

Oral History and Human Geography

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter describes how oral history can be used in geographical research. After defining oral history, we outline the aspects that make it unique and distinguish it from other forms of interviewing. These aspects include establishing rapport, dealing with sensitive issues, understanding the ethics of interviewing, ways to ask questions, and the importance of sound quality.

INTRODUCTION

It was a blinking dust storm. Every time you come up to Loxton there was you got off the track oh well that's where you was until you got yourself out again and it was always blowing dust. I thought 'Gawd' I always used to say, 'Fancy living up in this hole.' [Ruth Scadden, in George 1999a, 161]

These are the words of Ruth Scadden, the wife of a soldier settler who was eyewitness to a wave of major environmental change in the horticultural town of Loxton in South Australia's Riverland after World War II. Over the past 60 years, this 'dust bowl' farming area has been gradually transformed into an irrigated settlement producing citrus fruits, grapes, and stone fruits for Australian and overseas markets. When interviewed in 1999, Ruth had begun to witness a further wave of change as long-term irrigation revealed its impact on the River Murray, a situation that has now become critical. Her perceptions, understanding of rural life, and representations of that life to others are threads of everyday and ordinary existence whose cumulative weavings constitute a rich tapestry of local geographical knowledge.

Ultimately what has always struck me as being remarkably interesting about how one is influenced is that there is a local geography involved. For example, when I was working in Bougainville, there was one other academic working on the island, an anthropologist, and simply because we met fairly frequently we managed to produce two or three joint articles together, and that situation seems to me to have always continued. So there are these local factors which no one can actually build into an intellectual trajectory or even practical planning, have been incredibly important at how one actually shapes what it is one does. [John Connell, geographer]

These are the recollections of a scholar in the field, recorded during an interview for the Institute of Australian Geographers' Millennium Project on Australian Geography and Geographers. His words trace just some of the complex lines that ultimately form the web of an individual's life experiences and locales.

This chapter outlines the basic scope of oral history as a technique to gather information, insights, and knowledge from participants in social research—people such as Ruth Scadden and John Connell. It describes how oral history can be a powerful source of **situated learning** and how it can facilitate enhanced understandings of space, place, region, landscape, and environment—the five central filaments of human geography. Importantly, the chapter also summarizes a range of ethical, technical, and communicative guidelines for the effective conduct of oral history.

WHAT IS ORAL HISTORY, AND WHY USE IT IN GEOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH?

The practice of oral history involves a prepared interviewer recording a particular kind of interview. The interview is usually conducted in an informal question-and-answer format with a person who has first-hand knowledge of a subject of interest. Background preparation allows the interviewer to follow up responses and prompt further information. Oral history interviews may concern a very specific subject, or cover an entire lifespan, or trace a complex issue that unfolds over time.

Historian Allan Nevins first used the term 'oral history' in the 1940s to describe a project at Columbia University in which the memories of a group of *significant* Americans were recorded (Robertson 2006, 3). While '*oral tradition*' as a method of passing stories down through generations has existed for centuries, *oral history* was defined differently because its aim was to record the firsthand knowledge and experience of participants. During the 1960s and 1970s, the value of oral history in discovering and preserving the experiences of *ordinary* people was recognized. Since then, oral history has become an important tool for

studying hidden histories and geographies, the place-based lives and memories of disadvantaged people, minority groups, and others whose views have been ignored or whose lives pass quietly, producing few if any written records. In short, there are insights to be gained from oral histories to better understand space, place, landscape, region, and environment in ways that are sensitive to context (see, for example, Andrews et al. 2006; Stratford 1997).

American geographer Isaiah Bowman suggested that 'Geography tells what is where, why and what of it' (in Rivera 1997). Acknowledging that this definition no longer fully represents the complexity of the discipline but borrowing Bowman's phraseology in any case, oral history tells what happened, how, why, and what it was like from a personal perspective. For this reason, it has become a useful tool in human geography, illuminating how recollections and representations are placed over extended periods and enabling researchers and participants to track and understand changes across spatial scales as well as temporal ones. In this respect, oral history has been described as the voice of the past (Thompson 2000) and as 'a picture of the past in people's own words' (Robertson 2006, 2). As a research method, it provides a means to step back to the mix of past times and places *as they are mediated* through the words and memories of another person in the present.

