



Please cite the source as:

De Garay, G. (1999). The Oral-history interview: A conversation or a monologue? *Revista Electrónica de Investigación Educativa*, 1 (1). Retrieved month day, year from the: <http://redie.ens.uabc.mx/vol1no1/contents-garay.html>

Revista Electrónica de Investigación Educativa

Vol. 1, No. 1, 1999

The Oral-History Interview: A Conversation or a Monologue?

La entrevista de historia oral: ¿monólogo o conversación?

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Lecture presentada at
Primer Taller de Historia Oral del Noroeste: Métodos e Investigaciones
Evento organizado por el Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas (UABC) y
la Asociación Mexicana de Historia Oral
Tijuana, Baja California, México, August, 1999

Abstract

The conference presents some contemporary debates about oral-history interviewing. It describes its origin and frames it within the context of History's new theory. It also deals with problems and peculiarities found in the interviewer- informant's relationship and with the cultural context surrounding the interview. Finally, it offers a definition which includes important elements for its methodological characterization.

Key words: Interview, oral history, qualitative research.

Resumen

En esta conferencia se plantean algunos de los debates contemporáneos en torno a la entrevista de historia oral. Se describen los orígenes de las entrevistas de historia oral y se enmarca su replanteamiento en el contexto de la nueva teoría de la historia. Se abordan también sus peculiaridades y problemas en cuanto a la relación entrevistador-entrevistado y el contexto cultural que rodea la entrevista. Finalmente se presenta una definición que aporta importantes elementos para su caracterización metodológica.

Palabras clave: Entrevista, historia oral, investigación cualitativa.

Introduction

When historians started to do interviews with eyewitnesses and direct actors in contemporary events for the purpose of getting information not included in document files, in printed texts, or in the official versions of what happened, researchers agreed to define the new activity as *oral history*. Hearing the voice and words, seeing the gestures of those who actually experienced history seemed and unheard-of thing. Oral history gave back to the individuals their role in history, and recovered the subjectivity which traditional history had denied as being incompatible with the construction of scientific knowledge, and as belonging to the field of literature.

Nevertheless, the coterie who recognized the interview as the raw material of oral history—the professionals of this practice—were aware that many things had changed since its beginning, in the forties. Theoretical-methodological considerations obliged the specialists to contemplate another definition of oral history, or better said, of the oral history interview. Certainly, from the time of the seventies or eighties, when oral history enthusiasts like Ronald Grele, Alessandro Portelli, Luisa Passerini and Michael Frisch, among others, threw themselves into this work, one can say that oral history has constituted a political movement.

In principle we know know that since the middle of the nineteenth century, journalists have been doing interviews with which to construct the news of the moment. Having a desire to know exactly what happened, the news professionals took to the streets to collect the comments and stories of eyewitnesses. Soon, questions and answers were being used to reconstruct and publish the realism—with all faithfulness—of the history that was about to be written.

For their part, writers, eager to write realistic novels, turned to the interview—so that even today, among other things people are wondering about—is who is telling more of the truth, the historian or the novelist.¹ Hence, to oral history cannot be attributed the invention of the interview. In fact, says Philippe Joutard, everything before written history was oral (Joutard, 1986).

The truth of the matter is that oral history benefited greatly from what the journalists had previously invented—I mean the “testimonial report” which frequently appears

in North American magazines like the *New Yorker*. People, stimulated by open questions and conversational atmospheres, talked about their lives or fragments of their life experiences. Those interviewed, as well as offering information, expressed their experiences, judgments, opinions, myths, ideologies, conclusions. One can say that out of the rapport established between partners in dialogue came narrations that put to the test, on the one hand, the evocative ability of the interviewee, her² ability both to learn from what she has lived and to give it new meaning, and in this way, give meaning to what was without meaning. On the other hand it tested the ability of the questioner to gaining his partner's trust, and in this way, to lead him to the inevitable symbolic return to the past implied by memory and forgetfulness.

