

Oral History: The Research Reality

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Oral history as a research methodology is a tool that has been used much more extensively in Britain and the United States than in Canada. This, in spite of the fact that the assignment of meaning to the landscapes and relationships of everyday life is a process that can best be explored by means of tape recorded interviews followed by careful analysis of the resulting transcripts. Through the richness and depth of material collected, the link between past and present, as well as between an individual life and a group of consciousness, can be reconstructed more accurately than by using any other methodology.¹

Part of the reason for this gap in Canadian research is the indifference of the researchers themselves, since Canadian historians tend to assume that everything within the memory of the living is sufficiently documented on paper and sociologists that the past is irrelevant to present studies or, again, that it is sufficiently documented elsewhere. The spoken memory then becomes the special concern of anthropologists and folklorists, removed from the realm of "science" and relegated to the world of tradition, that is, art and craft.

Another reason is the cost of oral history research, and this, of course, plays a large part in determining research interest. There is no question that an extensive collection of oral history in the form of life histories is time consuming to collect, outline and transcribe. Also, the nature of writing in the social sciences, even that based on qualitative data, means that a researcher uses only those small sections of the material gathered which relate directly to the topic at hand, thus discouraging the tedious verbatim transcription of complete interviews. The complete transcript, of course, could be valuable data for someone else's project.

At present it is difficult even to find out about projects which have collected oral histories or life histories, let alone gain access to such tapes, outlines and transcripts as do exist. Once a project becomes known to a researcher, the question becomes, where the tapes are located — on the project coordinator's dining room shelf, in his/her office, in the university archives, at provincial or federal archives, in an historical society

archives, a local library, or a museum? If the tape outlines have been done, will they consist of a list of questions that were asked without the answers, brief summaries of the interviews, detailed running notes in longhand or some other notational scheme?

A variety of inaccessible, often inscrutable combinations is possible. One thing is certain, however, and that is that very few full length word-for-word transcripts of life history interviews will have been done, no matter what the project.

To show how interesting and useful life history research can easily get lost in such an impenetrable tangle of inaccessibility, I'll give an example from my own research project: "Growing Up in the Junction 1900-1930". As part of my doctoral research and also for the archives of the West Toronto Junction Historical Society, I undertook to interview people from all walks of life who had grown up in a particular geographical area of Toronto and who were born before 1914. Fortunately, I had a list of contacts to begin with, although many of the people no longer lived in the area. I also had a small salary and expense account to do intensive interviewing during the summer of 1987.

One of my better prospects was an 80-year-old man named Joe who lived in Hamilton and who had written several lively accounts of his personal experience for the historical society's newsletter. Joe was also much in demand by family members and volunteer groups, so it took some time to set up the interview. Eventually, we found a mutually convenient time and I took the bus to Hamilton early one morning, got off at City Hall, located his apartment building and sat down in his living room at around 10 a.m.

At 4 p.m. I emerged, hot, crumpled and weary, accompanied by Joe, still talking, who drove me to the bus station. I got back to Toronto around 6:30, grabbed a snack on the way home, where I collapsed around 8 p.m.

Joe had talked virtually non-stop for six hours, about four of which I had on tape. The rest had to do with his current life in Hamilton, a box of family photos, several of which he had lent to me to be copied, and

current events. I had started the interview with a question about a local landmark, but from there Joe took it wherever the spirit moved him. I don't remember getting many words of any sort, let alone questions, into the monologue. However, he did talk mainly about growing up in the Junction.

His reminiscences were extremely interesting. At least three-quarters of them were full of unfamiliar names, of both people and places, here and abroad, and Hebrew or Yiddish words.

These reminiscences were organized into "stories" about the past, usually incorporating references to the present to illustrate changing attitudes or conditions, and often containing a moral as to how responses or relationships could benefit the individual, the community or society as a whole. Joe was a story-teller par excellence, interweaving fact, humour and philosophy into a lively account of the past as it relates to the present and the future. His memories were useful on a variety of levels.

