



USING LIFE HISTORIES IN PSYCHOLOGY:
A METHODOLOGICAL GUIDE

By

Emma White, David Uzzell, Nora Rätzel
and Birgitta Gatersleben

RESOLVE Working Paper 01-10



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Research Group on Lifestyles, Values and the Environment

Centre for Environmental Strategy (D3)

University of Surrey

Guildford, GU2 7XH, UK

<http://www.surrey.ac.uk/resolve/>

Contact details:

Emma White: email – e.white@surrey.ac.uk

Tel: 00 44 (0)1483 682879, Fax: 00 44 (0)1483 689553

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Abstract

Life histories is an extremely rich qualitative methodology which is based on a tradition of storytelling and oral history which dates back thousands of years. It involves the telling of memories and experiences from right across the lifespan, from childhood, through key life events such as marriage and parenthood, to the present day. Its ability to highlight various attitudes, values, and behaviours, as well as to chart their progress and change across the lifespan, makes it an extremely valuable tool for the social sciences. This paper examines some key principles and methodological assumptions of life histories, and suggests some ways in which these differ from those of the dominant discourse in psychology, in order to help social scientists to better understand and apply this methodology within their own research.

Key Words: Life History; Oral History; Methodology.

1. Introduction and Oral History

We have been telling stories for thousands of years (Sharpless, 2007); of wars, adventures, great lives and ordinary lives, myths and legends. In Africa, for example, griots use discourse, song, music and dance (Hoffman, 2000) to communicate “ancestral and historical information about the culture, people, village, and local geographic area” (p. 123, Burgh, 2006) of their listeners. The information is passed from one generation to the next through diligent memorisation of the stories, poems and songs, using their “prodigious [griot] memory” (p.112, Hale, 1999). It is often thought that there are only male griots, but in actual fact this is not the case (Hale, 1999). Indeed, oral history is not the exclusive possession of any particular group in society, but serves many different civilisations today, as it has in the past. In fact, Minh-ha suggests that “the world’s earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women” (p. 121, 1989), and oral history has been used by such diverse peoples as the Greek, Herodotus, to create an account of the Persian Wars in the 5th century BCE (Sharpless, 2007) and the ex-slaves of the 1930s, to document their horrific experiences of slavery (e.g. Yetman. 2000).

Today, oral history is used across several disciplines, most prominently in history. Here, it is often considered an important addition to what is frequently deemed a discipline of facts and figures associated with historically important events. Indeed, Paul Thompson (1988), a leading oral historian, argues that history has long relied on records of people of importance and economic figures such as unemployment rates to tell its story, largely ignoring the histories of the ‘ordinary people’. Accordingly, the Oral History Society (2008) defines oral history as “the recording of people's memories. It is the living history of everyone's unique life experiences” which “enables people who have been hidden from history to be heard”. Thompson (1988) also suggests that oral history can be used to study the previously inaccessible aspects of the family structure such as “the roles of husband and wife, the upbringing of boys and girls... courtship, [and] sexual behaviour” (p. 29). And it is here that we believe life history, a form of oral history which has long documented the social aspects of history, crosses over in to the social sciences. In this paper we will try to understand how this rich methodology may be utilised within the social sciences, in particular within psychology, and attempt to lay out some of the methodological assumptions which we believe set it apart from other commonly used methodologies. We hope that this will enable others to begin incorporating it in to their own work and increase its deserved recognition as a legitimate methodology within the scientific, social scientific, and historical spheres.

2. Defining Life Histories

The life histories methodology is distinct from its parent, oral history, in that rather than focussing on a particular event or place, it involves the recording of an individual’s memories and experiences from right across their lifetime. Howarth (1998) suggests that life histories forms “the backbone of oral history work” (p.v). It can be used to examine everyday practices (both past and present), attitudes and values, and memorable or traumatic experiences, for example, whilst providing the context of the interviewee’s life. A life history interview typically examines the interviewee’s family background, experiences of childhood, school, marriage, parenthood, and retirement (for older interviewees), and present day activities, although topics are limitless within the bounds of the interviewee’s

guidance. It is a method which examines the ways in which people remember and interpret their values, practices, and preferences, and how these have developed over time and why, against the backdrop of other historical data; allowing us to understand how people have experienced and interpreted events, experiences, and changes across their lives within the context of broader societal developments. The methodology can therefore create a detailed view of the interviewee, with much of the real-life complexity which often gets left out of quantitative approaches.