Another way of thinking about oral history in relation to human geography is to acknowledge that people witness and engage in all manner of change, including environmental change—and here we mean 'environment' broadly as 'that which surrounds'. While documents and photographs may tell part of the story, eyewitness accounts can deepen the image and provide unique or specific detail from many different perspectives (Sackett 2005). Take, for example, how oral history helps to uncover people's experiences of the built environment and to trace the narratives of their geographical engagements there. As oral historian for the Adelaide city council, Karen George learned from statistical records in annual reports that during the 1950s and 1960s the population of the city declined markedly. Many buildings were declared unfit for human habitation, and residents were forced out of the city as it was being transformed into a business district. Only when she interviewed such former residents did Karen understand the significance of this phenomenon. The city was the home of individual families *and* also a community and a support network; destruction of homes resulted in the breakdown of both. People described meeting places that no longer existed and reminisced about people they used to see every day. From such stories Karen reconstructed an image of the city before the exodus. Interviews with a health inspector who had declared many of the houses unfit allowed her to see the event from another perspective. Ironically, events have now gone full circle, and the council has vigorously encouraged people to move back to the city to live and to build new community networks and sense of place (City of Adelaide Oral History Collection, Adelaide City Archives).

A second example shows that oral history can uncover the way that geographers themselves understand their professional contributions to how space, place, region, landscape, and environment are constituted (Matless, Oldfield, and Swain 2007; Powell 2008). As coordinator of the Institute of Australian Geographers Millennium Project between 1996 and 2001, Elaine Stratford encouraged members of the profession to undertake oral histories with eminent geographers (Stratford 2001; see also Hay 2003b; Rugendyke 2005; Sheridan 2001). Participants were asked to give some thought to the contributions that geography has made or may make to Australian society. Two responses begin to hint at the wealth of disciplinary knowledge that can be gained by the extended and in-depth interview style of oral history.

I think that geography could continue its contribution to the development of Australian society by expanding the public imagination and . . . values about [the public's] . . . relationship with the environment and so on. Because it is a very special place here, a very special environment with special needs and so on. [Joseph Powell]

I think geography has made an enormous contribution. It would be difficult to look at that in its totality because different geographers are obviously looking at that component from the perspective of the work that they themselves have done. I think geography has contributed or could contribute again enormously to the understanding of the habitation of this country and what this means for the future. [Elsbeth Young]

HOW IS ORAL HISTORY DIFFERENT FROM INTERVIEWING?

In Chapter 6, Kevin Dunn describes in detail how to conduct research interviews. Most of his guidelines hold true for oral history. However, oral history practice does differ from interview practice in a number of ways, which we set out in the sections below.

Perhaps one of the clearer differences between interviewing for research and conducting oral history interviews is that many elements in the oral history process place particular emphasis on the role of the participant. Through preparations and techniques that make a participant comfortable with recording an interview, oral historians aim to record as natural, rounded, and complete a story as possible.

Starting Ethically

Matt Bradshaw and Elaine Stratford note in Chapter 4 that it is a significant matter to engage with research participants and share, interpret, and represent

their experiences. Therefore, these acts require an ethical approach. Oral history work involving researchers from post-secondary institutions must be assessed and approved by those institutions' ethics committees (see Chapter 2). Similarly, private practitioners must be ethical in their approach, and membership in oral history associations demands this. Thus, in describing below the various stages and techniques of oral history, we assume that ethical considerations and/or clearances are in place before research commences—a matter that has parallels with interviewing more generally and on which Keyin Dunn elaborates in Chapter 6 of this volume.

The Oral History Association of Australia (<http://www.ohaa.net.au>) was established in 1978 to promote the practice and methods of oral history, educate in the ethical use of oral history methods, encourage discussion on all aspects of oral history, and foster the preservation of oral history records. There are branches of the association in each state. As well as providing advice and training in oral history, the association has drawn up 'Guidelines for ethical practice' (<http://www.ohaa.net.au/guidelines.htm>). It strongly advises that these guidelines, which protect the rights of both participant and interviewer, are followed by anyone involved in oral or life history. A similar organization exists in Canada (<http://www.canoha.ca>), and others thrive internationally: in the UK (<http://www.ohs.org.uk>), the US (<http://www.dickinson.edu/oha>), and New Zealand (<http://www.oralhistory.org.nz>). Many oral historians belong to the International Oral History Association (<http://www.ioha.fgv.br>).