The only way I could deal with this rambling monologue, however, was to make a detailed set of running notes in longhand — it took me several days because my hand got tired and because I had to keep switching the tape recorder on and off. On average, most researchers agree that preparing an outline takes a minimum of twice the time recorded on tape.

Later, I listened to the tape again to make a complete list of all the names and terms which were unclear to me, so that I could ask him to spell or explain them during a future interview. I also had to check the material on tape to see which areas of my questionnaire he had covered and which still remained.

In the meantime Joe became ill, went to Israel, and had accumulated a long list of commitments by the time he recovered. It took me several months, long after the summer project was complete, to arrange a second interview. This time I ate a substantial breakfast, packed a lunch and made a list of questions that must be answered.

When I returned from the second trip to Hamilton, I had five more hours of tape and every question answered, although, of course, most of the time Joe ran the interview, good-naturedly structuring it to help me out as he felt necessary. At the end he provided me with a mimeographed family tree, maps of the family "home" in Russia, copies of newspaper articles and other useful written backup material.

Besides my own handwritten outline, I eventually did another much briefer summary of the tapes for the Ontario Folklife Centre, an organization which is run out of Carol Carpenter's office in York University's Humanities Department. I also lent the Folklife Centre the tapes to be copied. Months passed, and the Folklife Centre still had not completed their copying, which

seemed to be dependent on York's Music Department equipment. When I finally did get the tapes back, one of the originals was missing and the copy I had been given was noticeably inferior in quality. But I only discovered the quality problem in 1988, when trying to make a sound track for a slide-tape show.

The Folklife Centre by this time had sent all the original master tapes to the Ontario Archives. After waiting a month or two for Folklife Centre staff to make the enquiries which they had promised, I contacted the Ontario Archives directly. First I was told that they didn't have the tapes at all and then that they didn't know where the tapes were. Finally I located the right person in the Archives' sound and moving images section. He had stored the tapes in a couple of boxes in an unused cabinet over a desk in his office. There, indeed, was the single original tape in a set of nine and he agreed to trade it for my copy.

In the meantime, the Jewish Archives had asked me for permission to copy the tapes and to see pictures and written material which I had collected from Joe, since his father was the founder of the Junction's first and only synagogue, the oldest one continuously in use in Toronto. When the archivist first contacted me, the tapes were still at the Folklife Centre. Finally, after many delays, I met with him. He copied the tapes, told me which negatives he wanted prints of and made photocopies of all the written material, including the outline I did for the Folklife Centre. During the intervening period I had computer coded the interview by means of a Watfile system devised by my advisor, Professor Gerry Gold of York's Anthropology Department (see Appendix A). I made the Jewish Archives a copy of that as well. This took place in 1989.

As of 1990, there are four copies of Joe's life history (18 sides of tape) in four different "archives" in Toronto. The material on them has been used to illustrate the immigrant experience in Toronto, and, of course, West Toronto Junction. Small excerpts from the tapes have been used in a slide show, along with slides made from his family pictures, and eventually I will use some of the material in my doctoral dissertation. Many hours have been expended by five or six people working with his life history.

But nowhere is there a full transcript available to give anyone, other than a few "insiders" who have actually listened to the tapes, an idea of the quality of the material and its usefulness to social researchers. Not that it would be possible to use a full transcript for anything in its entirety. As a life story it would have to be rearranged and edited before it could be printed and some of it is definitely extraneous, but a full transcript would make the material accessible, once a potential researcher located its whereabouts.

At the moment, Joe's nine tapes, like the other 110

tapes of life histories which I recorded for my project, are stored in the basement of the Annette Library. They are accessible, to those who know about the project or might want to know about it, by phoning me and making an appointment to listen to the tapes and/or look at the pictures and written material. A researcher is often better off contacting the person who collected the tapes personally to gain access than trying to contact the appropriate archives. In this case, because the originals are in my possession, not copies, they are not available to "take out" or use on an extensive or regular basis.

When I located a project called "Growing Up in Rural Ontario 1900-1930", undertaken by University of Guelph professors Catherine Wilson and Alan Brooks, I was able to borrow their personal copies of about 40 tapes to listen to at home. The master set is at the University of Guelph Archives. The outlines are very brief, some of them consisting only of a list of questions asked, and there is no computer coded index and no transcripts, even though the material has been used for a slide-tape show, an unpublished paper, and a journal article on specific aspects of the interviewee's lives.

