

Criminology 321 Oral History



Oral History: Characteristics

- Various definitions of oral history
 - “A very unique kind of interview situation because of the distinct process of storytelling on which it is based” (p.131)
 - “[O]ral history is a special method of interview where the researcher and research participants spend extended time together engaged in a process of storytelling and listening. In other words, it is a collaborative process of narrative building.” (p.133)

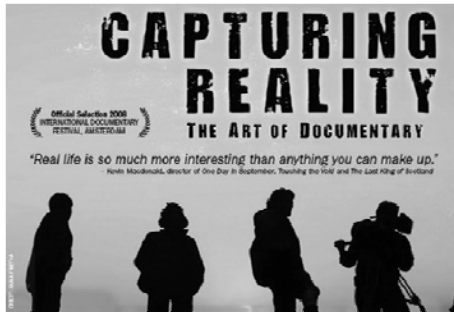
Oral History: Characteristics

- Can be seen as occupying one end of a continuum from *oral history* to *surveys*
 - Ideally suited to looking at *process*
 - Participant-centered; collaborative
 - Flexibly structured: often no more than a list of opening topics or very general structure
- An interactive method with an historical, process, phenomenological focus

Oral History: Varieties

- Often person-centered
- Can also be event or site-centered
- Case studies can be
 - Intrinsic (e.g., my oral history of Fattah)
 - Instrumental (e.g., Borland’s history of her grandmother)
 - Collective (e.g., the collection of Residential School stories featured in *Muffins for Granny*)

Why People Talk



Oral History: Advantages

- Addresses problems of *selective deposit*:
 - “History” is not completely accessible to us
 - All we can consider is what is “in the box,” which includes artifacts, documents, ...
 - Oral history is a way of getting more into the box
- Especially empowering for minorities and other marginalized people/groups

Oral History: Objectives

- Allows you to
 - determine patterns (for collective case studies)
 - pay tribute to those we admire
 - understand how people make sense of their experience – emphasis on meaning
 - make connections between biography, history and social structure – put experience in context
 - create archives for future use, research
 - better understand the impacts of social change

Oral History: Objectives

- Particularly valued by minorities, the oppressed, to whom it gives voice
- E.g., for women’s movement, oral history
 - has helped to draw women out of obscurity
 - repairs the historical record, fills gaps
 - provides opportunities for women to identify with admired predecessors

Oral History: Advantages



from *Muffins for Granny*



from StoryCorps.net



Oral History: Dilemmas

- The power of oral histories like those in *Muffins for Granny* is that they take something abstract and huge and show its concrete meaning for real, individual people
- The flip side of that advantage, however, is another concern – it sometimes individualizes experiences that need to be understood more structurally, systemically

Oral History: How To



Oral History: How To

- Pick someone you have rapport with; these get very personal
- Pick a topic you are truly curious about
- Discuss ahead of time, get a general game plan that you agree on
- Make sure you have time, privacy, no distractions; expect more than one session

Oral History: How To

- Preferably tape record, but always have Plan B; always ask permission
- Whether you record or not, take notes that allow you to connect issues with tape
- Make eye contact, **listen**
- Come in with preliminary structure – chronology; domains – but go with whatever works for your narrator

Oral History: How To

- Narrative structure depends on the topic and the narrator. Use their preference, not yours
 - Unified:
 - chronological, linear, examples, well thought out
 - Q: And then what happened?
 - Segmented:
 - “putting together the pieces,” hadn’t thought about this before
 - Q: What are some of your early recollections of..?

Oral History: How To

- Episodic:
 - Organized thematically,
 - Q: When did you start thinking about...? When was the next time those issues arose?

Oral History: How To

- Regarding questions, typically open-ended; encourage people talking at length
- Asking “how” better than asking “why”
- The more them and less you, the better
- Set a rhythm/balance at the outset
- Don’t be afraid of silence: let people collect thoughts; put onus on participant to talk

Oral History: How To

- What to listen for
 - “Moral language,” like “crocks”
 - Descriptions and explanations that are evaluative about self or others
 - Tells you about standards, values, issues
 - Q: So what were you thinking about X at that time?
 - Q: What were the tougher issues to deal with?
 - Q: What advice would you give your former self if you could?

Oral History: How To

- Digital technologies allow greater flexibility, less intrusiveness, and perhaps greater validity



Oral History: How To

- Triangulation
 - Supporting documents to stimulate discussion of personal experiences
 - Photographs, journals, diaries, letters, poetry, art, newspaper clippings
 - Documents about marginalized groups are difficult to find and those that do exist more likely to have been produced by authorities

Oral History: HOW TO BLOW IT

- No planning ahead of time
- Create a detailed interview schedule (Too much planning ahead of time)
- Ask focused questions that can be answered in a word or phrase
- Do the oral history in a public place like a coffee shop or sitting on a park bench

Oral History: Dilemmas

Some other dilemmas

- Oral histories may break the silence and ‘give voice’ but, in doing so, may also individualize social problems
- Power (im)balance: Researcher holds power because she knows how information will be used and has the last word

Oral History: Dilemmas

- As Borland shows, must also be reflexive regarding interpretation; whose data?
- Diversity of opinion regarding extent to which researcher is simply an instrument for the participant’s realization of story or an active interpreter/analyzer
 - “In my view, feminist oral historians need not silence themselves to let other women be heard.” (Reinharz, p137)

Oral History: Finding Meaning

Interpretive dilemma remains. What to do?

- Provide copies of transcripts for addition, clarification and feedback
- Discuss with interviewees the meaning of their stories prior to researcher's interpretation
- Arrange follow-up interview to discuss meaning of stories
- Exchange ideas and discuss misunderstandings while still at the draft stage
- However, can be difficult to be critical if sharing final product (be careful what you promise)

Next Week

- Mid-term
 - Will be done in class
 - Probably 20-ish questions sampled from across the material covered so far
 - Most people should take about an hour; should not be pressed for time