

Oral History

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The method of Oral History is originally a method of the historical sciences. Among other contemporary testimonies, such as documents, the narratives of contemporary witnesses represent an important source of knowledge. Today, however, narrated remembrance is also used in many other contexts and not only within the historical sciences. In the course of an oral history project, testimonies of living people are collected about their own experiences. With the help of these reconstructed memories of everyday worldly references, life stories can be collected and preserved. The preservation of these stories from contemporary witnesses is central because history is made up of stories and constitutes an essential basis for collective and individual identities. This is especially true for minorities and vulnerable groups. Oral history aims above all to preserve the memories, experiences and insights of older generations for future generations. The method of oral history thus represents a comprehensive possibility for the preservation of experiences and stories, which can be of great significance in numerous respects and can be used in a wide variety of contexts.

Rationale:

At the heart of Oral history are the stories of contemporary witnesses. In order to collect these stories, a planned exchange with the witnesses is necessary. Since it is above all a question of stimulating free narratives, it is better to refrain from firm interview guidelines. Rather, the contemporary witnesses should be encouraged to tell their stories freely and allowed to recount their own focus and situation-specific dynamics. More important is the analysis and interpretation of the narratives in the aftermath. It must be considered that the stories are subjectively felt and interpreted realities. This does not mean that they are unreliable, but rather that the specific backgrounds and contexts of the emergence of these life stories must be considered (Thompson & Bornat, 2017).

Organizational requirements, equipment and materials:

For the implementation of oral history projects, little material is needed. Only tools for recording the exchange with the contemporary witnesses are necessary. These can be cameras or audio devices. It should be discussed in advance with the contemporary witnesses to what extent they agree to such a recording. Depending on the context in which the recording was made, it may be necessary to protect the identity of the

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eyewitness and anonymise the data obtained. Irrespective of this, data obtained through exchange with third parties should be treated sensitively. In order to work with the data later, computers and appropriate software as well as archiving options are needed.

Securing the access and the collaboration of communities:

For oral history it is first of special importance to find appropriate contemporary witnesses and secondly to step into a trusting exchange with them. An oral history project may well be carried out by a larger group. Depending on the situation, one or two persons from the project group could be involved in an exchange with the contemporary witness. This can happen in a neutral place in public. Perhaps the contemporary witness would like to be questioned at home, because they have memorabilia there that they would like to include in the story. There is also the possibility of inviting the contemporary witnesses to a lesson, so that they can tell their story in front of a larger group. It is important to consider the wishes of the contemporary witness, e.g. for privacy or anonymity. In any case, the exchange must be well prepared and re-prepared.

Implementation process:

According to J. Myer (1999), the process of an oral history project can be divided into the following steps:

1. Formulate a central question or issue.
2. Plan the project. Consider such things as end products, budget, publicity, evaluation, personnel, equipment, and time frames.
3. Conduct background research.
4. Interview.
5. Process interviews.
6. Evaluate research and interviews and cycle back to step 1 or go on to step 7.
7. Organize and present results.
8. Store materials archivally.

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Outcomes:

Oral history can be used to discover, process and preserve a wide variety of stories. The stories from the everyday lives of those affected, offer students a variety of new perspectives on phenomena that they might otherwise only know from books. At the same time, such narratives are also important when it comes to questions of belonging and identity. Experiences of exclusion and discrimination can be re-experienced and their meaning re-evaluated and re-framed. It is important to carefully process and interpret the stories, to integrate them into images of oneself and others, and thus to preserve a valuable source of experience and knowledge over generations.

Useful Literature:

Atkinson, P. (Ed.) (2007). *Narrative methods. Oral history and testimony*. London: Sage.

Dunaway, D. K., & Baum, W. K. (Eds.) (1996). *Oral history – An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (2nd Ed.). London: Sage.

Thompson, P., & Bormat, J. (2017). *The Voice of the Past* (4rd Ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.

Ritchie, D. A. (Ed.) (2011). *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Useful Links:

Oral History Society, UK: <https://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/getting-started/>

Baylor Institute for Oral History: <https://www.baylor.edu/oralhistory/>

Step-by-Step Guide to Oral History by Judith Moyer:

http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html

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