

Research methods: oral history

Prof. Jasmine Gideon
School of Social Sciences

What is oral history?

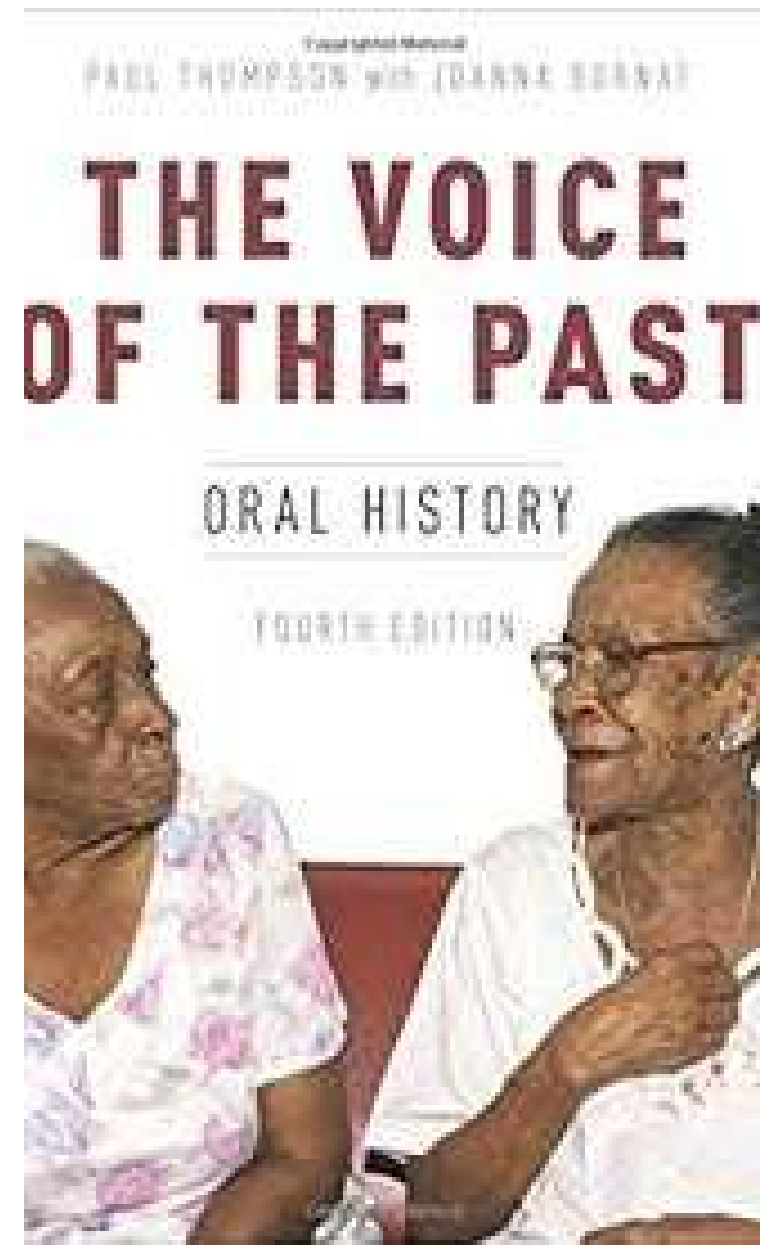
- Oral history often linked to grassroots and progressive politics
- ‘Giving voice’ to those marginalised, oppressed or forgotten by traditional histories
- Shared authority (Frisch) – shifting power relations



Paul Thompson

'The voice of the past'

- Oral history is a history built around people. It thrusts life into history itself and it widens its scope. It allows heroes not just from leaders, but from the unknown majority of the people. It encourages teachers and students to become fellow-workers. It brings history into, and out of, the community. It helps the less privileged, and especially the old, towards dignity and self-confidence. It makes for contact - and thence understanding - between social classes and between generations. And to individual historians and others, with shared meanings, it can give a sense of belonging to a place or in time. In short, it makes for fuller human beings. Equally, oral history offers a challenge to the accepted myths of history, to the authoritarian judgement inherent in its tradition. It provides a means for a radical transformation of the social meaning of history'.*



Tensions in oral histories?

- 'epistemological dichotomy' (Blee) that places the oral historian in solidarity and empathy vis-a-vis certain narrators and in a position of distance and objectivity in relation to others.
- 'ideological heroes' or 'politically abhorrent informants'? Can you build rapport?
- At times a hostile environment can aid the interview



Feminist oral histories?



- Feminist oral history should redefine itself to include awareness of distinct power differences in most interview contexts, and to analyze in general the constructed nature of an interview (Gluck and Patai, 1991)
- An interview method that “[promotes] a more reflexive and reciprocal approach and [seeks] to neutralize the hierarchical, exploitative power relations that were claimed to be inherent in the more traditional interview structure”?
- Is feminist oral history more than simply ethical practice?
- In practice difficult to isolate feminist oral history from general qualitative interviewing techniques, sometimes more psychosocial, sometimes more empirical in emphasis?
- feminist oral history may not be itself a method so much as a political perspective?