Again, to determine the usefulness of the material and the quality of each interview, a researcher has to listen to the tapes individually. Needless to say, this is not something that can be done quickly.

Besides the inaccessibility of the tapes and the lack of transcripts, there is also the lack of literature to serve as a guide to locating oral history projects past and present. Not one university or public library in Toronto subscribes to the oral history journals in Canada, Britain or the United States. While visiting Oxford last summer, I finally got a look at the British journal in the Bodleian Library. From it I gleaned some idea of what had been done in Canada in the last 15 years or so. The only institutional subscribers to this journal in Canada are the National Archives and the Archives of British Columbia.²

Recently, I was able to obtain back issues of the *Canadian Oral History Association Journal* from Mavis Waters. However, oral history is a rather obscure topic for many university libraries, which we all know contain some rather out of the way offerings.

Potential researchers may wonder, after a preliminary look at the time required to make the contacts, do the interviews, and locate not easily accessible material, whether they will find out anything worthwhile by doing life histories or even taped interviews on specific topics, especially if they are interviewing people over 60. I myself approached the interviewing process with a great many misgivings. I imagined myself talking to a lot of dour and dismal pensioners, unhappy with the state of the modern world (which seems to be going to the dogs – or perhaps the

pigs – even to me). Did I really want to spend all my spare time with old people, and worse still, would it be a boring waste of a summer?

The amount of time involved in collecting life histories is much more than I would ever have imagined. Other than that, "Growing Up in the Junction 1900-1930" has turned out to be one of the most worthwhile and interesting projects I've ever done. And I did put together enough research material for a dissertation. However, I also learned a great deal about the contemporary concerns of older people, about the process of aging, and the way society deals with it. Unlike Joe, most of my interview subjects fed me as much as I could eat, whether I was hungry or not, and not just the women. One delightful fellow of 92 made me lunch, found me some extra batteries for my tape recorder when the plug next to his sofa declined to supply the necessary electricity, gave me a pair of hand-knitted slippers (he had an over-supply for some reason) and a \$20 donation to the historical society.

For every hour of tape-recorded interview, there was another hour, sometimes two or three, of coffee or tea or lunch or light supper and family album perusal or general discussion. Some people I interviewed had extremely active lives, involving family, church, and community activities and outings. Others, due to physical problems or incapacitated spouses, rarely left their homes.

One charming woman in her seventies with limited eyesight and a paranoid, depressed husband spent her time writing or calling family and friends, baking, knitting, playing the piano and entertaining people like me who came to hear about her family history. Her husband refused to let her go out except to family gatherings or to shop in suburban malls. According to him criminals were lurking everywhere, especially in downtown Toronto. At one point he was convinced that the government wanted to listen to my tapes. If only this were really true, perhaps we could get them transcribed!

By contrast, another equally delightful woman in her seventies, who had remained single all her life and lived alone, lost a mitten after driving me home late one evening. At 2:00 a.m. she realized it was gone and went out on foot in a snowstorm to where she thought it had fallen from the car eight or ten blocks away. She found it in the middle of the road and returned home on foot. Recently I gave her directions to a play that would finish downtown at 10:00 pm. She planned to take the streetcar down to the lake shore and return the same way, rather than try to look for a parking spot.

Other people I interviewed, primarily women, will not venture even a few blocks from their homes in quiet residential neighbourhoods after dark. Whether these people are likely to be attacked or not, the fear is real and

the reasons for it need to be explored.

Perhaps there is something in common among people who consent to talk about their life history in detail. Generally speaking, both the women and the men who consented to be interviewed and who still lived in their own homes were alert, capable and in good spirits, whether or not they ventured out into the wider world. They read the papers, listened to the radio, watched television, and talked on the telephone if they couldn't go out. They had arrangements with neighbours who checked to make sure they were all right, had pets to keep them company, and arrangements made to look after gardening or shopping or housekeeping if they couldn't do it themselves. The same was true of apartment dwellers. One woman in her eighties who could barely walk regularly escorted an elderly blind neighbour a few blocks to the local podiatrist's foot clinic.³

Those in nursing homes were not so fortunate. Those who were coherent were there because they were physically unable to care for themselves or because their aging children could no longer look after them. One woman of 102 years had been living with her 80-year-old son and his 69-year-old wife until she could no longer lift herself up out of bed and neither could they.