As oral historians advanced in the application of this methodology and took more into account the tactics of this new theory of history, the need to restate the definition of the oral history interview came a central commitment for its practitioners. Thus, oral history has questioned the objectivity defended by scientific or positivist history, and has cast doubt upon the task of history as a way of explaining reality based on laws, suggesting instead a history interested in interpretations, understood as knowledge of truth by consensus, developed by individuals, actors and objects of history.

The oral history interview: peculiarities and problems

Before proceeding to define the oral history interview, we should note some of the peculiarities and the most important problems which have emerged in its uses and abuses. An initial mystique persuaded historians to undertake a naive search for the other's truths—the truths belonging to those who had never had spoken; they (the historians) also trusted the literal transcription of the testimonies, sure they would not lose one iota of the reality. They supposed, without fear of error, that by following strict rules and methodologies they would achieve impeccable narrations, without contradictions, and if this were not enough, of great exactitude. They imagined that the objectivity, the neutrality, would eliminate the transferences that always present themselves in face-to-face interviews. They never imagined the risks of identifying with the interviewee, a probable bearer of the dominant hegemony, and because of this carelessness, of falling into the risks of empowerment, i.e. giving power to another, an consequence nothing advisable, especially if the task of the historian is to critique the ideologies. At other times, they simply ignored the fact that in identifying themselves, unthinkingly, with the victim, they might lay themselves open to the populism of completely and unintentionally substituting one ideology for another. Most importantly, they soon forgot about the ethical commitments made when they ventured to penetrate the unconscious motivational world of the private person's loyalties, self-images, self-censorship, traumatic memories, and public and private memories that individuals keep to themselves so as not to contradict the social scripts, myths and ideologies of the group of which they are part, and from which they have no wish to be excluded.

Indeed, to do the interviews, the historian had to explore the interviewee-interviewer relationship. They were moot questions: who had the power in the interview, how it influenced the context of the interview, and how the rapport was achieved. The technology, in turn, reminded the historian that the message changes with the medium. What happens when we log an audio interview? What happens when we do it with a video camera? Even when the protocols agreed upon for making a good oral history interview warned that interviewer should prepare himself, that he should establish a rapport (a kind of intimacy with his informant); should listen and make open-ended questions; should not interrupt; should allow pauses and silences; should eliminate technical or academic jargon should avoid censuring the interviewee's testimony, and should minimize as much as possible the presence of the recorder, the experts admitted that the oral history interview involved a process of "seduction", of "courtship" (Morrisey, 1998, p. 108) because in this case it was the historian himself who was drawing close to ask for a story, and not the person who knew the story who was asking to tell it and to be heard. Thus, the persons involved understood that the relation between interviewee and interviewer was much more complex and culturally specific than it seemed at first sight.

The fact is that the interviewing methods considered by the center's professionals as essential and unique, the experts on the periphery found totally inappropriate for their context. The individual and face-to-face interviews conducted by those of developed countries as the only way to construct oral history did not work in a cultural context where community interviews were the custom. In the peripheral world, the intimacy of a face-to-face interview was seen as intimidating and dangerous. It is essential to remember that in some societies, the group has hierarchies and practices of which one must always be aware. The value of remembering as a group is thus discovered.

The fact is that oral historian must be conscious that the interviewee is a representative of his culture, with a particular and individual vision of the world, formed within the hegemony of that culture or in opposition to that ideology. In other words, it is as if the testimony were a combination of myth and ideology. Hence, the oral testimony arises from the subjective sphere, located within the symbolic activity associated with what is psychological, cultural and cognitive. This implies that in process of the interview, the questioner must be attentive to what is said, by means of what is permitted by the social conventions of socially ordinary conversation (invisible loyalties), and to the meanings of what is said. Therefore, we, as oral historians, must observe with the same zeal, what is said, how it is said, and the meaning of what is said. Communication is no longer understood as the strict and neutral emission of information. Bees convey information, but human beings communicate emotions, feelings, visions of the world.