Paradigm shifts in oral history

- Post WW2 – use of memory as source for historical research (invention of portable tape recorder)
- Early 1970s – critiques that memory was distorted by physical deterioration and nostalgia in old age/ personal bias/reliability of memory
- Late 70s – unreliability of memory also its strength – subjectivity of memory offers insights into relationship between past and present/ memory and identity/ individual and collective memory
- Links with European historians – Luisa Passerini & Alessandro Portelli
- Oral history vs memory studies (individual vs collective memories? Different academic 'tribes'?)
- Influence of different disciplinary approaches
- Growing international focus
- Use of oral histories in aftermath of crises



Decolonizing oral histories?

- What are the centers and edges of (feminist) oral history?
- What has kept some stories and storytellers in these locations?
- Importance of engaging in oral history practices that challenge ongoing and historic forms of colonialism
- Do stories told challenge or perpetuate structures of privilege and power?
- Importance of challenging methodologies, languages, and histories of global imperial powers



Some Practicalities

- Informed consent – requires more than brief explanation of what the project is about
- Ask participants to sign consent form at the end rather than the start of interviews
- Informed consent may be required many years after interview was conducted (e.g. To use field notes etc)
- Allowing participants opportunity to view transcript/ use of transcript?
- <http://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/ethical-and-legal/>
- Recording equipment / use of video?



'Deep listening'

- Need to listen not just to what is said but also to what is meant
- Set aside preconceived structures and interpretations – what lies beneath what is being said?
- (gender norms around communication/ roles/ responsibilities)
- Importance of the political and institutional contexts of both the narrator and the interpreter
- Listen critically to our interviews/ our responses and our own questions



Deep Listening

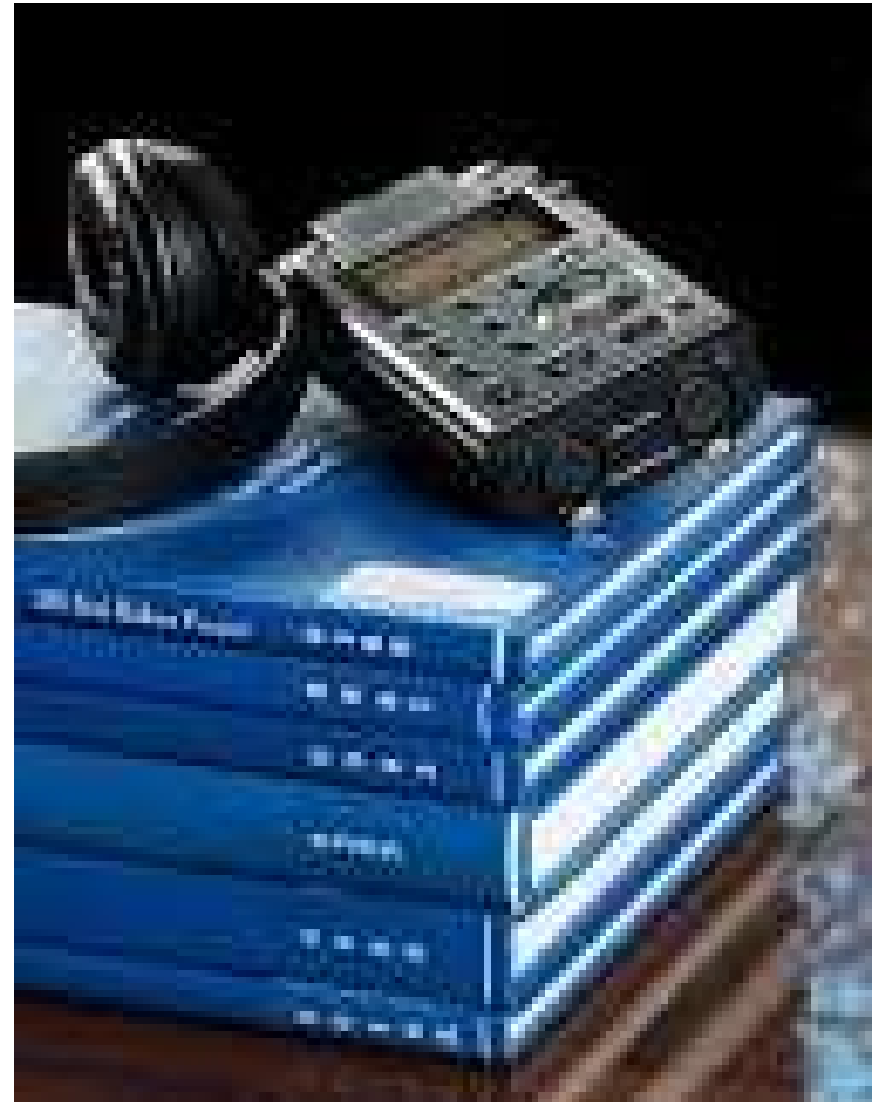
- Excerpt from interview with 'Verna' by Kathryn Anderson

(V) There were times that I just wished I could get away from it all. And there were times when I would have liked to have taken the kids and left them someplace for a week – the whole bunch at one time – so that I wouldn't have to worry about them. I don't know whether anybody else had that feeling or not but there were times when I just felt like I needed to get away from everybody, even my husband for a little while. Those were times when I would maybe take a walk back in the woods and look at the flowers and maybe go down there and find an old cow that was real gentle and walk up to her and pat her a while – kind of get away from it. I just had to, it seems like sometimes.

