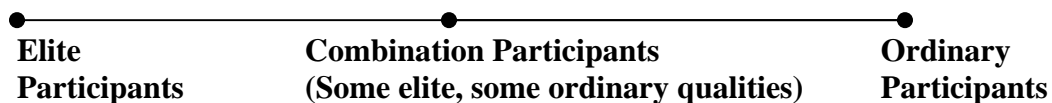
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I am writing this to assist researchers in training and experienced researchers in understanding ways to view oral history as a social justice project. This paper will illuminate the importance of oral history in terms of enriching the knowledge base of qualitative research methods as well. Oral history provides us with an avenue of thick description, analysis, and interpretation of people's lives through probing the past in order to understand the present. The postmodern appreciation of the study of people and their stories, those stories from persons generally on the outside or periphery of society, offer a unique opportunity to view and conduct oral history as a social justice project. Key Words: Oral history, Social Justice, and Qualitative Research

Introduction

Oral history is a technique with its very own history (see Thompson, 1988). It is regularly defined in this era as some variation of, "the recorded reminiscences of a person who has first hand knowledge of any number of experiences." In reviewing the literature, I have discovered seventy definitions of oral history, many of which are overlapping. For ease of understanding this paper, the notion of recording participants' memories in some form seems to fit. Early in the last century, oral history focused on interviewing elite persons such as generals, famous artists or scientists, great leaders of nations, or anyone who surfaced as distinctive within a given community. At the same time local individuals who had a strong memory of a town, city, state, or region were sometimes seen as knowledgeable in terms of historical events. Thus, it is helpful to view oral history itself on a continuum. On one end, the most sophisticated individual elite may be interviewed, while on the other end we have the most ordinary everyday citizen. Each has much to tell us as we come to understand society in all its complexity (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Timeline of oral history participants.



The specific techniques of oral history are also the techniques of the qualitative researcher. Likewise, the use of ordinary language to convey a story has its roots in qualitative research. It is easy to see how oral history can be a valuable tool in the qualitative researcher's "tool kit." In addition, we as qualitative researchers have

experienced various transformations from a traditionalist to a reconceptualist approach, and now to the postmodern orientation.

For this paper, I define the traditionalist oral historians as those who prefer to use a tape recording only, and who, usually, do only one long interview per participant. Traditionalists likewise often stay clear of interpretation and concern themselves only with elite participants.

Reconceptualists go further in that they may use multiple technologies to conduct an interview such as a digital video recording, some written protocols from participants, and more than one interview per participant. They also may frame their oral history projects around themes, and may offer multiple and competing interpretations and analyses. For example, reconceptualists might interview the army general as well as the second in command, and the lowest member on the hierarchical totem pole.

Postmodernists use all tools currently available to conduct multiple interviews with participants, and before analysis and interpretation of the data, they clearly spell out their own point(s)-of-view. Postmodernists also see oral history as a way to repair the historical record by including the voices of participants outside the mainstream of society. An example of a postmodernist approach to oral history might be to frame the questions to the army general around themes of power, its uses and abuses as well as race and class-based questions. The postmodernist oral history project offers the opportunity to widen the repertoire of techniques, interview questions, and competing points of interpretation and data analysis. Thus, I will argue in this piece that oral history can be extended to be understood as a postmodern social justice project.

Oral History Evolving

Within this postmodern orientation, I want to take a dynamic view of oral history. I am asking the reader to give up the notion that oral history is simply a collection of tapes and transcripts on file in a library archive. Rather, I am asking the reader to take a journey with me in viewing oral history as dynamic, ever changing, and evolving to match the evolution in our understanding of research and society. With any research project, there is analysis and interpretation. In the postmodern era, oral history can consist of tapes (audio, video, digital) and transcripts. However, that is only the first step. The next step is the analysis and interpretation of the data in those transcripts. Thus the interviewer as oral historian shares an interpretive role with the participant being interviewed. In fact, in my own oral history research project on women teachers, a participant asked me, “what are you calling me in the write-up?” I answered that I usually use the word “participant” to describe members in a study. She then said to me, “wouldn’t it be better to call us both interpreters?” Her comment suggested that we were both engaged in a mutual process of translating and making sense of one another, essentially in a co-researcher relationship.