In any case, according to the experts, the most important aspect of oral history is that having to do with the cultural context of the interview. It is this cultural context, and nothing else, that distinguishes us as oral historians from other social scientists who also use the interview. By this I mean the anthropologist, sociologist,

psychologist, folklorist. As oral historians, we have to understand and analyze the various and different cultural contexts and historical thoughts that permeate the interview. Therefore, the historian's contextualization is a substantial part of the oral history interview. Ronald Grele said that the oral historian looks for the mythical and ideological matrices of the society's cultural consciousness through the development of the story idea. Each interview is different, and each person implies something new and unique in the interviewer/interviewee relationship (Grele, 1998, 108).

The oral history interview: definition

Once we have accepted the proposal that negates discourse as the mere formalization of knowledge because we no longer believe in an objective relationship with the world, and once we no longer separate the world of the symbolic from the reality it produces, then we can understand reality as proposed by the "linguistic turn".³ Supported by this approach, oral historians will take a new look at interviews to distinguish *how* things are asked, as well as *what is asked*, how it is said, the meaning of what is said, and to whom it is said.⁴

From this perspective, Ronald Grele then defines the oral history interview as a "conversational narrative". It is said to be conversational because of the relationship established between interviewee and interviewer, and narrative because of its form of exposition—which tells, relates, or narrates a story. But it should be clear that this conversational narrative is different from an autobiography, a biography or a memoir, because the conversations recorded by the oral history interview are the result of a joint activity, a negotiation between interviewee and interviewer, organized from the historical perspectives of both participants (Grele, 1998, 44).

The oral history interview has three main aspects: one internal and two external. The internal aspect has to do with the signs and their interrelations, i.e. the relationship of the word or sign to the other words—in other words, the linguistic structure, grammar and literature of the interview. The second aspect is that which follows from the interviewee-interviewer relationship. This interrelationship is said to imply a perfectly-structured form, that if studied closely, reveals exactly what kind of communication is occurring in the interview, and what kind of communication is being transmitted. This falls within the scope of *performance*, which refers to the circumstances and contexts in which the interview is taking place. We must remember that the oral history interview is not a literary production, and for that reason it can not be divorced from the context in which it occurs, the space in which a transmitter and a receiver are meeting face to face, and an audience for whom both parties are producing this history from their unique perspectives and cultural horizons.

The third aspect, more abstract, and for that reason more difficult to evaluate and less studied, has to do with who is directing the interviewee. The one who is telling

his story is not speaking only for himself, or for the person who is asking, but is also speaking, through the interviewer, for a larger community on behalf of whom he is explaining their vision of the story. Here there are two relationships in one. One is between the informant and the historian (each point of view is a standard reference for the other, and both are distinguished by the questions answered, and by the questions not asked or not answered); the other exists between the informant and his or her own historical consciousness—more elusive because it involves the hidden levels of discourse which must be read as symptoms. This is more than a mere *Weltanschauung* (attitude), because it has to do with a well-structured field in which the people live their history, and which, at the same time, guides their practice and action. It is the field of the myths, the ideas of history, the ideologies. It is their attitude toward the past, with profound cultural consequences (Grele, 1998, pp. 44-46).

Now, defining the oral history interview as a conversational narrative also implies the recognition of it as a communicative act. As such, it represents a “controversial” act where there exists a margin or response that goes beyond the simple questions of “confirmation” and “clarification”.⁵ Eva MacMahan says it has to do with a “reciprocal act”, in which interviewer and interviewee are agreed to disagree (McMahan, 1989, en Grele, 1991). The idea is to achieve a hermeneutic conversation, which according to MacMahan, permits the modification of the cultural horizons of the interviewer and interviewee through an appropriation of each other’s texts (text understood as the ways in which the subjects structure their relationship with the world [see A. Schutz]), and not the simple questions of verification and proof that are made in the supposed interest of historical objectivity and/or rectification of the other side’s ideology—the dominant ideology. It means breaking the vicious circle that simply reinforces the ideological outlooks of interviewee and interviewer. It legitimizes the exercise of power and avoids the tension, the conflict, so as to provide the “political *praxis* of the interview” itself as reflexive communication. With the retrieval of its ability to respond, the oral history interview recaptures its reason for being, and that which defines its critical specificity. The problem lies in maintaining this conversational narrative without losing sight of the critical stance that orients the historian’s activity in investigating the past. Clearly, oral history is a narration, and also an analysis. The narrator conducts her analysis when she selects and imposes a *gestalt* (narrative structure) on what she tells, and the historian conducts an analysis when he introduces questions. Hence, the historical language used by the person interviewed is the narrative, and its form consists of the report which is interrupted when the historian breaks in with his historical language, whose form is the question. When these historical languages flow in the interview and conflict with each other, one can see how the participants vie for control of the interview and make clear the interview’s “political *praxis*” (p.125).