Armstrong (1982, in Walmsley, 1995) also suggests that in examining several different life histories, themes can be identified which make "it possible to generalise... by showing that certain biographies have, for all the idiosyncrasy, some common elements" (p.185). The ability to identify commonalities and differences between people, their practices, and their attitudes and values, makes life histories particularly interesting as a methodology for the social sciences. Given also the depth of data that life histories can generate, and the historical context which it provides, it enables us to understand how and when certain behaviours and attitudes may have originated or changed, in addition to information about current practices and behaviours which more traditional psychological approaches provide. This enables us then to build up a picture of the past, in order to understand how we came to be, and the changes which we underwent to get here; the knowledge of which could be used to strengthen or modify existing psychological theories and help to more carefully guide policy responses to behaviours. The life histories approach may also help to link attitudes with behaviours, given the depth of data that can be gathered, something which has proved elusive in other approaches. We believe then that its merit is clear. The next section will go on to examine its use within the social sciences.

3. An Understanding of the Principles and Assumptions

The life histories approach is a technique which has developed and evolved in a very different paradigm to psychology. Its epistemology and methodology are therefore quite different to those within more traditional areas of psychology. But rather than seeing these differences in methodology as problematic flaws (since they do not often fit with our goals of representativeness and impartiality, for example), we would argue that it is important to try to adopt and combine with our own the methodology and assumptions recommended by oral historians (for there is not a rigid formula), since their experience is likely to create a stronger life history interview. Indeed, as business philosopher, Jim Rohn, suggested, "we need a variety of input and influence and voices. You cannot get all the answers to life and business from one person or from one source"; and similarly, you cannot get all the answers from one type of methodology. The analysis of a life history interview will also differ from that of the traditional psychological interview, since it is important to understand how to utilise the information in the best way. In the following sections we will therefore attempt to present some of the key elements of life histories, and lessons that we, as social scientists, as well as others working in oral history have learnt in using the technique. Although there is a distinction between life history and oral history, life histories being a more specific form of oral history, we will in places discuss oral history given its overarching implications for life histories.

3.1 The Interaction between Interviewer and Interviewee

Oral historians place particular emphasis on the importance of the interviewer-interviewee relationship, believing that the interviewer is there to learn, and so has to keep listening to the interviewee (Portelli, 1997). Similarly, psychologists place a great deal of importance on listening to the interviewee and building a rapport. But often there is an attempt in psychology to limit the input from the interviewer to the asking of questions, whereas many oral historians believe that it should not be a one-way interaction, but that it should contain some conversational elements. Alessandro Portelli (1997), one of the principal exponents of oral history, writes that “people will not talk to you unless you talk to them, will not reveal themselves unless you reveal yourself. You teach nothing unless you are also learning, and you learn nothing if you don’t listen” (p.52). He also argues that within an oral history interview it is important for the interviewer to offer some information about themselves, and to feel able to politely challenge what the interviewee says. For example, if some facts appear to contradict more established facts, then challenges can be politely made by saying “are you sure?”, “I’m not sure I agree”, or “I have heard other people tell this differently” (Portelli, 1997, p. 62). The relationship, conversational interaction, and dynamics between interviewer & interviewee are aspects, therefore, which are central to the approach, and quite distinct from other approaches in psychology.

Given the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee then, Portelli (1991) suggests that “the historian is, in certain ways, a part of the source” (p.56), and that “when the researcher’s voice is cut out, the narrator’s voice is distorted” (p.55). Portelli (1991) highlights the involvement of the researcher in all stages of the study: “it is the historian who selects the people who will be interviewed; who contributes to the shaping of the testimony by asking the questions and reacting to the answers; and who gives the testimony its final published shape and context” (p.56). The researcher is no longer an observer presenting the account of the interviewee, but “is now pulled into the narrative and becomes part of the story” (Portelli, 1991, p.57). This is not entirely different from interpretive phenomenological analysis and discourse analysis, which acknowledge the role of the researcher in interview and analysis and understand it within the context of the co-construction. It also has similarities to intervention and action research, although life histories does not necessarily work to achieve a particular goal as they do. The distinction between the majority of psychological approaches and Portelli’s oral history lies in that way that it includes the interviewer in the story, allowing the interviewer to explicitly interfere in the story, challenging the story and their positions within it (although without imposing views).

