

# Oral History

An Introduction



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# What is oral history?

- Research methodology (way of conducting research)
- Established as research method in America in the 1950s, popular in South Africa in the 1970s in South Africa
- Records spoken memories and stories of people in an interview situation.
- Used in universities, schools, museums and many NGOs
- Resurgence in the 'Internet Age', with dissemination of audio and video online
- Pertinent to South Africa as our knowledge is often oral



# Quote from *New Scientist*

“Local knowledge and ways of doing things in Africa have historically been transmitted orally from one generation to the next. In South Africa, various factors such as urban migration and the AIDS pandemic in younger generations have contributed to a disruption of these chains of cultural transmission. Digital technologies, in particular, mobile phones, offer some ways in which this information can be recorded and circulated. These technologies can facilitate the preservation and dissemination of local knowledge through audio recordings, photographs and articles. The technology allows for multiple contributions from a variety of perspectives - male, female, young and old.”

*An app for Folklore*



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# Purpose for using oral history

- Be clear on your purpose!
- Why are you starting an oral history project? What are your aims? What are you hoping to achieve that couldn't be done through research online or at the library? Who is your audience and what do they want from your work?
- Is it related to personal or political history, specific cultural practice or to learn more about the environment?
- Is it educational? Oral history can aid in the transfer of skills to learners, students, activists and members of the community.



# Planning your project

- Identify topics you are interested in and see how they fit into research aims
- Identify possible interviewees. Select more than one as some may be unavailable or not interested in participating.
- Identify logistical obstacles. Where are the interviewees located? Will you be able to access them during working hours? Are they on or near transport routes?
- How does your topic fit into larger history of the area? Read and research the broader issues around your topic.
- What has already been done?



# Equipment

- It is essential to have some sort of recording device
- Simplest and cheapest: notepad and pencil. Always have a notepad as backup!
- Digital audio recorder can record interviews as MP3 files. Good for dissemination online
- Digital camera used to photograph interviewee as well as location and object they may reference
- Cellphone can be used as audio recorder and camera. A cell-pic is better than no pic!
- Know how to use your equipment. You don't want to waste the interviewees time working out how devices work.
- Have back-ups of batteries



# Selecting your interviewee

- Single life story, group interview or a number of different interviews on the same topic?
- Individual interviews provide an in-depth perspective of someone who may have a unique experience of an event or person; group interviews are animated, with people responding to others remarks, reminding them of what happened; numerous interviews on the same topic provide different perspectives

Some questions to consider:

- How long did they reside in the community?
- 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?
- Will you select according to age and generation?
- Are you interested in political affiliation?
- Are you interested in religious affiliation?



# Setting up the interview

- Be cognizance of the fact that the interviewee has the information and is doing you a favour by sharing
- Arrange a time and place that is convenient; to the interviewee, not you!
- Stress the fact that this research will benefit the community and forms a larger part of the community's/areas heritage
- Make sure gatekeeper permission has been received; local authorities need to be informed of your project
- Language - what is the interviewee more comfortable using? When dealing with memory and stories, these are conveyed best in the interviewees first language. For the purposes of dissemination, English summaries can be provided.
- Ask permission to use the interviewee name and stress that they can choose not to answer any questions
- Make sure the interviewee is willing to sign the release form



# Doing interviews

- Before you start interviewing, set up an 'interview guide'. List of possible questions and the sequence they will take
- Remember to ask questions for clarification and follow-ons. This shows you are engaged with what they are saying and creates an easy atmosphere for story-telling
- Try to set up a rough chronological flow to the interview but being open to variations. It is good to get people to discuss things from beginning to end as that is how they will be remembering it
- Remember, there could be intense feelings attached to memories. Be empathetic
- Give interviewees the time to tell stories that are important to them
- Build trust. Interviewees should see that you really listening to them; be an empathetic listener!



# Basic interviewing techniques

- An oral history interview should be a directed monologue, not a conversation
- Ask clear, open-ended questions, which the interviewee can respond to
- Start with easy questions to get the interviewee talking. Establish a pattern of responses and recollections and get the interviewee comfortable with talking about themselves.
- Respond to what they are saying
- Don't overwhelm with multiple questions. Take your time and don't rush the interview
- When interviewee goes off on a tangent, gently draw them back to the topic



# Common mistakes

- Arriving late
- Interrupting the interviewee
- Talking too much
- Trying to solve the interviewee's problems
- Interrogating the interviewee
- Arguing with the interviewee



# What type of questions?

- Get facts, such as “Where were you born?”
- Get stories, such as “Tell me about the day you first came to the place you live now.”
- Get images and ‘flavours’, such as “What foods did you eat on a typical day?”
- Get values and ideas, such as “Was there a saying your mother often repeated to you?”
- Connect to a larger history, such as “What kind of transport did you use?”



# Some questions: family history

- What is your full name? Why did your parents select this name for you? Did you have a nickname?
- When and where were you born?
- How did your family come to live there?
- Were there other family members in the area? Who?
- What was the house (flat, farm, etc.) like? How many rooms? Bathrooms? Did it have electricity? Indoor plumbing? Telephones? What were the walls made of?
- Were there any special items in the house that you remember?
- What is your earliest childhood memory?
- Describe the personalities of your family members.
- What kind of games did you play growing up?
- What was your favourite toy and why?



# Transcribing

- It is important to record the place, date and interview participants!
- Try and convey the tone and emotions around certain topics, by recording pauses and physical responses
- Decide whether you need a verbatim transcription or summary of important points



# Post-interview engagement

- SMS or call to say thank-you. They have given up their time so it would be polite to thank them. This also makes it easier to come back to them with more questions or to get recommendations for other interview subjects
- Provide a CD or printed copy of the interview
- Ask for reflection on the interview in a follow-up session



# The Release Form

- Interviews: all interviewees must sign it and be made aware what they are signing. If content is made available online participants must be made aware of what this implies
- Materials: for images, multimedia and documents given to interviewer to supplement the interview
- Decide on a license agreement; Creative Commons License or copyright and explain to participants
- Ulwazi example: "By signing the form below, you give your permission for any tapes and/or photographs made during this project to be used by researchers and the public for educational purposes including publications, exhibitions, World Wide Web, and presentations. By giving your permission, you do not give up any copyright or performance rights that you may hold."



# Practical Session

- Break off into groups and interview each other
- What do you want to find out? Where they went to school and what they learnt? Their family history? Their experience of University life?
- What questions will extract the information you need?
- Develop your questions, interview your subject, transcribe the answers, present your findings



# Credits

- Extensive use was made Sean Fields 'Conducting Oral Histories'
- Examples taken from our work with the Ulwazi Programme



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