

Conference Report:

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Analysing Recorded Interviews: Making Sense of Oral History. British Library in London, November 29th, 2003, organised by the Oral History Society in conjunction with the British Library Sound Archive

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Abstract: In this article the author reviews the one day Conference held in London at the British Library which provided an opportunity to discuss different ways of analysing and making sense of transcribed interviews using various approaches. These approaches have been discussed in order to assist researchers during the process of identification of themes, through comparisons, analysis, and the drawing of conclusions. The debates which emerged included ways of analysing oral history data through participative approaches discussing issues around often sensitive topics. The report outlines the issues covered giving a critical summary of the event, which has helped to expose newcomers to oral history.

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1. Making Sense of Oral History

"Analysing Recorded Interviews: Making Sense of Oral History" was the title of the one-day Conference organised by the Oral History Society in conjunction with the British Library Sound Archive on the 29th November 2003. Held at the British Library in London, the aims of this original and illuminating conference was to present and explore the different ways in which oral historians, researchers from qualitative approaches, and history practitioners make sense of the words they record. Issues and approaches around the way researchers extract patterns and themes from interviews were discussed and looked at both through old fashion techniques and more advanced computer-based approaches. Difficult issues of ethics and copyrights were also discussed, looking at the ways in which we can deal with such sensitive issues, the way we can (and cannot) present data, and the methods with which to deal with these sensitive health and social care topics. An interesting and insightful exploration of the process of collaboration between the researcher and narrator raised further issues of interpretation of oral history and the vulnerability with which both, narrator and researcher can get exposed. [1]

2. Knowledge Making Through Interviews

Dr. Joanna BORNAT from the Open University introduced the background for the whole Conference eliciting questions on how can we construct ideas and knowledge in order to make sense of interviews. What are the ways in which we begin to read the transcript and whom do we bring into the analysis? The process is very complex where our own biographies (constituted by our recent reading, our stories and our scripts) become parts of the analysis. She suggested that our views of the world are also brought into the landscape, with our different disciplinary backgrounds and training. This issue is embedded within qualitative methodologies and epistemologies where the role of the researcher becomes part of the researched material (ALVESSON & SKOLBERG, 2000). Questions were raised concerning who we see in the transcript and what we are looking for in terms of "shape" of stories. What are their reasons for telling their stories and, very important, what do we *not* see within the transcript that may give us more meaningful and insightful explanations. In the process of conducting interviews/analysis, Joanna BORNAT challenged issues of homogeneity and the role of objectivity; acknowledging rather than apologising for the privileges that we may have during the research process. She also discussed the importance of celebrating the differences between people, because what matters is the knowledge and lessons we learn from them. [2]

The joint Editor of Oral History, the Society's bi-annual publication, Dr. Al THOMPSON from the University of Sussex presented an informative picture on the ways we can make interpretation explicit and at which point should analysis begin through project design, interviewing documentation, and organisation. He emphasised the importance of the dialectical process between the researched and researcher where conversation, reflection, and analysis are on the same continuum. It was suggested that immersion in the material is necessary from the word "go", but not letting ourselves drown in it with overwhelming feelings of breathlessness. Al THOMPSON talked extensively of the importance of imagination and creativity during the process of data gathering and analysis, which may make positivist social scientists who look for visible, measurable and tangible realities seethe. Creativity not chaos, imagination and yet organisation. The responsibilities of researchers and oral historians include rigour in recounting what the story tells us without falling into journalism or fiction (which have their own validity). The story teller's sense of identity was brought into light and the differences which exist between "the Narrated Self" and "the Narrating Self". The dynamic relationship between these two ways of telling about the Self is fundamental in the way pasts and presents are shaped and in the way this influences the whole story. Different forms of expressions, the meaning of silences, repetitions, visual and oral cues, cultural and linguistic codes used by the narrators are all elements, which give nuances to the script. And these nuances need to be acknowledged. Al THOMPSON also discussed the importance of narrative genres, in which subtle explanations and meanings can be revealed through disappointment, hope, unfulfilled plans or a sense of anticipation. In this maze of multifaceted elements the researcher needs to be in

tune with and attentive to his or her interviewees, which can make the whole process very exhausting. [3]

Dr. Wendy RICKARD from South Bank University discussed the difficult issues of "Ethics" through an example of a sensitive social care topic: The story told by a sexual worker and her experiences as a mother. Definitions of ethical issues were presented at the outset with PLUMMER's definition (1995), who identifies ethics as being the study of human conduct and values. WENGRAF (2000) defines ethics as a way of explicitly going beyond the simple recycling of verbatim data. These definitions alone are up for discussion. Whose decision is it to use certain data? Is the interviewee really aware and conscious (is she or he intellectually and emotionally prepared) for the consequences and vulnerabilities which may develop well after the interview has taken place? The safeguards of confidentiality/anonymity may be considered just contemporary disguises in order to protect our interviewees, but they are far from becoming the real safety nets to protect them from themselves. Wendy RICKARD suggested that we become the guardians of transcripts/tapes, and thereby taking on the responsibility of protecting their authors. This issue led to a discussion of the problems around agency and authorship and the problems of editing material. What material can we edit and when can we safely do it? A life history is a "work in progress" as much as many qualitative approaches from ethnomethodologies, semi-structured interviews, content-analysis, discourse analysis and interpretative phenomenological analysis (SMITH, 1996). Can the researcher feel satisfied with the final product; indeed, is it ever finished? Whose story is it at the end? [4]

3. Collaborative Interpretation

These profound questions were left unanswered, but they seemed to have aroused in the Conference participants a desire to seek further solutions and possibly new paths to be taken. A self-analysis seems to have spread as a result of asking such deep questions, placing the researcher, oral historian, academic, and all researchers in general in a position of responsibility. The work of interpretation and analysis does not finish with the final product but regenerates itself through a process of constant change and progress. [5]

The Conference set out to discuss the challenges and opportunities faced by oral historians and researchers employing a qualitative approach. It aimed at highlighting the strengths and pitfalls of this paradigm, delineating interesting questions. The last presentation was done by Lorraine SITZIA, author of a biography of a war veteran. She explored the process of collaboration during the interpretative stages of interviews and the constant comparison with the narrator version, which raised issues for both researcher and researched. Although there was only a total of four speakers, the richness and depth of their presentations allowed a wide and engaging audience to reflect and debate those issues. The dynamic means of exploring the present and the past, the ways of capturing memories and the testimonies and stories of individuals can only enrich our knowledge, illuminating the way forward for all qualitative research. [6]

The next Annual Conference of the Oral History Society will investigate the challenges and opportunities of putting oral history on display and will be held next June 2004 (12th-13th) at Bournemouth University, Dorset, UK.¹ [7]

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1 The Oral History Society will give access to regional contacts across the country with advance details of forthcoming Conferences, meetings and international events. Website: <http://www.oralhistory.org.uk/>.