INTRODUCTION

Oral history, with its combination of methods drawn from history and sociology, places emphasis on the significance of temporal context and memory by interviewing people about their past experience. In the UK, oral history as a practice has developed rapidly since its emergence in the 1960s and is now taken up widely by academic researchers as well as people outside academe investigating their own families and communities. Proponents of an oral history approach argue that by talking directly to people about their memories, past aspects of their lives will be revealed which otherwise might be overlooked through lack of documentation or public record. They also have a commitment to a form of history-making which seeks to give expression to ordinary and marginalised voices in studies of ageing; childhood; ethnicity; class; gender; colonialism; displacement; resistance and identity.

While valuing the ensuing data for what it tells us about the past, oral historians also regard the interview as an object in itself; it has a shape and totality determined not just by someone's life events but how that life is narrated and by the social relationship of the interview. Who owns the interview is an ethical issue which is much debated amongst oral historians. While seeking to maintain the rights of interviewees to their spoken words they remain committed to finding ways to interpret and analyse recordings without creating distance between the original contributor and any resulting output, be this a book, aural, visual, or online publication. Add to this the question of archiving for re-use by future researchers and the interpretive, epistemological and ethical questions raised by an oral history approach directly engage with key methodological issues in the social sciences.

KEY POINTS

- Oral history values the contribution which individual experience makes to understanding the past and society today.

- By recording an interview the many nuances, accents and emotions of speech are preserved. Transcription aids analysis but cannot fully represent these qualities.

- The oral history interview is a dialogue, a social relationship between two, or more people.

- A life history or biographical approach enables reflection and analysis which draws out the significance of time in individual lives and wider society – it is an approach that is central to qualitative longitudinal enquiry.

- The contested nature of memory is sometimes presented as weakness in oral history. However, oral historians have developed robust responses to this argument.

- The rights of the interviewee are of central concern and a regard for ethical principles in ownership, consent and shared authority are seen as paramount.

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Guide No. 12

Oral History and Qualitative Research
Joanna Bornat

BACKGROUND

Oral history takes its place amongst other terms proliferating in the social sciences such as biography, narrative analysis, life story work and life review. All draw on individual accounts of past experience as sources for understanding change and continuities in society across time and within generations and epochs (Thompson, 2000). Oral history's distinctive features are its interdisciplinary roots in sociology and history, and its valuing of orality.

These characteristics permeate the four 'forms' which Abrams (2010) argues oral history takes: the interview; the recording of that interview; the interview's transcription and the interpretation of the interview data. Moves to include subjectivities, to recognise the impact of difference and attempts to involve interviewees in the process of research have all influenced those four forms in various ways.

> In the early days of oral history, the interview was seen as a means of eliciting information about those disempowered or without a voice in historical accounts (Thompson, 2000). Less attention was given to subjective and cultural meanings presented, though this was to change under the influence of Italian oral historians Passerini and Portelli (in Perks and Thomson, 2006).

The influence of feminism has also been significant in the development of oral history. Initially seeking to rescue women from neglect and exclusion in accounts of the past, feminists moved on to question assumptions about the presumed democracy of oral history practice by pointing to the significance of interviewee's own definitions and agency in the interview (Bornat and Diamond, 2007). Taking this further, Gluck and Patai (1991) argued for perspectives which acknowledge differences of class, race and power in the interview, thus countering essentialist tendencies which assume a solidarity between both sides of the microphone. Even so, the idea that oral history might achieve a 'shared authority' has persisted, prefiguring the move in social sciences towards participative research with an ideal that interviewees have ownership in the interview, control over the transcript and a contribution to make to ensuing analysis (Thomson, 2011).

Linked to this has been a growing interest in the social production of memory and the ways in which individual memory is able to co-exist with public and popular memorialising of the past. Thomson's (1994) use of the term 'composure,' as he encountered older men's managing painful memories of combat in the context of changing public meanings of war, also points to oral history's engagement with reminiscence in late life and the significance of recall of the past in the lives of older interviewees.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND PRACTICE

For oral historians the spoken immediacy of the interview, its social relations and its inevitably interrogative nature are its defining characteristics. Yet oral history remains a wide ranging method. Approaches to designing an oral history project may vary, including the small case study (Thomson, 1994); the themed selection (Summerfield, 1998); and the larger sample based project (Thompson, 2000). The re-use of archived oral history interviews presents an additional approach to design, sometimes combining all these approaches (Bornat *et al*, in press).

As an oral historian drawing on late life memories, Thompson (2000), was working with survivors and used a quota sample to fill pre-determined categories with interview subjects, matching occupational groups identified in the 1911 UK census. Such an approach is favoured where the focus is general social trends over time, for example, explorations of family relationships, gender, migration, employment, political generations etc. In contrast, studies which seek to explore particular events, or which draw on the experiences of a highly selected group or only one individual's story tend to take a rather different approach to finding and interviewing subjects. In such cases, snowballing, appealing through the media, the use of membership lists, representative bodies, or networks amongst older people's organisations to advertise for witness accounts are the most usual approaches to finding interviewees.

