

**International Oral History Research As Vocation:
Inquiry and Confusion -
Teaching and Learning Oral History Methods**
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History research, study and analysis expects that the search, collection and ultimate analysis of evidence will proceed with due care and attention to both ethics and the nature of the evidence itself. This is no more or less important when dealing with a body of orally preserved evidence in the collective mind of a community.¹ History expects that research will examine closely every possible source of information – oral, document, artifact and so on. All sources are important and none should be immune to critical reflection and analysis. To question their validity, value and reliability is part of the researcher's task. All information must therefore be analysed, checked and assessed with great care, regardless of its nature or form.

In the process of source criticism questions undoubtedly emerge which challenge the skill of the researcher, the nature of the data collection process, and the type and validity of the evidence accumulated. Inquiry into the oral records will raise ethical concerns. Data will be disputed. Information will be challenged and the process of recording that data will be questioned. It becomes the responsibility of the researcher to prepare well and be ready to answer this challenge.

The very process of collecting evidence from the collective memory of any community is expensive, time-consuming and often extremely complex. That collective memory is shaped by the nature of experience and the form of society, community, and individual in which it is stored. For example, in

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1. A good starting point from which to probe the large existing resource collection of oral history research methodology is D.P. Henige, *Oral Historiography*, London: 1983, which provides one of the better, more comprehensive bibliographies. Also an even more up to date bibliographic reference is contained in R.A. Sargent and J.B. Webster, (eds), *The Collective Memory: Practical Oral History Research Methods*, Fourth Dimension Press, forthcoming.

a pre-literate society the collective memory about the past can be an important component of the social law, boundaries and norms by which the whole society operates. The information is thus important, perhaps even critical, to the most basic of societal operations, including marriage, political authority, resolution of disputes and so on. It is, moreover, unlikely to be a perfect record. However, neither is the document of a perfect record of the past. In literate societies it is fairly well accepted convention that the validity of a written account or an interview concerning a particular event is directly related to the elapsed time between the event and the interview or production of the written account. In pre-literate societies or communities where records are orally preserved the same concern arises, but such concern must be tempered with the understanding of the context in which the historical account operates. The researcher should thus seek to comprehend the pressures and/or social need to preserve evidence of the past in any community. This contextual framework must change the way in which we look at, use and analyse both the collection and eventually transcription of oral evidence itself.

We must remember that the oral records stored in the collective memory of any community were probably never intended to be written down. Also, the oral record of the past had much more direct relevance than the simple recall of an event. An individual's whole socio-political relationship to and status within the community might depend on a reasonably accurate, socially accepted recall of complex historical events from the distant past. Further, whole cultural systems, values, biological and kinship connections, land claims, political rights, and so on can be dependent on the recollection of the "historical" record. Thus, the imperative to preserve is more powerful – that is, *more* powerful not perfect. This does not mean that the record is pure, perfect, and complete, but it may very well be richer and perhaps relevant and reasonably reliable. In one way we could argue that because the events stored in the collective memory are still unfolding – even generations later – the relative distance between the captured oral account and the event itself is much narrower than pure chronological time would suggest.

What emerges from our research requires critical reflection and detailed analysis through rigorous cross-checking with every available source. It is necessary to consider both product and process. That is, the information captured (product) must undergo rigorous assessment, comparison and evaluation within a very clearly defined structure of overall source criticism (process). Also, the actual collection process, whereby that data has been accumulated, must be cause for considerable reflection and critical analysis.

Thus, both product and process raise fascinating questions that can enliven, enrich and more importantly inform our understanding, not only of the past we are trying to reconstruct, but also of the ways in which we achieve that understanding. In teaching and learning history we can thus introduce to the curriculum the question of ethics and sources management and analysis as part of the ultimate contribution to the improvement of all our oral history skills.

What follows are examples of case studies which raise important questions for anyone interested in tapping the collective memory of any community through the oral records. These examples are drawn from African field work experiences, but also have applications for those interested in any aspect of oral history research. More importantly, these case studies are useful tools for the teacher of oral history.

Case Study One

The village chief has welcomed you warmly and insists that all your interview must be done before him, because, as he says, "he is very interested in history". Every day you schedule interviews at the chief's residence and dutifully record (tape and notes) the information of your informants. The chief grows increasingly impatient with this long process but stubbornly continues to attend and prevent you from pursuing your job beyond his watchful eye. Very late one night a surreptitious visitor to your home warns you that a section of the village is getting increasingly upset that you are not interviewing them. They are concerned that you are only hearing the official version of history, that is, the version that is sanctioned by and acceptable to the chief.