What she was talking about was the evolutionary, vibrant nature of oral history. Thus, the reason for me to connect oral history at this moment in time with qualitative research rests on the notion of interpretation. Why do we want to hear the stories of individuals? Why do we take pains to record on tape and even type transcripts about the past? Why do researchers undertake such projects? We do this to understand the lives of those whom we interview in order to understand ourselves and our worlds. As with any

qualitative research project, developing an understanding of lived experience from the participants' point(s)-of-view is primary. Oral history with its immediate face-to-face orientation and supplemental documentary evidence helps to provide a path to understanding behavior, its motivations, and this for both interviewee and interviewer. Thus, oral history becomes particularly useful to qualitative researchers for we are documenting multiple histories, of multiple individuals, to make sense of our world. Experience and what sense we make of experience are critical. Here is where oral history and qualitative research meet. We converge in various ways.

1. The *basic techniques* of oral history are the basic techniques of qualitative research. Both use interviews, observations, and documents as evidence. How things differ in any approach to qualitative research (in this case, oral history) depends on the purpose of the study, the theory which guides the study, and the role of the researcher.
2. Telling someone's story particularly through remembering key events and *lived experience* is a major goal for both the oral historian and for many qualitative research projects. Thus the oral history method, which has been underused in the field of education, at least may now be considered as a viable approach. This may allow for documenting the stories of women, minorities, or any individual outside the power base and center of decision-making. For example, I am currently conducting an oral history project of women school superintendents who bring a unique perspective to the study of women in administration. Oral histories of these leaders may provide a fuller picture of what that role means in today's world.
3. Using *ordinary language* to tell the story is required for both the oral historian and the qualitative researcher. The beauty of oral history is that the everyday words of the participants are captured on digital voice recordings or digital video recordings and yield an understandable narrative.
4. There is no one set *explanation or interpretation* for a given set of data. Oral historians, as qualitative researchers, use the data at hand and render the most inclusive explanation and interpretation possible at that moment in time. In this postmodern era, the oral historian often includes the points-of-view and voices of participants who are on the outskirts of society, thus widening our understanding of oral history.
5. Historians and qualitative researchers in general are involved in *describing and explaining someone's memory* of events and activities. There is a powerful urge in the soul of human beings to preserve their stories, their past recollections, and weave the story of their lives. Oral history is a memory of the self.

Consider the following proposed timeline, Traditionalist, Reconceptualist, and Post Modern as you process the connection between oral history techniques and qualitative research techniques.

Traditionalist Era

This era was marked by social circumstances to tell someone's story with tools at hand (e.g., cave painting, hieroglyphs, petroglyphs, oral traditions). It included the basic forms of storytelling available. In the field of Oral History in the United States, many historians chart the beginning of the official study of oral history at the beginning of the last century at Columbia University. Prior to when tape recorders became available, the use of pencil and paper provided the means for someone's story to be written. Eventually, this developed, in the technological age, into recordings on tape and some photography, usually documenting the remembered history of well-known elites.

Reconceptualist Era

In the activity of reconceptualizing oral history, researchers use not only audio tapes, but possibly video tapes and photography as well as interactive interviews, and the beginning of considering interviewers and interviewees as co-researchers. To separate from the traditionalist, the reconceptualist begins to identify a theoretical frame for analysis of interviews. Not only that, participants from all walks of life (not just the elites) are included in oral history projects. Reconceptualists also adds to the historical record by amplifying personal stories within a social context. This may or may not be a social justice project, but always is placed in a cultural and social context so as to understand more fully the participant's story. For example, early oral histories of the Holocaust survivors were placed within a context of the brutality of war and the history of violence in world history.