> For The Oldest Generation (TOG) project a sample of 12 older people, 'seniors' aged 75 and over, each with a 'recorder', was recruited by using the Open University's online networks. An invitation mentioning interviews and diary keeping was sent out to which 27 people responded. People were then selected according to criteria which were intended to cover the main characteristics of people in this particular age group: age, gender, geographical location, ethnicity, married status and living arrangements. The Open University online networks proved to be unsuccessful in reaching black or minority ethnic participants; however a face to face invitation was successful. The sample comprised seven women and five men, ranging in age from 99 to 75 at first interview.

The TOG sample could not claim to be fully representative of older people in UK society, though the criteria used resulted in 12 different life history accounts from which we were able to identify some unique and also generationally similar aspects of people's lives. For example, only one of the sample had experienced world war two as an adult with the result that we gained a young person's perspective of that event. We were not able to include people who had grown old with a disability, who were single and without children, whose first language was not English or who were living in isolation. It is possible that secondary analysis

of other data sets in Timescapes and beyond could make good this deficit. However, we generated a theoretically robust sample to address our research questions about the dynamics of family practices and the sustaining of family resources in the lives of the oldest generation.

Oral history interviews were carried out in two waves, eighteen months apart. Appointments were made with the twelve seniors who were scattered throughout the UK, between the Scottish Islands and South Wales and interviews were arranged at participants' homes. For the first interview, the schedule followed a life history format, beginning with questions about each person's current situation and ending with five common questions (see the methods guide no.19) which were asked of participants in all seven Timescapes projects. Questions covered major life events but were open-ended enough to allow for reflection and elaboration. By the time of the second round interviews two participants had died. Rather than seek to replace them it was decided that because death is a likely hazard for this particular sample, members of the bereaved family would be interviewed about their absent parent and the impact of that death on their family.

For those two interviews a separate interview schedule was developed around the idea of 'continuing bonds' but for the remaining ten interviews the schedule followed the design of the first, but with more emphasis on lapsed time between the two interviews while also inviting participants to talk about their plans for the future. Eleven interviews took place in people's own homes, with one in a guest house where

the participant was staying while her husband was having prolonged hospital treatment. The first round interviews were mostly over two hours long, with the second interviews being mainly over an hour long, with two as long as the first. All the interviews were checked, transcribed, anonymised and lodged in the Timescapes archive.

Data analysis and interpretation followed a thematic approach. Some themes, for example ceremonials, generation and succession, were decided in advance, while others emerged from the data as different conceptual frameworks were introduced (Thompson, 2000; Abrams, 2010). Cross-referencing to the diary data brought out fresh conceptualisation as the temporal frame of daily life was brought into the analysis with references to moods, feelings and responses to changes in the weather. This led to a focus on themes such as embodiment, care histories and risk, ideas which we had not anticipated at the outset and which we developed within the context of the social work literature (Bornat and Bytheway, 2010).

As is required practice, following each interview participants were given a consent form which all signed. This explained how confidentiality would be kept by the researchers and also meant that participants were consenting to their interview recording and transcript being deposited in the Timescapes archive for future educational and research use. This is in accordance with current copyright and data protection legislation.

