

DEVELOPING DIALOGUES: THE VALUE OF ORAL HISTORY

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Summary

Oral history is not a miracle cure for development problems. However, oral history can work as a strategy for development work, if it is guided and shaped by sustained dialogues between, on one hand, interviewees and communities and, on the other, interviewers and development workers. Furthermore, oral history for development purposes cannot be adopted in isolation from other development strategies. Of central importance are developing dialogues, which build respect and commitment through empathetic methods of eliciting, recording and utilising peoples’ memories and stories. These stories constitute vital forms of local knowledge, which can inform and sensitise development processes.

1. Introduction

Given the oral history ethos of ‘breaking silences’ and recording ‘voices from below’, it is often romantically assumed that oral history automatically contributes to development work. While it is true that oral history can, and has, contributed to development processes in countries across the globe, we cannot assume inherent or mechanical connections between the two forms of practice. This essay therefore conceptually and concretely explores the following question: How can oral history contribute to social development?

2. What is Oral History?

Oral historians use a set of interviewing techniques to elicit and record people talking about their memories of past experiences. While oral history research was conducted prior to the 1960s, it was only during the 1960s that oral history became popular amongst university and non-governmental organisation (NGO) researchers in both 1st and 3rd world countries. This was partly due to the political struggles of the 1960s, and partly due to the arrival of mass marketed, affordable, portable tape recorders. Oral history emerged as a particular challenge to the domination of written historical sources, and their political and social biases towards ruling classes. Oral historians to this day tend to focus on marginalised peoples who are usually not heard, seen or recorded. However, oral historians do sometimes conduct interviews with elites, and often combine written and visual forms of history in their research. Oral history then, in its narrow sense, is a research methodology that records oral stories drawn from living memory. While the work of oral traditionalists overlaps with that of oral historians, oral traditionalists are more specifically interested in stories, fables and legends that have been transmitted across generations, and go beyond the confines of living memory. Oral history, in its broader sense, is a cluster of research and life skills, which is constituted through several forms of practice:

2.1 Lived practice: We should never forget that long before the term ‘oral history’ was coined, people in various cultures and societies have used and perpetuated oral traditions and oral histories as an indispensable part of their daily lives. This remains true to this day for both rural and urban contexts, and for both formally uneducated and formally educated people. Oral histories are a significant aspect of what has become known as ‘living heritage’. Moreover, many forms of talking such as casual conversations, gossip and report-backs draw on individual and collective memories. We usually do not refer to this as oral history but oral stories and memories are a part of the minutiae of our daily lives.

2.2 Research practice: Oral history can do far more than just supplement the written historical record or fill in the gaps of the archive. Oral historians and other qualitative researchers have, since the late 1980s, grappled with issues of remembering, forgetting, silencing and storytelling. Researching forms of memory opens up ways of utilising oral history research tools. Oral history has the critical capacity to provide new knowledge and to provide challenging and unusual insights into ‘mainstream’ forms of knowledge. A central strength of oral history as a research practice is that because it draws from everyday conversations and reflections on the past, it tends to be more accessible to a wider range of public audiences.

2.3 Teaching practice: Oral history interviewing is best taught in a hands-on fashion, which focuses on fundamental skills such as listening, empathy, and ways of interpreting the spoken word. These skills have a value that stretches far beyond the research terrain, and can be used in a variety of professions. For example, such skills are centrally involved in reminiscence therapy as practised by social workers, epidemiological research, community drama and radio, and documentary filmmakers.

2.4 Archival practice: The archive is not simply a place for deposits. Oral history and

memory-work can help us think beyond the custodial mentality that tends to dominate archival practice in most countries. The sound and audio-visual archive is a site of popular memory where the significance of our living heritage is continuously open to interpretation. The recordings conserved by archives constitute forms of intellectual and cultural capital that belong to institutions and communities. Oral histories can also help transform the image of 'the archive' as a static, dusty-old place to a dynamic resource for communities, especially students, at all educational levels.

2.5 Dissemination practice: Contrary to the notion that oral history 'gives voice to the voiceless',

we argue that marginalised people do have a voice, and in a multitude of ways they do speak out in their daily lives. The problem is rather that marginalised groups do not have a sufficiently strong public voice. This, in part, has arisen because in many countries there are not sufficient good listeners (individually and organisationally) and there has been an insufficient attention to the popular dissemination of people's stories after they have been recorded. Oral history and other recordings can make vibrant contributions through various media such as radio, television and drama, and probably the most limited medium for oral history, the written medium.