You decide to approach the chief with an idea that you want to do more interviews and that you need to do longer interviews with the very informed people that you have been interviewing. That is, you intended to work all day, every day. He accepts with some reservation because he cannot spend all his time at these "important sessions," and decides to appoint an interpreter to help you in your task.

Have you proceeded ethically?

Have you liberated yourself sufficiently to inquire about contrary views of the past?

What would you do now?

Case Study Two

David Henige (among others) has argued that the only way to effectively capture an oral interview is to videotape the proceedings. You have been awarded a relatively small grant to conduct oral history research in a small, but very interesting and important salt producing village in West Africa. The grant should cover your airfare and basic living and transportation costs. Obviously you cannot afford the camera, let alone the VCR, tapes and cost of batteries. You also know that one hour of recorded (audio or ideo) information requires approximately ten hours of transcription and analysis. Such a strategy would add considerably to both the financial and time costs of the project, costs that you can ill afford.

Do you accept the grant and conduct a series of interview using resources available (i.e., pen and paper notes)?

Do you reapply for a larger grant and postpone the field trip until such resources are made available?

Case Study Three

You have received a substantial grant to conduct oral history research in a particular community in Tanzania. The local government officials not only give you permission but actively support your research through provision of accommodation and other forms of assistance. You gratefully accept the government's help, and set up your field centre in a government residence. As you begin field work you notice over and over again that informants are reluctant to talk to you. They repeatedly ask, "Why are you doing this?" "Why should a foreigner like you be interested in us?" Or perhaps they ask, "How much money are you going to make from the information?"

When you begin to ask why these people are so reluctant to talk you are told that they see you as a part of government, perhaps as a tax assessor, investigator, or informant of the local government that has deteriorating relations with the community.

What are your options?

Would verbal reassurances to prospective informants be enough?

Would it be wise to cut your ties with the local government and try to start again?

Could your whole research project be seriously impaired, perhaps even ruined?

Case Study Four

During fieldwork your informants keep telling you that you should really be interviewing a man called Gaar. You discover that he lives about 30 kilometres away from your base along a series of footpaths off the better travelled road. You decide to send a message to set up a meeting. You eventually travel to meet this prospective informant. He does not greet you well, and seems very, very reluctant to cooperate. As he comes so highly recommended you ask for a second visit in a few days time, and while he agrees he does not seem enthusiastic. The whole operation – travel and initial interview – consumes a full day. The second visit proceeds much like the first and the results are not particularly rewarding. Your initial reaction is “another day wasted.”

Do you try and go back a third time?

Eventually – some weeks later – Gaar sends a message that he would like to see you. Do you “drop everything” and rush off to meet the man a third time?

Case Study Five

As you travel around during your fieldwork experience you begin to recognize that many activities seem to be dominated by the women in the society. Your efforts to collect information about these activities prove fruitless.

Do you “hire” a local woman and train her to ask some of your pressing questions?

Or do you persist informally to ask and perhaps not receive much satisfaction?

Or what other options may you have to try to find out about these issues?

Case Study Six

One day it begins to rain heavily during one of your motorcycle journeys. The road becomes virtually impassable, and you decide to stop off in a little village along the road to wait out the storm. As you wait in a local “brewery” you become fascinated with the scale and nature of this business.

Is it appropriate to begin asking questions about the business while you are waiting?

Or should you try to set up a more formal exploratory session for some later date?

Case Study Seven

During one of your interviews the main informant suddenly stops the process and begins to question you about your reasons for being there, your connections to the police, and your past in general. He will not be deflected and seems very agitated.

During the course of this very tense discussion he admits to a serious crime that he committed over forty years ago. And he seems to think that you are there to arrest him.

What do you do?

What do you say?

Case Study Eight

A series of informants have told you that the present chief of your base village is the legitimate son and heir of the former ruling chief, and that his family has been in power here for many generations. Later during an interview session outside the village you are told that the present chief is the grandson of a usurper who took control of this area three generations ago. You now have a discrepancy in your evidence – your political history is in doubt.

How can you begin to find out which version is "true"?

How critical does it become that you know the politics of each of your informants in this search for the "truth"?

How critical is it that you can trust your own informants and interpreters to actually tell you in an open forum what they perceive the truth to be?

Would one-on-one interviews perhaps provide a less stressful information-gathering forum when seeking clarity on the controversial evidence? What are the advantages and disadvantages as compared to large group sessions?