Listening to the interviewee also means allowing them to tell their story in their own way. Portelli (1997) points out that an interview rarely flows as the questions are written; the interviewee will often dictate what stories they want to tell, and the way in which they are told: whether in chronological or thematic order. Allowing them to tell what story they want to tell will make them feel that you are being more attentive, whereas interrupting them and/or directing the line of questioning away from their desired story may inhibit them later (Portelli, 1997). Portelli (1991) writes that “the first requirement... is that the researcher... give priority to what he or she wishes to tell, rather than what the researcher wishes to hear, saving any unanswered questions for later or for another interview” (p.39). Similarly,

Sypher, Hummert, and Williams (in Yow, 1997) suggest that interviewers should be “focussing the interview not on what is important to us in our lives, but what is important to our interviewees” (p.64). Interestingly, Portelli (1997) often mentions gaining the most interesting information when being led by the interviewee away from the line of questioning, even though he felt frustrated by the detour at the time of the interview. This is something that we have also found in our work. Although at first it was difficult to allow the interviewee to lead the direction of questioning, being aware that a lot of the data was irrelevant to the purpose of the present study, the data we received on the topic of interest was far more detailed than when a direct question was asked of it. Allowing natural progression on to the topic of interest through a related subject of interest to the interviewee, or sometimes guided gently by the interviewer, gave the interviewee more ownership over the topic and a greater interest in that area compared to when the subject was given to them. Asking a direct question which was not as related to their current area of discussion also often threw the interviewee and meant that they were less willing to create open and honest discourse. A similar response was encountered when the interviewer asked a question which had already been covered voluntarily by the interviewee, highlighting the need to be an attentive listener. Creating a relaxed conversation, where the interviewer is a good listener, and where questions appear naturally within the topic discussed by the interviewee, is something which is therefore not only vital within the oral history interview, but which may also be a useful consideration for other types of interview as well.

The characteristics and relationship between interviewer and interviewee also have an important influence on the progression of the life history interview. This is the same within any methodology, but given the intimate connection which (hopefully) forms when communicating one’s life story, this is of particular importance within life histories. Yow (1997) suggests that the age and gender of the interviewer may affect what the interviewee narrates, and suggests that if the interviewer is in the same approximate age group as the narrator’s child or grandchild, then this can make them relate to the interviewer as such. There are advantages to either being of a similar or different age to the interviewee: being of a similar age may give the interviewee the impression that they have shared common experiences, which might induce them to elaborate and discuss events in greater detail; but being the same age as a child or grandchild may also be beneficial, since the interviewee may be more likely to try to teach the interviewer, and be more patient in their lack of understanding and at the asking of further elaboratory questions. It is often the case that oral historians interview older people, given that they are able to shed light on the past, and have more stories to tell. Indeed, one of the authors interviewed a group of women aged approximately 70 years-old, and found that she was often treated as a curious youngster who needed to be taught about how things used to be done, even explicitly compared to a Granddaughter by one interviewee. The women were very generous in their stories, providing very personal and often traumatic accounts, which were not provided by younger groups. One reason for this was suggested by an interviewee, who very frankly said that she wanted to tell her story because she was getting old. Similarly, Shostak (1989) found that her interviewee “appreciated the chance to contribute to something ‘bigger’” (p.386), saying “I am an old person who has experienced many things, and I have much to talk about” (p.387). But Portelli (1997) suggests that we should not be exclusively looking to the older generation, and that “it is important to be aware that the young are bearers of class culture and memory, and may suggest reinterpretation of the past” (p. 239). Similarly, it is

important to have interviewees from varied backgrounds: Thompson (1988), for example, claims that the upper class and the very poor will rarely be in a self-selected sample, and highlights the need for a “variety of social experience in the community” (p. 30).