The bureaucratic "necessities" of nursing home life can be particularly hard on the elderly. Fire regulations prohibit the wide use of carpeting in nursing homes and the polished floors are the cause of otherwise unnecessary falls.

Protecting a person from fire by greatly increasing her chances of being incapacitated by a bad fall is little short of ludicrous. Another problem is staffing timetables. So that the staff can leave by 5:00 p.m., many homes have an early dinner hour and bedtime preparation. This leaves residents with a long boring evening, especially those who cannot get around to socialize with other inmates. Old people do not sleep very much.

Most nursing homes are located far from the inmates' home neighbourhoods on the fringe of suburbia, where land values are cheap. This makes visits from friends their own age difficult because of the distance. It also makes it harder to get to them for an interview. Relatives also have a harder time getting out to see them. It is also much harder for those who can go out occasionally to make the necessary arrangements to do so.

Nursing home residents who were mentally incapacitated but physically active seemed perversely to enjoy nursing home life. In many cases they could roam their floor freely, find opportunities to give away their belongings or have them simply taken away by equally vague new friends; they could babble to entranced listeners in the same state as themselves or just stare at the television or out the window. Falls on

the slippery floors and emotional ups and downs seemed to be the major problems. Relatives I spoke with were more concerned about disappearing belongings and the staff's inability to find inmates when the relatives came to visit. But the simple fact of human companionship without the constant demand to behave responsibly and to make sense may have actually made life easier for them.

Interestingly enough, the last remaining memories for people who had lost most of their memory were often childhood ones of tobogganing or skating or sledding or picnicking in local parks. Most of the things I learned in nursing homes had to do with the organization of institutions.

However, one of my favourite interviews took place in a nursing home. I was taken to visit the woman of 102 by her daughter-in-law. She spoke for 45 minutes without a break about her experiences helping doctors with home births (she did not want to be called a midwife) from 1910 onwards. Another woman in her nineties and quite hard-of-hearing only needed to get the gist of a question to launch into a beautifully spoken account of some aspect of her early life. She had volunteered to be on the social committee at the private nursing home where she lived.

The most remarkable person I interviewed was a female psychiatrist in her seventies who was dying of leukemia. In a series of three interviews, from her hospital bed, she gave me a frank account of her not always pleasant childhood and why she had chosen to go to medical school during the depression.

Most of the people I interviewed were coping very well with the problems of aging. This may have been why they consented to be interviewed in the first place. These were people who were concerned with the past without removing themselves from the present. They reached out to their neighbours and the community at large to involve themselves in other people's lives and offered whatever they had to give in exchange for companionship and the help they might need. Perhaps elderly people who are poor, depressed, and disorganized do not want to talk about their lives.

Many of the people I interviewed found that giving their life histories made them think about things in their lives that they had not discussed in some time, bringing back a flood of memories and a desire to ponder the ramifications of this or that experience. For a few the experience was negative. By and large, however, talking to an interested researcher about their lives for posterity made these people feel important. It reinforced their place in society as that which belongs to "elders"—keepers of wisdom based on past experience. In this fashion, present day social scientists can be the keepers of past experience of everyday life, something that cannot be as effectively reconstituted in any other way.

Nowhere is the past more alive than in the minds of the people who lived it. As Paul Thompson outlined in *The Voice of the Past*, interviewing the old raises no fundamental methodological issues which do not apply to interviewing in general and in fact mis-description and distortion are less likely in old age when memories of early life are often most vivid.

Few people remember exact dates well. On the other hand, few people have forgotten home and church and school games and meals and holiday celebrations. As I mentioned earlier, memories of tobogganing, skating and sledding, along with picnics along the Humber River and in High Park remained vivid when all else had faded. As many people told me, "we made our own fun in those days" — all the more reason to remember it.