Getting to Know Your Participant—The Preliminary Meeting

Establishing rapport with a participant is integral to success. Oral historians use a particular approach to help establish rapport, and the **preliminary meeting** is a key part of it. After contact by letter, telephone, Internet, e-mail, or other appropriate means, the interviewer arranges a meeting, usually at the home of the participant or another place of his or her choice. No audio recorder is produced at this orientation session. Rather, the time is used to establish a relationship, gather background information, and 'assess' the participant and interview environment. Some interviewers use an information sheet to record information about their informant, such as where and when they were born, aspects of their school, employment, and/or personal background, and other data that might be pertinent to the interview. Although much of this material might be covered again in the recorded interview, preliminary notes establish context and ensure accuracy—for instance, in spelling and pronunciation.

The preliminary meeting also offers the interviewer opportunities to ask to see materials that may enhance research. News clippings, letters, diaries, or photographs may suggest new questions not previously considered. If a new topic is

raised during the interview proper, you may be unprepared to ask questions about it. If it emerges in a preliminary session, you have time to conduct further research about it before the interview.

'Assessing' the participant sounds clinical, but some people remember things and are able to talk about them more readily than others. You may find that someone you thought would provide you with great material remembers very little, is extremely nervous, or is overly wary about their responses. Thus, at a preliminary meeting you have the opportunity to defer or cancel the interview by telling your participant that he or she has already provided what you needed. This strategy can prevent the embarrassment for both participant and interviewer of a stilted recording, filled with clipped responses and phrases like 'I don't remember', 'I don't recall'.

Sensitive Issues

If a project deals with sensitive issues (including personal, political, or professional details that may require the researcher to guarantee the confidentiality of parts of the oral history transcript), a preliminary meeting will allow you to discover how your participant feels about answering particular questions or exploring aspects or phases of their life or the subject under investigation. Even when interviewing in a subject area that seems straightforward and non-contentious, it is good practice to assure participants of their right to refuse to answer a question or to withdraw from the research altogether without prejudice. Discussing these matters in advance saves embarrassment during an interview and allows participants to think in advance about what they might wish to say about difficult subjects.

Sensitive subjects can arise unexpectedly during an interview. If this happens, exercise care and consideration. Ask your participant if she or he wishes to continue or would rather stop. If they wish to continue, let them speak. If the subject material becomes very personal and you think that it should be excluded, let the participant know this. University ethics committees (e.g. research ethics boards, institutional review boards) may make the useful suggestion that if the participant is distressed, you might ask whether they would like you to call a friend or family member or refer them to a helpful counsellor.

After the interview is over, allow time for winding down. Winding down can be as simple as accepting another cup of tea or listening to other stories not related to the research subject.

Multiple Interviews

Unless there are unavoidable constraints, oral history recordings with a participant may be completed over several sessions. When longer recordings are feasible,

individual sessions may be confined to an hour or so and second and subsequent occasions used to complete the history.

Multiple interviews can be very valuable. There is time between appointments for you to listen to the initial recording and note responses to enlarge upon later. Participants may also reflect on their answers: remembering triggers further memories to be shared at ensuing meetings. By a third or even fourth meeting, a bond between interviewer and participant has usually developed, which can result in an even better interview.

The Question of Questions

Open questions are integral to effective oral history. These questions begin with words such as who, what, where, when, why, and how. They reveal who was involved in an event, what happened, where and when it happened, how it felt, and why that was so. They yield the details that make oral history such an effective source of nuanced (if always partial) recollections.

In Chapter 6, Kevin Dunn refers to secondary questions or 'prompts', which oral historians often label **follow-up questions**. They often comprise the body of an interview. Most are prompted by a participant's response to an initial question. If a participant says that his or her first day on the job was 'frightening', the logical follow-up question is 'why?' or 'in what way?' If he or she responds by saying that 'fellow-workers were aggressive', a logical follow-up question is 'can you give me an example?' Through follow-up questions, great depth may be added to the detail of information being sought.

Interview Structure

Oral histories can appear to be 'unstructured', but such is not really the case. Interview guides or aides-mémoire are often used. Interviews in the tradition of oral histories can often be divided into a three-part format, comprising orientation, common, and specific questions. As Robertson (2006, 22) points out, this

three part structure provides an excellent framework for interviews. It helps you to avoid aimless or superficial interviews and it can lead to recordings that are easier to use for research, publication or broadcast because of their well-defined structure and focus.

Orientation questions establish the participant's background. **Common questions** are those asked of each participant in a project. They build up varying views and information about certain themes. **Specific questions** relate to individual experiences and are developed through follow-up work. The flow of an interview is determined by participant responses, so follow-up questions are always different across interviews.