In some situations the interviewer and interviewee may simply not “get along”, some of the reasons for which are discussed by Yow (1997). But it is important to try to maintain a good relationship and conversation with the interviewee throughout, and there are ways in which the interviewer’s technique may be improved to help combat this problem. Yow (1997), for example, observes that “interviewers who can respond to narrators with empathy can expect fuller answers, while an inability to have empathy may cut short the interview” (p.67). Similarly, Thompson (1988) suggests that “the essential need is mutual respect. A superior, dominating attitude does not make for a good interview” (p.31). But there may be cases in which the interviewee is relating very negative attitudes or events, or where the two personalities are incompatible, and it is important then to try to conceal negative feelings towards the interviewee (although negative comments may be questioned respectfully), not only to elicit information, but so that the interviewee does not feel judged or distressed by the interviewer’s reaction. In our experience, however, cases where the interviewer and interviewee do not get along are fairly uncommon. Indeed, Howarth (1998) suggests that the “greatest strength [of oral history] at an individual level is its innate ability to create lasting personal friendships” (p.ix). It is important then to consider how best to manage what can feel like a close relationship; whether to maintain a professional distance or to acknowledge this friendship and maintain contact: An important ethical consideration.

3.2 Ethical Considerations

Codes of ethics and conduct which apply to psychologists and those in the medical profession, also apply to those conducting life history research: The interviewee must give their informed consent to take part in the research and to have their story recorded, they must be aware that they can leave the interview at any time, and special care must be taken when dealing with vulnerable people. But there are also ethics to be considered which are more specific to the life history interview situation. The Oral History Society has published guidelines on their website relating to the code of ethics which should be followed before, during, and after a life history interview. Of some of the more unique ethical requirements, the Oral History Society suggests that the interviewer has a responsibility to “to determine the preferences of the interviewee as to the location and conduct of the interview”. This is important because the interviewee may not wish to talk about certain subjects or may wish to be interviewed in their home where their family are present, for example. The Oral History Society also suggests that the interviewer has the responsibility “To treat interviewees with respect and courtesy”. Although this seems intuitive, this guideline is a reminder to treat the interviewee as an individual who is telling their own life story and providing personal information, rather than as an interviewee to be questioned. Life history interviews often take place in the home of the interviewee, since this is generally a more relaxed and preferred environment for the interviewee, and so the need for respect is particularly important here. In such situations, Portelli (1997) highlights the importance of not judging the interviewee, suggesting that the interviewer should rely on their intuition about how to be polite, and to do what comes naturally.

It is also important to respect the privacy of the interviewee, and not to push them into revealing information which they feel uncomfortable about sharing. Life historians want to extract as much information as possible, but care must be taken with painful memories such as of bereavement. The Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth state in their ethical guidelines that researchers should avoid “undue intrusion” and “be aware of the intrusive potential of some of their enquiries and methods”. A life history interview, although more relaxed and unobtrusive in many ways than a typical psychological interview, also has quite high potential for moving in to very personal issues. For example, one project conducted by several of the present authors used life histories to examine the outdoor practices of women over their lives; a seemingly uncontroversial subject. But in discussing outdoor activities over their lifetime, interviewees inevitably remembered some very poignant memories of being outdoors with family members, and one interviewee became quite emotional. Although it was a positive experience for this interviewee, it illustrates the ease with which a life history interview can move towards very private memories, and has the potential to become intrusive. On the other hand, however, Thompson (1988) reminds us that we must not be afraid to ask certain questions, suggesting that oral historians “have come for a purpose, to get information, and if ultimately ashamed of this they should not have come at all” (p.31). Additionally, the interviewee may pick up on a reluctance of the interviewer to talk about awkward or sensitive issues, making them feel uneasy, and so it may be best to discuss an issue when it arises. Anderson, in her article with Jack (1991), discusses her quandary in deciding whether to ask about sensitive issues which arose in her interviews or to follow her instinct of “don’t pry!”. In looking back at interviews in which she felt unable to discuss certain issues, Anderson feels as though she has missed opportunities, and in changing the subject, she believes she has essentially given the message “tell me about your experiences, but don’t tell me too much” (p.133): clearly something which she regrets because of the ways in which she has inhibited her interviewees in discussing their feelings.