2.6 Development practice: As will be explored below, there are ways in which oral history can contribute to forms of social change. But it is crucial that the past is perceived as a resource and not a burden, and that access to local knowledge forms about the past can help to change peoples' lives in the present and future. It is in this sense that oral history has the potential to assist social development projects.

3. Oral History and Development

The oral historian, Allesandro Portelli, once made the simple and profound observation that interviewers should never forget they do not interview 'oral sources' but people (1991). In this encounter, the person who knows the most about their life stories and their community is not the interviewer/researcher but the interviewee. This argument represents a conceptual break with perceiving researchers and development workers as 'experts', and rather emphasises seeing interviewees and development recipients as the 'experts' of their localised forms of knowledge.

In considering the relationship between oral history and development work, we are therefore arguing that our starting point should be: on the one hand, interviewees/communities' in-depth knowledge of themselves and their histories, and on the other hand, our relatively limited or lack of knowledge about them. However, we should not deny the knowledge and training that professionals bring into research and development relationships. In short, a key question becomes what strategies will build co-operative, sharing and respectful relationships between communities and professionals/organisations? How do we move from a 'them' and 'us' situation to, as Michael Frisch (1990) puts it, 'a shared authority' or shared ownership over oral history projects, and ultimately the ideal situation of community self-sufficiency? The point where a community can genuinely 'own' its history is not a short-term but a long-term goal, and the process of getting there involves external assistance and partnerships. If communities and development organisations are to reach this long-term goal, then the

design and facilitation of empowering relationships and projects is fundamental.

Oral history does have a role to play in this regard, but let us dispel some myths about oral history from the outset. Oral history is not the magical antidote for transformation issues, development problems, lack of community participation and the ‘healing’ of emotional legacies from any era of conflict. It is understandable that many might want it to be some form of ‘cure’ for organisational, social or personal problems, but it is simply not capable of that. If we load oral history projects with these unrealistic expectations and promises, then development organisations will probably do more harm than good in communities. Thus, designing oral history research and training projects should be but one important strategic focus in resolving these complex community and development problems. If the human development potential of oral history is to be harnessed, it has to be conceptualised and integrated with other development strategies such as community participation programmes, cultural and historical conservation strategies, spatial and housing planning and job creation plans. Conducting oral history in isolation from these other processes will diminish its impact. A useful background reading is Hugo Slim and Paul Thompson’s book, *Listening for Change: Oral History and Development* (1993). They argue that:

Development is not an exact science: to date it has been riddled with misunderstandings, failed experiments and discarded theories. But it is increasingly recognised that one of the most damaging aspects of the aid industry has been the tendency of donors to impose their own theories of what constitutes development on the recipients. This book aims to identify some useful ways in which the voices of ordinary people may ‘burn’ more brightly, so that it is their priorities and concerns which inform the development debate (p.10).

In addition, we must not fall into the trap of perceiving development as only being about bricks, mortar and jobs. How, then, can the training, conducting and disseminating of oral histories best harness people’s stories to bring about constructive change? Here are some of the small but significant ways in which oral history work can make a difference.

Through **training** community members as researchers they can learn the following:

- How to design and conduct a research project
- How to design and use an interview guide
- How to listen in different ways
- How to empathise with others
- How to sensitively ask questions and elicit information
- How to read and respond to verbal and non-verbal cues
- How to facilitate and process people’s feelings.

Through **interviewing**, the following benefits might be experienced by interviewees:

- Partly help people to link and understand fragmented memories
- Partly help to locate their memories in the context of their life stories

- Partly help to review and re-value their memories
- Partly help to hear reflections and affirmations of their sense of self
- Partly help to release burdensome feelings from the past
- Partly help to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of past decision-making.

And, through the **dissemination** of stories, the following possibilities open-up:

- Partly help people to redefine themselves by seeing and hearing their stories in the public realm
- Partly help people to see that they are not alone and that they have shared memories, which connect them with others
- Partly help people to learn more about the stories and heritage of other ethnic, political or religious (and many other) groups that make-up their community
- Partly help people to rebuild a sense of collectivity and community pride through participating in and witnessing the sounds and images of their community heritage.

In general terms, it needs to be stressed that when development planners draw directly from the popular memories of the constituencies they service, it helps them to devise strategies that are more sensitive to a community's legacies and traditions **and** more attuned to their present needs and wishes.

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