Postmodernist Era

In the postmodern era, the oral historian uses all possible audio, video, and written recording techniques, which includes photographs, video filming, digital tape recording, still photography, and various documents related to the project. This includes participant and researcher interpretations of the story placed within a social and cultural context. Usually the oral history is the story of someone from an under-represented group (e.g., women labor leaders, teachers, nurses). In any event, the postmodernist still adheres to the conventions of oral history, but with a wider scope of interest. Included in the story would be the social context of the participant, perhaps documentary evidence of peers and colleagues, and definite interpretive comments from the researcher and participant (co-researchers).

For the purpose of this paper, I will work predominantly from a postmodern perspective to emphasize the evolution of oral history. In this perspective, oral history takes on more texture and possibly more credibility. This postmodern oral history is characterized by the following characteristics. Postmodern oral history becomes an interpretive approach, which may include the participant in the project as a co-researcher. Both interviewer and interviewee take active roles in the project. This may involve a political context as well as a racial, class, and gender context. Often, the postmodernist will probe into spiritual and aesthetic topical areas as well provide a well-rounded picture of the participants in the research project. In addition, the use of ordinary language in the

final report, to make the story understandable to the widest possible audience, is a hallmark.

Likewise, the postmodernist uses technology to enhance the power of the story being told, and may use multiple uses of technology and the written word to complete the story telling. This distinguishes the postmodernist from the traditionalist and reconceptualist who may also use technology. For the postmodernist, technology enriches a story rather than using technology to pare down data into overhead projections, or, lately, the simple viewing of PowerPoint slides. Technology, the postmodernist would say, should be used for understanding a story as well as leading towards emancipation.

In addition, to use the metaphor of choreography, the choreographer asks the following questions as a general beginning to any dance/art work. My favorite ballet teacher framed it this way,

- Who (or what) is doing?
- What to whom (or what)?
- Where, in what context?
- Why, what were the difficulties?

I wish to describe the ways in which choreography interfaces with qualitative research, as I have done elsewhere (Janesick, 2000, 2004, 2007). In doing oral history, eventually a final report is completed. Completing this report is like choreographing a dance. The story or narrative of the dance is like the story or narrative of any given oral history. When a choreographer designs a dance, it evolves from a combination of the imagination of the choreographer and the dancers. Likewise, oral history is similar to the act of choreography, as the oral historian and the participants co-create and evolve into a storytelling team. More particularly, until the dance is performed, and until the oral history is told, the final product continues to emerge and rearrange itself. Finally, both dance and oral history are in the end telling a story, and may be considered to be works of art.

Why Oral History Now?

Oral history is of interest to many disciplines and to social science researchers in general. Particularly, those fields which capture the story of outsiders, whether from a gender, race, or class perspective, are the fields where social justice projects may emerge more fully. To use one example, feminist oral history may be found in sociology, anthropology, history, business, mental health, nursing, education, or medicine. Reinharz (1992) eloquently tackles the issue of feminist oral history by reminding us that feminist oral history creates new more inclusive material about women, thus, validating their experiences. In addition, feminist oral history contributes to a social justice project by repairing the historical record through including women's voices. In her text she also offers examples from many fields of feminist, social justice focused oral history (e.g., feminist interview research, feminist ethnography, feminist action research).

Oral history may also be considered an art form in terms of the art of storytelling. Likewise, oral history is an interpretive activity of communication. In addition, in this postmodern era, in-depth interviews are still the quintessential substantive data set. Most

importantly, memory is a rich part of the social world and will always intrigue us. When a person sets out to interview another human being, there is a written record eventually, so that knowledge of the past can serve to refute myths, half truths, fabrications, and faulty perspectives. This, alone, marks oral history as a social justice activity when the outsiders and peripheral members of society are included in oral history research projects. With a renewed sense of interest in oral history, as evidenced by journal articles and books printed since the 1970's, there will always be an open space for qualitative researchers to pursue in-depth long interviews in any given research project, which falls within the oral traditions. Many more voices may be included in oral history projects of our time that were systematically excluded during the past century.