From comments made during and after the interviews it
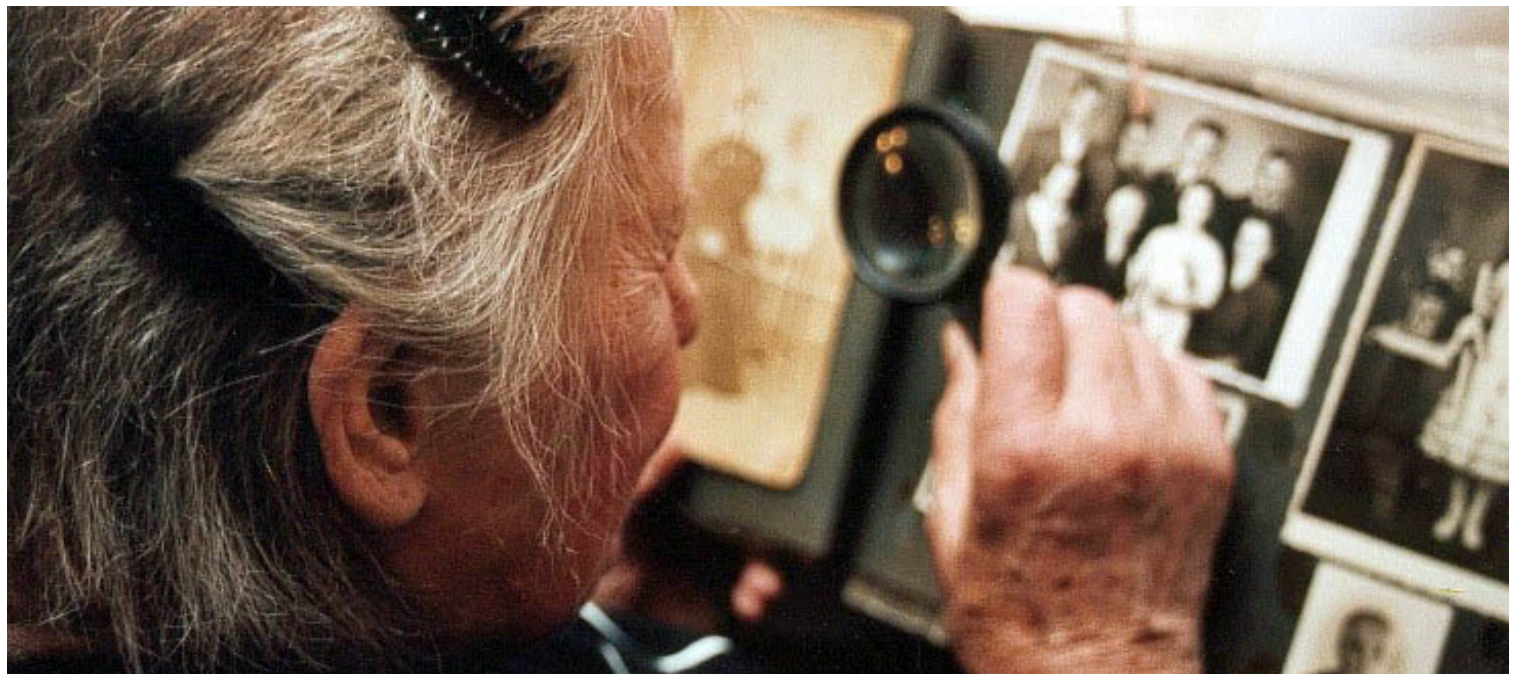
appeared that participants very much enjoyed the experience and opportunity to talk about their lives. For several, the interview transcripts which they were all given was going to serve a purpose as a family history document. Confidentiality did not appear to be a major concern. Perhaps this was because the approach to interviewing was not particularly probing. The aim was to solicit an account of a life without necessarily seeking to investigate or pursue difficult moments. Given that the participants knew that other family members were taking part, as recorders, it is possible that they sought to present a positive account of a life lived, with bereavement and loss not being dwelt upon. At the second interview, a potentially more difficult topic was introduced: the future.

This is a topic which tends to be avoided in interviews with older people. However, participants engaged reflectively, discussing their own and younger members of their families' possible future lives An advantage of Qualitative Longitudinal (QL) research is that follow-up strategies can be developed in this way from a first round of interviews, and analysis can be enriched by combining data that looks both backwards and forwards in time.

The account of the TOG project presented above raises an important issue for oral history – the contested nature of memory and the extent to which this represents a weakness in the method. Oral historians have developed robust responses to this challenge. They point out that other historical sources, e.g. letters, diaries and statistics are not always accurate, and that links can be made with other sources, for example large data sets which demonstrate likely trends, or with documentary sources such as maps, or census records. Sampling techniques aim for representiveness in what will inevitably be a population of survivors, while the subjective nature of memory has value

in demonstrating evidence of emotions, feelings and internalised attitudes.

Even where memories are mistaken or inaccurate they have value, for they may be indicative of desires, hoped for outcomes and shared misunderstandings. In this regard, what people don't say, their silences on some topics, may be as significant as what they do say. Finally, remembering can be a therapeutic activity which many people find helpful and supportive in late life.

CONCLUSION

Oral history interviewing brings the possibility of multiple temporalities to data collection and analysis. These include the time contexts for interviewer and interviewee, remembered time, generational time, historical time, timings of life events and lapse of time between interviews if a QL approach is being used. Add to this, as in TOG, diary time and a fore-shortening of time also becomes possible as the lens focuses on everyday life (see methods guide no. 7 for more information on this theme).

The positive response to being interviewed reported by TOG participants is not an uncommon observation amongst oral historians. Indeed the proliferation of remembering through blogs, online discussions, intergenerational projects and broadcast media means that the idea of recall in an interview now scarcely needs explaining. As a researcher, one's own biography inevitably gets drawn on during the process of analysing and interpreting life history interviews. Researchers should be encouraged to incorporate such reflection into a research diary. This would enrich understanding by any subsequent user of the data, who would then inevitably draw the original researcher into the story of any later research.

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