Within an oral history interview, it is also important to ensure that the interviewee is able to tell the story in their own way, and that although guided by the interviewer, they have some degree of control over the interview and the language used within it. Walmsley (1995) conducted life history interviews with people with learning disabilities, and discusses the importance of using their own terms rather than jargon, something which we believe is equally relevant for the general population. Walmsley (1995) also tries to grapple with the question of how a differentiation of social status affects the course of the interview, and whether it lends more power to the interviewee or interviewer. She found that although she believed herself to “belong to a higher social stratum than the interviewees” (p.190), who were living in care and had fewer chances to make their own decisions, they still found means by which to exercise power in their own way, for example by having the interview recording turned on and off. Interviewees can therefore be empowered to take control of the interview by, for example, telling them at the start that (a) you are interested in hearing their story in order to learn from them (which should be your goal anyway); (b) they do not have to discuss anything they do not wish to, and conversely are able to discuss anything of particular interest to them; and (c) that they can terminate the interview at any point (as stated by ethical guidelines). This is important in providing the interviewee with ownership over their interview, something which can be built upon later by providing the interviewee with a recording of the conversation.

Students of psychology in the UK are repeatedly reminded of the importance of participant anonymity within research. But there are times when this is perhaps inappropriate, and this can often be the case in life history research. People generally get a great deal of pleasure from telling their story, and many feel a need to pass this on to the next generation for posterity. Indeed, Thompson (1988) describes how oral history “helps the less privileged, and especially the old, towards dignity and self-confidence” (p. 31). Removing the name of the interviewee then is to remove ownership from the story, as well as to remove a large part of the context of the story. The Oral History Society therefore suggests that it is a moral right for the interviewee to be named in relation to their contribution, enforced by the 1988 Copyright Act which gives “interviewees the right to be named as the “authors” of their recorded words if they are published or broadcast” (Oral History Society, 2010). That is not to say that anonymity should not be offered, but anonymity should not be the automatic assumption; rather individuality should be respected and the interviewee should be given the option to put their own name to their own story.

There are also cases within oral history where the ethical responsibility goes higher than that of the interviewee. Portelli (1997) suggests that oral historians should be aspiring to make the world a better place by learning from the stories interviewees tell. It is important then that we learn not only from the positive stories, but from those that tell of painful, distressing or nefarious events. Portelli (1997), for example, writes about omitting to tell one interviewee about the context in which he was to place his comments, as well as the interpretation he was planning give to them, in order that he could expose “the Church’s role in political discrimination” (p.66).

3.3 Representativeness

Oral history does not generally aspire to be “representative” of the population, in that it does not seek interviewees to represent the average (Portelli, 1997). Instead, it tries to show a range of experiences, using people who may in actuality lie at the extremes of the population (Portelli, 1997). Portelli (1997) argues that this is important because it shows what could be, suggesting that it is often the case that the imagined possibilities resonate with people more. Take as an example Portelli’s (1997) analysis of the stories printed in two books, *Nam*, and *Bloods*, told by American soldiers who served in Vietnam. Some of the stories involved the rape of Vietnamese women and the killing and mutilation of Vietnamese civilians and soldiers. These stories may not be representative of the stories of the average American in the Vietnam War, but it illustrates the possible dimensions of the war, and hearing these accounts of terrible actions resonates deeply with people, and may be more useful in creating change (Portelli, 1997). To an oral historian then, as with those using methods such as semiotic analysis (e.g. Uzzell, 1984), unrepresentative samples do not pose the same problems that are generally perceived in quantitative psychology, but can be highly valued (although many will still endeavour to produce a representative sample). The danger may come when people believe the sample is representative, and in actuality it is not. This is something, however, which can be easily overcome with proper explanation of the source.