Sorting Out Oral Traditions

Many writers seem to feel that there is a significant variability and/or confusion in defining oral history. This may be due to the fact that various terms are used interchangeably, and different disciplines often discuss oral history within their own specific jargon. Some of the terms include oral history, folklore, memory, *deja-vu*, narrative research, storytelling, autobiography, autoethnography, biography, the long interview, and reminiscence. These terms grew out of various fields each with its own language. I list these terms not to confuse the issue, but to point out that each of these terms overlap in many ways. They overlap in their overall purpose, that is, to tell someone's story. They overlap in method, given that they all use interviews and written documents. They overlap in rationale in that they seek to uncover stories from the past so that we preserve more than a simplistic bureaucratic account of a person's life (i.e., social security number, driver's license, business cards, deeds of sale, bank account records, will). True, this can give some information regarding a person's life, yet in the oral history genre we seek to understand the story of a person's life in all its depth, complexity, misery, joy, and purpose.

A sense of history empowers us. By reading or viewing oral histories, we seek that which is common in our own experience. For example, Stephen Spielberg's Holocaust project documents many individual survivors' lived experiences during that time in history. Yet, when we view the tapes today we take in more than just the stories because Spielberg provides the viewer with a context for placing the violence of that time within our present day. It is empowering to see how someone's story of lived experience of violence from the last century may help us make more sense of our current wars and violent spaces.

More notably, a sense of history may serve to illuminate the present situation and force us to make sense of who we are. One example of contemporary oral history on film is the Michael Moore film, *The Big One*, a documentary of executives in charge of Fortune 500 companies such as Nike. Moore interviewed them by asking one simple question, "If you are making record profits, how is it that you are closing factories in the United States and making new factories overseas?" Each executive interviewed on film is interviewed after the detailed story of their company's shut down in the United States and its reemergence in Indonesia, as was the case with Nike. Moore as the oral historian forces us, by and through the visual image, to ponder many social propositions. Should we participate in purchasing Nike shoes? Is profit the only motive for employment of

workers? Should conditions in the Indonesian factories with fourteen-year-old workers on fifteen hour shifts go unnoticed? You get the point. Oral history can make us more aware, more critical, and more informed. In this case, the social justice implications are self-evident.

Perspectives

I bring various philosophies to the table. First, my view of history is that history is both a process and a point-of-view. What we study is dynamic and in terms of the postmodernist outlook, is affected by outlook, experience, and reinterpretation of a given experience. I hope to provide a critical postmodern perspective to the study of oral history. I do this to differentiate my view from those postmodern writers who adhere to the notion that the world is purely chaotic. Likewise, a feminist oral history is both critical and postmodern. Any feminist oral history brings a sense of connection with women of the past and the lived experience of those women. The social justice frame continues to be imbedded in feminist oral history. In addition, I want to bring oral history to life in terms of documenting the lived experience of any participant.

I see history as a method in and of itself, and that interpretation is both a goal and a benefit of studying oral history methods. Oral history is dialogical in the sense that researcher and participant very often become co-researchers. The story evolves from the questions posed and the context to which it adheres. Oral history is about the excitement and engagement of some lived experience.

Oral History as Social Justice

If we take a view of oral history as a social justice project, think of all the potential and possibility. Stories from individuals who may have been overlooked in traditional projects may now have the opportunity to have a voice. Not only that, we may all learn from those outside the mainstream, and we may learn more about the human condition overall. By learning about the lives, ways of knowing, culture, speech, and behavior of those on the periphery of society, we stand to learn more about our society as a whole. In fact we may become more aware of social justice issues as we come to understand the perspectives of another. In terms of actually doing oral history, majority members of society may help equalize the record by conducting oral histories of those members traditionally left out of the written record. Another side of social justice and oral history is that of the potential for recording the stories of protected populations such as disabled persons, prisoners, individuals with mental problems, and children. Overall, each person has a story to tell. It is the work of the oral historian to craft the narrative from the recorded memory of those in a given oral history project. Most recently, testimony given by truth commissions continues to be a good example of oral history for social justice. If we view the case of South Africa, and its truth commissions, we have much to learn about this matter.

On the Critical Importance of Testimony as Oral History

One of the useful prototypes of oral history is testimony. Globally, testimony has been used to document the stories of victims and those perpetrators who committed crimes against them. Testimony of individuals created a written record of misdeeds, which then facilitated some part of social justice.