In conclusion and to relate these reminiscences to the topic of oral history and the older family, the resilience and the unflapability of my elders for this study showed

me that, far from teaching them how to cope with their lives, they have much to offer in terms of strategy for coping with our own old age, when we who are middle aged now become a large enough portion of the population to have the political clout to make positive changes in the way older people are treated by the government and by younger people. Needless to say, it's much easier to be optimistic about old age if the elderly can have an adequate amount of money to support themselves and a reasonable environment to live in.

In order to gain further insight into the material collected by means of oral history and life history research, we must start with plans to make such material as already exists more accessible to researchers and the public in a way that can be used effectively — transcripts, computer indexes and even a simple list of projects periodically updated. We should also start some new projects.

Notes

1. The classic in this field is Paul Thompson's *The Voice of the Past*, Oxford, 1978. An excellent example of the use of oral history is Thompson's *The Edwardians*, London, 1975, as well as Thea Thompson's *Edwardian Childhoods*, London, 1981. All three draw their material from one research project. Recently, feminist research has drawn on oral history research as explored in Susan N. G. Geiger's Review Essay: "Women's Life Histories: Method and Content", in *Signs*, Winter 1986, 334-351. Meg Luxton's *More Than a Labour of Love*, Toronto, 1980, is probably the best known example. In addition, John Pickles shows how this type of qualitative research can be used in his chapter "From Fact-World to Life World" in John Eyles and David M. Smith's book *Qualitative Methods in Human Geography*, Cambridge, 1988, 233-254.
2. The major journals in the field are: *Canadian Oral History Association Journal*, Halifax, Nova Scotia; *International Journal of Oral History*, Westport, Conn.; *Oral History Association Newsletter* (and other publications), Baylor University, Waco, Texas; *Oral History: Journal of the Oral History Society*, University of Essex, Colchester, Great Britain; *Oral History Review*, New York.
3. See Willa Baum, "Therapeutic Value of Oral History" and Robert N. Butler, "The Life Review: An Unrecognized Bonanza", in the *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, Vol. 12(1) 1980-81, 49-53, and 35-38, respectively. Excellent insights are also provided by Graham D. Rowles in "Towards a Geography of Growing Old," in Anne Buttimer and David Seamon's book, *The Human Experience of Space and Place*, London, 1980, 55-72.

Appendix A

Keyword Coding

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The following is an example of a computer coded oral history interview using the WATFILE/Plus data base software programme copyright 1986 by WATCOM Systems Ltd., Waterloo, Ontario.

The KEYWORD coding system was developed by Professor Gerry Gold, Anthropology Department, York University, to make possible systematic access to tape recorded interviews and field notes. Keyword short forms have proved easier to remember and more resistant to error than longer words or number codes. It provides both an instant overview and easy access to specific information.

My own version of this coding system, adapted for the "Growing Up in the Junction 1900-1930" project, is as follows:

KEY A three letter principal category code used to specify the general topic, often a short form for a word that triggers the category for the researcher:

wor	-	work experience
home	-	home life
rel	-	religion
com	-	community
bak	-	family background
ssh	-	secondary school

The same section of tape may be recorded under several headings if necessary. In my own coding system, I have used the word 'key' to indicate that the information concerns a named institution, individual, business, etc.

SUB a three letter sub code further defines the information.

wor phl	-	philosophy of work
wor cho	-	choice of a job
hec hof	-	household economics, mortgage (house finance)
ssh tea	-	secondary school teacher(s)

DESC the opening line of the material, 30 letters or spaces. in the case of the 'key' category, the proper name only is given.

INT Initials of interviewee - three letters

RES Initials of interviewer - three letters

FORMAT One letter indicating: outline, transcript, written material, clipping from magazine or newspaper.

PAGES Four numbers - tape # is first, page 1 could be 01 or 1, followed by page # in outline, transcript or whatever.

QUALITY One number on a 1 - 3 scale, quality of material spoken about, relevance - eg., one sentence comment on irrelevant topic or garbled response = 3.

