PLANNING AN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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OVERVIEW

- Aims and objectives of your project/research
- Timescales and budget
- Who you would like to interview, and why? – content and format of interviews
- Finding and recruiting interviewees
- Interview guides and questions
AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- Why do you want to use oral history?
  - Importance of having clear focus or research question that oral sources can help illuminate
  - Importance of having a clear understanding of how oral histories will be used in dissemination
    - Will you need video recordings or will audio recordings suffice?
    - Will the materials need to be archived somewhere for future reference?

- What proportion of the project will be oral history?
  - Some oral historians use oral sources exclusively
  - Other oral historians prefer to use oral sources alongside written documents, photographs and other materials

- Do I need to do original interviews or can I use an existing archive / oral history collection?
  - Implications for planning of project in terms of budget, time management, etc.
“More generally, I’d say doing interviews is the “sexy” part of oral history. I just wish people would slow down a bit and consider the urge to collect. Particularly they need to ask: Why is it important to interview on this particular topic? What are the unanswered questions and how can interviews address them? How can we incorporate quality control in the oral history process? How can we facilitate access and use once the interviews are done? I know that sometimes the urgency of the moment may make consideration of these issues a luxury, but I believe it’s necessary to do so.”

TIMELINES AND BUDGETS

- How much time do you have to complete the project/research?
- How much can you achieve within the budget available?

**Factors to be considered:**

- Other commitments – classes, research/teaching, work/life balance
- Number and style of interviews, length, repeat visits
- Open-ended project? (archive/community)
- Location of interviewees (travelling time/budget)
- Transcribing/summarising – returning to interviewees to check. Administration!
- Archiving standards
POINT OF CAUTION: TIMELINES

- Oral history is time-consuming
  - Background research
  - Apply for ethics approval
  - Acquire permissions from gatekeepers
  - Recruit and train research assistants
  - Recruit interviewees and establish informed consent
  - Conduct interviews
  - Transcription (budget 6-8 hours of transcript per 1 hour of interview)
  - Time-coded summaries
  - Editing (to ensure confidentiality, etc.)
  - Analysis
  - Dissemination
POINT OF CAUTION: BUDGETS

- Oral history projects can be expensive
- Basic equipment
  - Digital recorders, video cameras, microphones, extra batteries / battery chargers, padded / waterproof carrying bag...
- Travel costs
  - Airfare, bus fare, petrol, accommodation
- “Gifts” for gatekeepers
  - Include bribes as well as genuine gestures of gratitude
- Dissemination
  - Conference attendance including membership fees, conference registration fees, travel, etc.
  - Publication fees associated with open-access journals, etc.
  - Website fees
- Storage and archiving
  - External storage devices, hosting companies, etc.
GATEKEEPERS

- Ethics approval
  - University ethics approval
  - Institutional ethics approval
- Research permits / researcher visas
  - Government authorization to conduct research
  - Travel visas
- Letters of support / informal permission
  - Community-based organizations
RECRUITING INTERVIEWEES

- Ask friends, relatives, neighbours, work colleagues for ideas/recommendations
- Distribute leaflets round local history groups, museums or library services
- Public lecture/meeting
- Reach out to community-based organisations, trade unions, public interest groups, churches
- Advertise in national and local media
  - Be sure to use a secure email address or phone number!
- Remember the ‘snowball’ effect
BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

- Key job: to create an atmosphere of trust and mutual understanding
- Introduction from trusted sources
  - Phone calls, letters, preliminary visits prior to first interview
- Build confidence
  - Provide opportunities for interviewees to ask you questions about your qualifications, interests, and project
  - Stress importance of memories for project
- Informed consent
  - Ensure interviewee understands their rights within the project
  - Revisit subject as and when necessary
INTERVIEW FORMATS

1. Life history interviews
   ▶ Smaller number of interviewees
   ▶ One or more interviews aimed at documenting interviewees’ lives in detail
   ▶ Interviewee takes the lead in determining content

2. Thematic interviews
   ▶ Larger number of interviewees
   ▶ One interview may be sufficient to exhaust interviewees’ knowledge related to the research question
   ▶ Topical approach that involves the interviewer asking questions specific to their research interests

3. Ethnographic interviews
   ▶ Smaller number of interviewees
   ▶ May take place over days, weeks, or months
   ▶ Informed by participant observation of the interviewees’ everyday life and surrounding community
COMPILING QUESTIONNAIRES AND INTERVIEWS

- Adaptability: Reflect on questionnaire and interviewing.
- Structure: Free flow; Semi-structured; or Structured?
- Begin with context / personal background questions.
- Open-ended questions encourage greater reflection and more detailed responses
  - E.g. who; what; why; when; where; how; ‘tell me more about...’ etc
- Keep questions short, clear and jargon-free
AVOID MULTI-CLAUSE QUESTIONS…
Avoid questions giving your own viewpoint, or leading/loaded questions that ask interviewees to confirm or reject your opinions or assumptions.

- E.g. How bad were working conditions in the factory? Women never worked in those days, did they?

Tailor questions to the interviewee if you know they have knowledge of a more specific area in your study.

Make sure questions deal with the subject area as comprehensively as possible.

Reflect regularly on the effectiveness of your guide/questionnaire for eliciting the kind and quality of information you require and adapt as necessary!