To use a prime example, let us consider the case of South Africa and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC was a vehicle for capturing witness's stories of events occurring in South Africa under the system of apartheid. In the case of South Africa, ordinary citizens came forward, faced their accusers with their long testimony, and forgave them. Torturers and killers also came forward, admitted their transgressions, and stated that they were sorry. All this was done in a specific time period with the understanding that once the testimony was given, the case was closed and never to be reopened. This was done so as to move forward as a democracy, a citizenry, a community. What Desmond Tutu wanted to emphasize as a key participant and architect of this process was that true reconciliation can never happen if we deny the past. Thus, the oral histories of accusers and accused became a model of social justice-in-action.

Obviously, there were many truth commissions throughout history beginning with Nuremburg. I am focusing on the case of South Africa because it is still so close in time to our own experience. It is fresh in the annals of history and numerous texts such as Desmond Tutu's (1999) are a result of the TRC. Testimony in the case of South Africa allows all of us to more fully understand the political, cultural, emotional, and psychological aspects of apartheid as never before. Since Africa retains storytelling as part of its culture, the brave individuals who took part in the TRC testimony gave straightforward descriptions, often emotional, of what had occurred. This was the first step toward forgiveness and reconciliation.

In fact, Desmond Tutu (1999) has argued that one cannot arrive at forgiveness without truth as a starting point. Tutu and other writers often catalogue four types of truth: First, he lists factual and forensic truth that is the actual evidence of what occurred. If someone was cruelly tortured and killed the forensic truth is too powerful to ignore. Secondly, personal or narrative truth is the person's story and narrative of how something occurred as well as what occurred. In other words, one had to have the human story of the lived experience on record. Third, Tutu describes the social or cultural truth, which is basically the social context and history of what occurred. This may involve both forensic truth and personal truth as well. Fourth, and finally, he mentions healing or restorative truth, which is explained as what is needed to heal the wounds of the three previously listed types of truth.

The power of testimony is simply that. People are allowed to tell their stories. This includes the accusers and accused, as in the case of South Africa, and within a specific time frame so as to have the society move on. Usually, the abused people in question have either had their voice diminished or erased prior to the testimony. In fact, some testimony providers had no voice whatsoever in the political or social arena (i.e., the ordinary people of South Africa). Thus, testimony as oral history opens up society to the possibility of new ways of knowing history. This may have been a history completely unavailable to the public, had there been no testimony at all. In the case of South Africa, during the testimony of the TRC, all testimony was public, a unique characteristic. In

previous truth commissions, in Africa or elsewhere, this was not the case. Likewise, the South African TRC granted amnesty to perpetrators under specified conditions and regularly granted compensation to victims in specific cases. What the South African TRC offers us is a living example of how oral history may be used as a social justice project through testimony.

Summary and Conclusions

Oral history is a viable, reliable, and valuable technique for the qualitative researcher. Furthermore, by using oral history to advance social justice goals, the oral historian/qualitative researcher maintains an active voice in the project and may contribute to social projects in ways which attempt to equalize and balance the historical record. As a social justice record is kept of stories from participants, most often marginalized in society, the stories become part of the historical record and, thus, the continuity of a society. In this paper the example of testimony as oral history from the case of the TRC in South Africa is a solid example of how oppression was turned into healing and, thus, a social justice record. Likewise, feminist oral history offers a means to document and interpret women's stories to advance a social justice agenda. Doubtless there are many more examples for others to find, use, and write about.

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Appendix A

Web Resources on Oral History

Oral History Association: www.oralhistory.com
<http://omega.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha/>
<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/>
http://www.dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html
 American Historical Association: www.historians.org

Oral History Review www.oralhistoryreview.com

Digital Story Telling Sites with how to do history guides:

- www.digitales.us
- www.storycenter.org
- www.cultureasaweapon.org
- www.historicalvoices.org
- www.dohistory.org

Appendix B

Other Useful Resources

- Cole, A., & Knowles, J. G. (2001). *Lives in context: The art of life history research*. New York: Alta Mira Press.
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