3.4 Subjectivity

Portelli (1991) writes that “oral sources are not *objective*... they are *artificial, variable, and partial*” (p.53). Indeed, subjectivity arises at various different stages in the interview: in the information extracted (and chosen to be extracted) by the interviewer; in the fact that it is impossible to recall all memories; in the relationship between interviewee and interviewer; and in the way in which the oral source is interpreted. But we believe that trying to remove the subjectivity from the oral source is to destroy the richness of the data. Portelli (1997) illustrates this point with the case of Frederick Douglass, a former slave who, as part of his life story, described two of the plantation overseers where he was enslaved. Douglass (Portelli, 1997) described one overseer, whom they aptly named “Mr. Severe”, as a man who took ““pleasure” in tormenting the slaves” (p.80). He then compares this man with “Mr. Hopkins”, who “whipped, but seemed to take no pleasure in it” (p.80, Portelli, 1997). As Portelli suggests, this is simply an interpretation by Douglass of the state of mind of these two individuals, but it is one that we could not have deduced without his (subjective) interpretation. This story then does not tell us a great deal about the actual state of mind of the overseers, but it does tell us something very important about Douglass, and we can look at why he might interpret the situation in this way. It is these interpretations then that provide information which we can use to understand more about the individual.

For the reasons stated earlier (and more), the story told by an interviewee will not be entirely historically accurate: dates, names, and places may be incorrect, and events distorted. But the story has been created that way for a reason, and it tells us a great deal about the interviewee’s attitudes and beliefs (as well as the co-constructed nature of the source). Once again, oral history is refreshing in the way in which it accepts this subjectivity and uses it to enhance understanding of a particular event in time. Portelli (1991), for example, writes that “subjectivity is as much the business of history as are the more visible ‘facts’” (p. 50). Therefore, rather than trying to eliminate subjectivity, we need to learn how to use it to explain the oral source. But it is not always clear within existing research as to how this understanding is achieved. Some researchers (e.g. Portelli, 1997) examine the similarities and disparities between different accounts of the same event, trying to understand why that event has been constructed in that way, and what it suggests about the underlying cultural beliefs and personal attitudes of the interviewees. But details of how this is achieved are often lacking, due largely to the unique nature of each situation, for which the researcher needs to utilise creativity, intuition, and some knowledge of the specific situation in order to interpret the historical events in a specific way. This does however make it difficult to replicate the method in other research and create a clear method of analysis.

One way in which to understand the oral source is to try to examine it in its various constituent parts. Portelli (1997), for example, often examines oral sources in terms of the way in which they are culturally constructed, suggesting that events are constructed along four interrelated axes:

- (1) *The Grammar of Time*: Events are constructed as existing in a discrete moment in time. They are located and identified then along a linear chronological axis, and are often recalled according to where they sit in relation to other events along this axis. They are also often conceptualised according to events which occurred at a similar moment in

time (temporal simultaneity). Whilst in history books events are often conceptualised as existing in a particular period (e.g. the eighties), in a particular year, day, or hour (a syntagmatic structure with one event after another), oral narratives are generally more paradigmatic and less discrete. The grammar of time therefore influences the way in which events are constructed and recalled in oral sources, often creating a merging of similar events which occurred at a similar time in these narratives.

- (2) & (3) *The Social Paradigm and Spatial Referents*: There are three vertical levels by which an event can be discussed in a narrative: (a) the institutional level; (b) the communal level; and (c) the personal level. Each of these has a spatial component, whereby narratives at the personal level generally relate to the home, those at the collective level generally refer to the community, neighbourhood or workplace, and those at the institutional level refer to the nation or the world as a whole. This is a useful way in which to examine behaviours and attitudes because it accepts that they don't just exist on a flat spatial or social plane, but can exist at various levels.
- (4) *The Narrative Point of View*: Portelli (1997) suggests that the choice of speaking in the first, second, and third person (e.g. "I", "we", "they", "us") can tell us a great deal about how the narrator constructs the story and his place within it. In the stories told to Portelli by American soldiers who experienced the Vietnam War, for example, the shift from "I" (first person) to "you" (second person) marks the loss of their identity upon joining the forces and their transformation from being an individual to being a soldier.

The issue of subjectivity then can be reduced through a better understanding the oral source. Yow (1997) suggests that oral historians need to create "(1) understanding [of] the subjective aspects of the research so that (2) we can carry out the project with as much objectivity as possible and use subjectivity to advantage" (p.63). Ultimately then, subjectivity is something useful, and "tell[s] us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did (Portelli, 1997, p.36)"; something that a list of more objective facts cannot do. Other qualitative methods within psychology, such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, do accept the presence of subjectivity, but the oral history method does appear to be fairly unique in its attempt to truly *understand* the subjectivity.