Questioning the Source

As the sections above suggest, oral history is active and shared; you can question the source. For example, as part of Karen George's South Australian research on War Service Land Settlement after 1945, she consulted written records of applicant interviews with the Land Board. Although these documents included board members' notes about applicant responses, she could not ask them, 'What do you mean by that?' When conducting oral histories with people who had appeared before the board, she could. Karen then created as complete a picture of those board interviews as memory allowed. She was able to ask what happened that particular day, what the interviewers were like, how respondents felt about the questions when they were asked and after the experience (George 1999a).

Sound Quality, Interview Sites, and Other Technical Issues

Oral history is *always* recorded via audio, and sometimes audio-visual, technologies and predominantly on digital tape recorders; 'solid state' recorders that use compact flash memory cards, or that record onto a hard disc, are highly recommended (Robertson 2006, 43–44), because a significant aim of recording interviews is to create enduring sound documents. Oral history preserves the participants' voices and content of their interviews. High-quality sound allows the emotion, inflections, and tone of each voice to be heard. It is also important because material may be used for broadcast. Background noises, interruptions, substandard recording equipment, and a too-talkative interviewer diminish sound quality.

Because you are recording a unique sound document, it is important to record interviews in a location that is as quiet as possible and to use the best equipment available. Oral history associations in all countries are the best place to approach with inquiries about renting equipment. High-quality recorders are often available on loan from libraries and, in Australia, from branches of the Oral History Association of Australia (OHAA). Some of these organizations run workshops on conducting oral history and the correct use of recording equipment.

Robertson's *Oral History Handbook* is an excellent source of information and advice on all recording equipment, from budget-priced to super high-quality (Robertson 2006, ch. 4). Recording technology is constantly undergoing change, and new digital recording devices are now becoming available. It may be prudent to seek professional advice from organizations such as your national oral history association before investing in new equipment. If you use digital recording technology, you must remember to download sound files after each interview and ensure that back-up copies of work are saved in secure settings, especially if you have promised to do so as part of the ethical commitments of the project. It is often very valuable to work in conjunction with a major university library or

state/provincial library. For instance, the University of California at Berkeley has a regional oral history office. In South Australia, if you agree to deposit recordings (with signed conditions of use agreements) into the oral history collection, you are given free access to a top-quality recorder and your recordings will be digitally preserved and copies made on CD for you and your participant. Check relevant libraries to see whether they offer similar arrangements.

No matter what type of recorder you are using, always try to find a quiet place free from interruptions to conduct an interview. Recording high-quality sound means that extracts from your recordings can easily be broadcast or used in museum interpretations, on websites or CDs, or for audio walking tours. This quality also makes any transcription and analysis much easier. Note that workplaces are among the worst locations, whereas private homes usually offer a dining or living room, both of which can be quieter. Avoid kitchens whenever possible. Refrigerators are renowned for droning away in the background or cutting in and out with a thump. Ticking or chiming clocks should be stopped or removed because their regular pulse in the background is distracting. If you cannot avoid background noises completely, such as traffic sounds on a busy road, direct the interviewee's microphone away from the noise. Close doors and windows to minimize background noises. If you talk about these things at your preliminary meeting, participants will usually help out and not think you are rude when you ask them to stop great-grandmother's cuckoo clock or turn off the fridge!

Interpreting non-verbal responses and gestures is common to oral histories and other interviews. The comment 'It was about this big' needs to be translated by the interviewer into 'about a metre high'. It is best to convey these details on tape, since you might forget them later. Recall, too, that an interviewer's verbal responses can be detrimental to a sound recording, particularly one for broadcast purposes. A litany of 'yes, yes', 'mmm', 'oh really', or 'wow' remarks that commonly occur in a conversation interrupts the recorded flow of a story. Respond with a nod or a smile instead. Let participants know you will remain quiet *and* involved. Listen to your own recordings to gauge how silent you actually are. A pause, a moment of quiet may be the instant before the best story (see Chapter 6 for additional discussion). Oral history also can be a demanding process for participants, and they may need time to stop and reflect. Be sure to allow them this time. Silence on tape can also be very emotive. Long seconds of silence recorded in the midst of a painful story reveal a struggle with strong emotions better than words ever could.

WHY AND HOW TO MAKE ORAL HISTORY ACCESSIBLE

Interviews conducted for research often have very limited circulation. However, in oral history interviews are encouraged to deposit their recordings in libraries

or archives. This step ensures the preservation of master or original recordings, and if the participant has agreed, allows recordings to be made available to other researchers. It is always worthwhile to search oral history collections *before* you begin an interview to make sure that your informant has not already been interviewed and to check whether there are other recordings that might provide data for your project. Even interviews concerning completely different topics may contain useful information. For example, since the majority of the men and women Karen George (1999a) interviewed about soldier settlement in South Australia grew up during the Depression of the 1930s, a researcher interested in that period of history could glean a lot of information from their answers to questions about their backgrounds and childhoods.

