

Being a ‘backward traveller’: the politics of life history

Sharon Clancy discusses how oral history approaches can be applied to both historical and contemporary research.

Undertaking research, and our choice of the methodology or methodologies which underpin it, is a profoundly political act. We choose who to give voice to, and how to record their experiences. Research, therefore, cannot be neutral.

In research for my own thesis, which explored a historical adult residential college (the Shropshire Adult Education College, 1948-1976), I chose oral history as a research method as I believed it offered an individual voice to former college staff, students and tutors, whilst placing them in a social, cultural and economic context. This combination of the individual’s own story and the wider history of their times is important. As Goodson and Sikes have argued, ‘Life story individualises and personalises, the life history contextualises and politicizes’ (Goodson and Sikes, 2001, pp87-88). In my approach I wanted to emphasise the importance of society and the ‘situated context’ over a celebration of the ‘idiosyncrasies of the individual’, locating life history in contradistinction to life story, with the researcher and the ‘story teller’ working collaboratively to achieve an inter-textual and inter-contextual account.

Since its inception in the 1950s and 1960s, oral history has focused on reclaiming the past, ‘history from below’, giving voice to the dispossessed and the historically silent, offering people previously unrecorded a place in history. As the power of the labour movement grew, recognising and recording the lived experience of the working man and woman was understood as part of the process of democratisation, as formal history was revealed as the story space of the wealthy, powerful and aristocratic.

At Ruskin College in Oxford, Marxist historian Raphael Samuel began the History Workshops in the 1960s with the express intention of

democratising history. He argued that the gathering of history, such as through the work of local historians and community members, was a means of taking history back by people, for themselves: ‘if history was thought of as an activity rather than a profession, then the number of its practitioners would be legion’ (Samuel, 1994, p6).

George Ewart Evans, a key early exponent of oral history, described the historical researcher’s main and most complex task as ‘to help the “backward traveller” not so much *know* the past as *feel* it . . . For history is not the mechanical acquisition of knowledge about the past: it is more than anything else the imaginative reconstruction of it’ (Evans, 1956, p16). Paramount for Evans is the concept of the human story, but the role of ‘the backward traveller’ is to ‘move into the past’ as a means of better understanding ‘one’s own immediate environment’ (ibid, p16). Context, as before, is everything.

Evans explores two means of gaining access to the past: travelling inwardly or *feeling* the past rather than just *knowing* it; and the process of engaging in imaginative or narrative reconstruction. Linden West has described the ways in which people make, and are not just made by, history and has suggested that narrative can be used as a means of engaging the ‘psychosocial, historical and educational imagination’ (West, 2016, p37).

Oral history has relevance to contemporary as well as to historical research. It places primacy on the human experience and its ‘imaginative reconstruction’ (Evans, 1956). It uses open-narrative or semi-structured interviewing and insightful thematic interpretation. Interviews offer a unique opportunity to look at lived experience, from people’s ‘inner world’ perspectives. It also places them in a social context, with the act of memory and

storytelling part of the process of co-construction and interpretation between the researcher and the subject: 'a focus on narrative challenges the concept of the atomized individual and replaces it with a concept of a person enmeshed in - and produced within - webs of social relations' (Lawler, 2008, p19). Oral history-making is therefore inherently a political act, allowing wider participation in the production of history and the dissolution of institutional barriers. It shifts our focus and opens new areas of inquiry 'by bringing recognition to substantial groups of people who had been ignored . . . breaking down boundaries between the educational institution and the outside world' (Thompson, 2000/1978, pp8-9).

Left-thinking intellectuals such as E. P. Thompson, Raphael Samuel and Raymond Williams were part of this movement to reclaim culture for the 'ordinary' person. Williams famously wrote that 'culture is ordinary' (Williams, 1958, p5); it is not the purview of those who have historically inhabited the history books - the elite in society - who have facilitated a kind of cultural imperialism. Williams suggested that culture does not have to be great, beautiful or sublime (as in a Romantic conception), nor is its popular or more commercial aspect necessarily utilitarian, bleak and reduced (as in a Modernist understanding). Culture is, in Williams's definition, not just about beauty or that which transcends the everyday, but is part of the fabric of everyday life and the lived experience - for all people, and not simply 'a special kind of people, cultivated people' (Williams, 1989, p93).

In *Culture is Ordinary* (1958), he articulated his confidence in his own cultural heritage, a culture he felt was as valid as that of those inhabiting the world of 'teashop culture' (with its markers of gentility and status). He was proud of the working-class way of life from which he came, the associational bonds of 'neighbourhood, mutual obligation and common betterment', which transcended the loneliness of the individual. As he was writing in 1958, his is a confidence born out of a time when the post-war welfare settlement, the 1944 Education Act (and with it universal secondary school education), the increased power of the institutions of the labour movement and a growing leftwing intellectual voice, of which Williams was a part, asserted the need for a new definition of culture.

I would argue that we are at a point in history when oral history has, again, become an important tool and that we should again be seeking to redefine culture. We are living at a time when an increasing number of young people, vulnerable adult learners, older people and 'left out' (Mckenzie, 2018) working-class communities feel they have no voice. This has been evidenced by the Brexit vote (and largely misunderstood by metropolitan commentators).

Good social research can be ably served by narrative and storytelling. Stories matter, because they allow space for strong emotions. Rather than seeking academic 'balance' or 'objectivity', they stir and challenge us. As Lisa Mckenzie writes, they are rarely 'just a story' but are about voice, belonging and identity:

These small stories are too often missed in wider political analysis in favour of macro trends, which has often meant that the poorest people in the UK go unrepresented. (Mckenzie, 2018).

In our research work, we have a duty to connect theory and action together in praxis - the process by which a theory is enacted, embodied, or realised (Freire, 1972). We have a duty, too, to challenge the elite's custodianship of history, education and culture. Through oral history we allow space for stories, but we do not lose sight of the situated context in which these stories take place. We take our cultural, economic and social place in history seriously. We make our own history, instead of allowing the commentators to make it for us.

References

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