3.5 Memory

Another criticism levelled at oral history, which is related to the issue of subjectivity, is its reliance on memory. Memory is subjective and incomplete, and is not a record of an event or time period, but the interviewee's *representation* of their experience of that event or time period. Memories can often be recalled in a way that places the individual in a more positive light (Howarth, 1998); they may be "phantom memories", based on other sources such as television (Howarth, 1998); and memories of similar experiences can often merge into one (Portelli, 1997). Uzzell (2009) also highlights the problems in relying on memory to create a life story by making several key observations relevant to the present discussion: (1) Even recently collected eyewitness accounts are problematic; (2) "What is now known as the past was not what anyone experienced as the present" (p.5); (3) The interviewee is biased in their telling of the story, and the interviewer is not unbiased in their understanding of it; (4) The retelling of memories is affected by their present day attitudes, values and practices; and (5)

“How we understand the past and the stories we tell about the past change with time” (p.6), under different social conditions and with the addition of new experiences and knowledge of the past. It is also impossible to interview all those who experienced a particular event, and to exhaust all their memories of that event (Portelli, 1997). These factors combined then ensure that memory is not a clear, unbiased recall of events, and that “oral testimony... is never the same twice” (Portelli, 1997, p.39). This then can be considered to be part of the Heraclitus problem, where “you could not step twice into the same river; for other waters are ever flowing on to you”.

This lack of reliability is again not something which is rejected by oral history, but rather it is embraced. For Portelli (1997), “what is really important is that memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings”. Indeed, take the example of the life story of Rigoberta Menchú (Menchú, Burgos-Debray, & Wright, 1984). Rigoberta became highly respected for her life story and the work that she did in highlighting the plight of her people, the indigenous Guatemalans. But inconsistencies emerged in her own story, which told of the hardships which her and her family endured, sparking furious debate and claims of fraudulence on her behalf. Although many of the facts can indeed be called in to question, her story is one which reflects the story of her people within Guatemala, and is in some ways more a story of her culture than her life. But does this mean that we cannot learn from her story, that it tells us nothing because it is not concordant with the historical facts? In actual fact we can learn a great deal: about her beliefs and attitudes; about the dominant cultural discourse of the indigenous Guatemalans; something of her motives and desires, as apparent in the disparities between her story and the historical facts; and something of her actual life experiences, in the parts which other stories and facts suggest are likely to be true. This final point also raises another possibility for oral history, and that is its ability to question other sources of information, and the more established facts of the time (Howarth, 1998, p.viii).

Once again, oral history makes use of what many may see as a weakness by aiming to understand *why* memory has been constructed and recalled in that particular way. For example, in understanding why the point of view differs between the time of the event and subsequent recollection. Portelli (1997) exemplifies this point in his examination of the atrocities committed by American soldiers in Vietnam (described earlier). At the time, or soon after, the crimes were described as fun by the perpetrators, but later on they describe disgust at the crimes, telling us a great deal about the cultural discourse at the time. Portelli (1997) also suggests that the way in which an event is reconstructed is affected by the “the stage of the personal life cycle” at which the interviewee was in at the time of the event. A child, for example, is likely to experience war in a very different way from an adolescent or adult. Portelli (1997) suggests then that although stories may not always be true, they are often told with conviction and may be a metaphor for real-life events: “Stories, in other words, communicate what history means to human beings... [and] what counts is less the event told than the telling of the event” (p.42-43).