Once coded the material can then be reordered using any combination of the categories. This page is in the original data input order.

Appendix A continued...

TYP_	key	sub	desc	int	res	format	pages	quality
=====	<==	<==	<=====	<==	<==	<	-----	-
	fac	bir	Clendenan lived on Pacific	jja	dlf	o	103	2
	wor	msc	the demolition squad from	jja	dlf	c	0201	1
	key	bus	York Wrecking Co.	jja	dlf	w	0201	1
	key	bmh	Boris Alexandroff	jja	dlf	w	0201	1
	bak	msc	I then worked at my father's	jja	dlf	w	0201	1
	rel	off	Although I left Toronto in 32	jja	dlf	w	0201	1
	com	lib	it is very interesting to me	jja	dlf	w	0202	1
	com	lib	I just remembered a tremendous	jja	dlf	w	0202	1
	bak	dad	My father didn't come to	jja	dlf	o	204	1
	bak	imm	turned them against the Jews	jja	dlf	o	206	1
	wor	cho	so the fellow comes running	jja	dlf	o	208	1
	key	ind	Canada Foundry	jja	dlf	o	208	1
	wor	phl	my father had a theory if	jja	dlf	o	209	1
	bak	mom	and then my mother came out	jja	dlf	o	209	1
	bak	imm	the war was on in 1905 so he	jja	dlf	o	210	1
	rel	cmp	Toronto was a Polish city	jja	dlf	o	210	1
	rel	cmp	Aramaic similar to Hebrew	jja	dlf	o	301	2
	bak	imm	so my grandfather comes over	jja	dlf	o	301	1
	luv	msc	shortly after my mother met	jja	dlf	o	301	1
	mar	cho	she told my father she would	jja	dlf	o	301	1
	wor	cho	but not as long as he worked	jja	dlf	o	301	1
	wor	con	but not as long as he worked	jja	dlf	o	301	1
	luv	prn	grandfather was a very learned	jja	dlf	o	301	1
	wor	msc	corner stones contain relics	jja	dlf	c	0301	1
	key	psh	Strathcona School	jja	dlf	w	0301	1
	psh	subj	my favorite subject next to re	jja	dlf	w	0301	1
	com	msc	one one of these occasions	jja	dlf	w	0301	1
	com	anm	racing toward us was a runaway	jja	dlf	w	0301	1
	rel	car	1920 was a banner year in my	jja	dlf	w	0301	1
	hom	car	1921 brought some tremendous	jja	dlf	w	0301	1
	wor	msc	she was working in a tobacco	jja	dlf	o	302	1
	mar	sav	she had a few bucks father had	jja	dlf	o	302	1
	wor	rou	he went to a man who bought	jja	dlf	o	302	1
	wor	pay	he worked for semi-starvation	jja	dlf	o	302	1
	bak	imm	and the first thing the did	jja	dlf	o	302	1
	hom	hos	they found this old shack in	jja	dlf	o	302	1
	ssh	beg	but I think that actually the	jja	dlf	w	0302	1
	key	ssh	Humberside Collegiate	jja	dlf	w	0302	1
	ssh	tea	but what fixed her in my mem	jja	dlf	w	0302	1
	pol	int	I was very int. to see on tv	jja	dlf	w	0302	3
	wor	cho	and they pooled their money or	jja	dlf	o	303	1
	wor	rou	my father had that hour edge	jja	dlf	o	303	1
	key	ind	coop knitting mill-name?	jja	dlf	o	303	1
	wor	str	four Jewish men and an Irishm	jja	dlf	o	303	1
	wor	cop	four Jewish men and an Irishm	jja	dlf	o	303	1
	wor	cho	sick horse, father had just	jja	dlf	o	304	1
	wor	rou	father immediately got a job	jja	dlf	o	304	1
	wor	cho	so he made him a foreman and	jja	dlf	o	304	1
	wor	par	I was collecting rent when I	jja	dlf	o	305	1
	hec	hbl	rent was done on all different	jja	dlf	o	305	1
	key	wkl	Anderson & McMaster	jja	dlf	o	305	1