Another advantage of depositing recordings in a library is that some larger repositories offer limited assistance with the transcription of interviews. Whether you produce full transcripts, **timed tape logs** (which note subjects discussed at different time points in the recording), or broad interview summaries is normally dependent on the project's aim and on funding. Professional transcription is expensive but worthwhile if material from interviews is to be reproduced in a publication. It is worth noting here that professional transcribers are trained to reflect pauses and the unique cadences of the spoken word through punctuation and layout. Transcripts are rarely completely verbatim because it is common for participants to feel concerned about their poor grammar, repetitions, and crutch phrases (such as 'you know') when they see them in print (see Chapter 6 for additional discussion on this matter).

Making interviews, both recordings and transcripts, accessible to others should only be done with the signed agreement of your participants. It is essential that you draft a **conditions of use form** outlining what will happen to the material they share with you—what their rights are, who will own copyright, where the recorded interview will be stored and for how long, and what it will be used for. Although participants should be encouraged to share their stories with a wide audience, they should also be allowed to add conditions to this agreement, to restrict portions of the recording—or indeed the entire interview—until after their death if they wish.

USES OF ORAL HISTORY—SPREADING THE WORD

As well as depositing oral history recordings into libraries or archives and using information from interviews in published and unpublished writing, there are other ways to share the results of your work. If you have made high-quality recordings, the possibilities are extensive. While quotations from interviews can be presented in displays and on the Internet in written form, it can be even more effective to use sound excerpts. Sound bytes used on a webpage allow users to

hear as well as read about your interviews. Listening posts—that is, posts with speakers in them—may be used as part of exhibitions, or portions of interviews can be used in audio commentary.

Well-recorded interviews offer much scope for presentation to groups, in radio, film, and video. For example, the voices of long-term employees of Balfours, one of the last city-based factories in Adelaide, were used effectively in conjunction with video recording of the working of the bakery (Starkey and George 2003). Using images and oral history excerpts, the project recorded and preserved images and descriptions of the original factory and of the processes that have not been used since the factory relocated to modern suburban premises. Certainly, narration may be made much more engaging when excerpts from oral histories are played in conjunction with visual materials. Similarly, when Karen George conducted an interview with a long-time printer in 2008, she also recorded the sounds of early linotype and printing machines, some of which may never be operated again after the printer's death. The sounds of the machines have the potential of being used in conjunction with oral history, photographs, and video footage in an interactive museum display—or they could be used as part of an audio walk (see, for example, Butler 2007).

LAST WORDS

Geography's central concern is to understand people in place, spatial relations, landscapes, regions, and environments. It also aims to contribute to research-based outcomes that advance well-being. For many geographers, these composite tasks involve philosophical and political investments in learning about—rather than appropriating—marginal, informal, and otherwise undocumented perspectives (see Chapters 3 and 13) as well as in comprehending those that are central, formal, and documented. Like those of the interview or focus group, oral history techniques allow both researchers and participants to explore the nuances of social and spatial interactions, events, and processes in ways that can make these goals possible. However, in the pursuit of these goals, never forget that your 'source' is another human being, a person sharing with you a distinctive and valuable gift—their memory.

KEY TERMS

- | | |
|------------------------|---------------------|
| common questions | listening posts |
| conditions of use form | multiple interviews |
| follow-up question | open questions |

orientation questions	sound document
preliminary meeting	specific questions
situated learning	timed tape logs

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the ethical issues associated with the use of oral history?
2. What are some of the relationships between oral history and human geography?
3. What are some of the ways in which oral history might help you explore an area of human geography in which you are interested?
4. Develop an idea for an oral history project, prepare a list of potential participants, and search existing oral history collections for previously recorded interviews on related topics.
5. Record an interview, paying particular attention to sound quality. Develop a multi-media spoken or web-based presentation using excerpts from the interview combined with other media—such as photographs and documents. You could present this as a talk or on the web.
6. Develop a conditions of use form to be used in conjunction with one of the two projects above.

USEFUL RESOURCES

- Baylor University, Institute for Oral History. 2008. 'Introduction to oral history'. <http://www.baylor.edu/oral%5fhistory/index.php?id=23566>.
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