3.6 Transcribing and Using Life Histories

Life histories face similar problems to other interview-based research in the way in which the interviews are transcribed and quoted. The majority of analysis of oral sources is not done on the voice recording or video itself, but on a transcript of it, and this inevitably leads to a loss of information: the rhythm change in speech, for example, can convey emotion and attitude change (Portelli, 1991), something which is hard to represent in the written form. Referring back to the previous example then of an interview (conducted by one of the present authors) in which the interviewee became quite emotional whilst remembering her mother, a person reading the transcript will have quite a different understanding of her emotional state to a person listening to the recording, and they in turn will have a different understanding to someone present at the time. The interviewer in this case recognised a range of different emotions: sadness at her mother's loss, perhaps slight embarrassment at the emotional display, but most of all, great joy at the memory of her mother and the knowledge that this could be triggered in various everyday situations, such as seeing one of her mother's cookery recipes. In the transcript however, this was initially represented as a pause and a note reading "tearful laugh". There is no easy solution to this problem, but we have found that it is particularly important to include clear emotional indicators in the transcripts, which although is difficult to represent accurately, greatly enhances understanding.

The use of only select passages from a transcript in the dissemination of the interview can also be problematic, in that it removes the context in which the interview was given, and the context of the question asked by the interviewer. Howarth (1998) criticises the use of poorly edited interviews, which lack "even basic information about context, informants, date of recording, [and] place" (p.vi), as failing to meet professional standards and often offering "inaccurate glimpses into the past" (p.vi). As far as possible then, the context by which the reader can understand the passage should be given, as well as contextual information about the interviewee and the circumstances of the recording. The writer should also remain faithful to the interview, and not be tempted to take a quote out of context in order to support their point. In line with this, Armitage (in Armitage & Gluck, 2007), suggests that the interviewer "can't simply lay her interpretation on what she's heard... we have to be faithful to the meanings the narrators give to their lives" (p.78). Within the analysis phase then, Armitage suggests that the researcher consult with others with regards to the meanings that they are deriving from the text, to ensure these meanings are faithful (in Armitage & Gluck, 2007). But perhaps most importantly, the writer should ensure that the process by which they arrive at a particular interpretation is a transparent one, providing all the necessary information leading up to it, so that they can follow this path and arrive at their own interpretation

3.7 Applications of Oral History

The way in which oral history research is applied appears to be quite different in its underlying assumptions from that of most psychology research. Armitage and Gluck (2007) suggest that oral history "can advance our knowledge, but also empower people to contribute to social change" (p.75). Similarly, Thompson (1988) suggests that "history... should provide... understanding which helps towards change" (p.31), and that "a history is

required which leads to action: not to confirm, but to change the world". Portelli (1997) also appears to consider himself an activist, who hopes to create change using oral history narratives. Oral historians then, believe that there is a need to learn from the experiences of others and use them to help improve lives and the world as a whole. Portelli (1997) also suggests that the research process itself is a form of intervention, which contributes to change. There may be a tendency for some psychologists, on the other hand, to see themselves more as impartial communicators of knowledge. But we would argue that psychologists and oral historians may not be using the knowledge in such different ways. After all, some psychologists try to understand patterns of behaviour in order to help direct those behaviours towards more desirable ones.

A more unique application of oral history is in the way in which it empowers the people who contribute, read or listen to it. Oral history, by giving a voice to people who may be suppressed, or less often heard, allows them to tell their story. The very fact that someone is eager to hear their story can increase their sense of worth, and if this is taken with interest by the community, then this feeling is deepened. Oral history can also empower the community, and give them a sense of history, which may act to increase their sense of pride and attachment to that community. For example, the East Midlands Oral History Archive collect oral history narratives from those who have experienced migration, using events and information on the website to "draw out the shared experiences and the unique circumstances of people who have arrived in the East Midlands from elsewhere", bringing together those from different backgrounds according to this shared identity. And indeed, Thompson (1988) suggests that the undertaking of oral history "makes for contact – and thence understanding – between social classes, and between generations" (p.31). For this reason then, it is crucial to provide the public with access to the recordings by placing them in public libraries, and not exclusively in academic databases.

4. Conclusions

This paper has attempted to explore some of the principles and assumptions of the life history approach and has examined ways in which it can be used effectively. It is a rich methodology which has the potential to elicit detailed information and understanding, and add a great deal to our understanding within the social sciences. The assumptions underpinning the method provide a refreshing take on problems of memory and representativeness amongst others, often viewing them as opportunities to gather more information, rather than being construed as methodological weaknesses. We believe that those from other disciplines, in particular the social sciences, can gain a great deal in applying it to their own research.

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