(K) Were you active in clubs? (Anderson and Jack, 1991)

Silences & Reticence

- 'We are comfortable with silences in interviews only as long as we control them' (Freund, 2013)
- Silence as political/ personal resistance? Agency/ control?
- Public history: Narrators may feel constrained if their stories contradict official histories of events
- Norms of social discourse
 - Narrators choice of stories told may also reflect social identification: E.g men telling stories which 'fit' with hegemonic masculinities
- Social rules of etiquette also shape stories
 - E.g. Reluctance to talk about 'initiation ceremonies' among power station workers (Layman, 2009).



Silence and reticence

‘...silence and forgetting are often confused if memory is analysed as narration be it oral or written. Something may be unsaid because its memory has been actually repressed - by trauma -...or because the conditions for its expression no longer (or do not yet exist). Sometimes the change in these conditions may break the silence...at other times silence can last for so long ...that it may ...induce oblivion. At the same time...silence may nourish a story and establish a communication to be patiently saved...until it is able to come to light in a new and enriched form’.

Passerini, L (2003) ‘Memories between silence and forgetting’, in K. Hodgkin & S Radstone (eds) *Contested Pasts: the politics of memory*, London: Routledge, p. 238

Silence as agency?

- With my skills I used to do the shoes for the others to fight. Do their rucksacks, give them the elements from embers of the party (pause). The thing is, I got about five versions of my life, I got one version which is open to everyone, then I got a very close version which is mine, I've got certain things, that I don't see that they are, shall I say, still I would say they are compartmental or secret (interview with Chilean exile conducted by Hirsch, 2012: 49)

Responding to silence?


- Those who are silent because they have been silenced?
- Silence as a means of resistance
- Interviewer can counteract silence with silence – but must take care not to impede rapport
- How far does silence reflect our skills as interviewers?
- Silence as constructive not destructive?
- How far do you probe?
- Speaking 'on' and 'off' record
- Role of research diaries

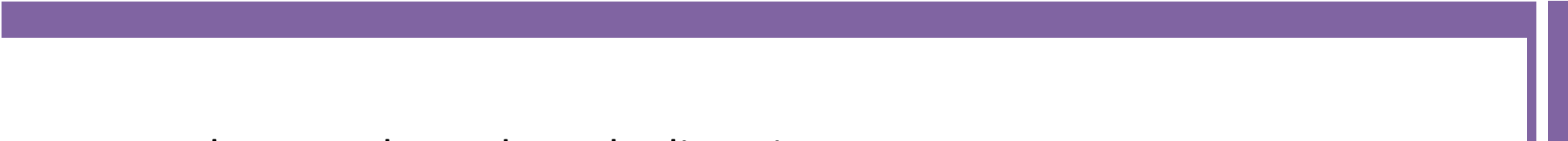


Sensitive topics

- How do we respond to traumatic stories?
- How do people experience being interviewed?
- How does interviewing impact upon researchers (including supervisors, transcribers etc)
- Researchers need to be comfortable so that survivors can openly talk
- Not possible to predict which topics might cause distress
- Clear boundaries about what, as a researcher, you can do to help



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- The testimony of survivors often requires a detachment that keeps them at a distance from self-pity, whereas for us the pathos of their stories, and sometimes the mere telling of such stories, is nearly overwhelming (Des Pres, 1986)
 - Defence mechanisms of interviewee? Ability to cope with talking about trauma
 - Other times interviewees can be more vulnerable
 - Interviewer has not experienced the trauma and will not have developed defence mechanism – interviewer can feel acute distress

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- There are hazards to the listening to trauma.... As one comes to know the survivor, one really comes to know oneself; and this is not a simple task. The survival experience.. . is a very condensed version of most of what life is all about.. . . The listener can no longer ignore the question of facing death; of facing time and its passage; of the meaning and purpose of living; of the limits of one's omnipotence; of losing the ones that are close to us; the great question of our ultimate aloneness; our otherness from any other; our responsibility to and for our destiny; the question of loving and its limits; of parents and children; and so on (Laub, 1992).

Useful resources

Oral History Society:

[Home - Oral History Society \(ohs.org.uk\)](http://ohs.org.uk)

(6th July Oral History festival in London)

International Oral History Association:

[Home - International Oral History Association \(ioha.org\)](http://ioha.org)

University of Essex Oral History Collection

[Oral History Collections - History - Library & Cultural Services at University of Essex](#)