The difficulty for the historian, then, is to avoid breaking into the interviewee’s narrative with her questions. The narration has a *gestalt*, that is, a narrative structure consciously chosen both for its meaning in relation to the rest of the history, and for the way it fits into the context of the interview (Rosenthal, 1991,

p.107). This has led other oral historians to argue over the relevance of the definition of the oral history interview as a “conversation”. For Dean Hammer and Aaron Wildavsky, the oral history interview is, instead, a “guided monologue” because it occurs in a plane of interview, based on well-planned and well-thought-out questions and answers, the interviewee being the most important element in this communicative act. The interviewer is not seeking to make friends with the person interviewed; the interviewer does not reveal his views to guide the interviewee or to agree with her. On the contrary, the interviewer hides his views, and allows the other to speak as much as she likes. He does not interrupt her nor harass her with annoying questions, although at the end, he may risk everything on a challenging question (Hammer and Wildavsky, 1996, pp. 40-42).

Indeed, the above considerations by Dean Hammer and Aaron Wildavsky are both evocative and critical as regards defining the oral history interview as either a guided conversation or a monologue. However, in my opinion—and I think those who have done interviews will agree with me—this experience is difficult to define in one way or the other. To circumscribe the reality of the interview based on a single characteristic or situation would be to exclude the particular situations imposed by the diverse cultural contexts of the interviews, the personalities, backgrounds, and ideologies of both the interviewees and the interviewers. I insist that each interview is different, and each person implies something new and unique in the interviewer/interviewee relationship. The interviewer has her art in knowing how to grasp and listen to what her interviewee requires, and in knowing what should be approached at the various moments of the interview. The narratives require both monologues and dialogues, conversations and discussions. The important thing is that the historian not lose sight of the fact that oral history is both narration and analysis, by both the questioner and the one who answers.

Conclusions

The oral history interview implies, of course, the recording of a story that a person tells through conversation or an assisted monologue, led by a historian interested in exploring the contradictions between the myths, ideology, visions of the story, unconscious motivations, individual and family scripts, public and private memories, the personal and the political.

The interview has aspects linguistic, grammatical, literary—and therefore deals with words-signs and their relationships. It has psychological and social relations conditioned by the interviewer/interviewee relationship and the context of the interview. It has yet another aspect harder to fathom—I mean the ideological—that aspect which the individual allows to be seen when he wants to tell his story to a larger audience, to his community. It is this ideological matrix which guides the interviewee in his *praxis* and action in the world.

Upon pondering these considerations, we must confess that the interview experience is very, very complex, and that every time, the communicative act will

be expressed in different ways. Sometimes, the interviewee will think for herself, and will require only the echo of her partner for company in her solitary attempt to give new meaning to the experience she has lived. But at other times, the interviewee will want to hear the interviewer's questions to aid in making sense of what he does not understand, because the *gestalt* of his narration has become broken, and appears not to fit together with the things that give it meaning, and to which it in turn gives meaning. Thus, the interviewee will be retelling his tale as a result of both the analysis implied in the very act of remembering, and of answering the questions suggested by the analytical language of the historian. The political *praxis* of the interview thus suggests the controversy, the tension of a dialogue format harsher than that of typical everyday conversation, but also the rapport characteristic of the interviewer/interviewee relationship.

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¹ See the use of the interview in the Nineteenth Century in Thompson, P. (1988).

² Earlier in the twentieth century, English, like Spanish, used the masculine possessive pronoun in generalized statements to indicate both genders of humankind. Since the advent of the feminist movement, however, such usage in English has been considered sexist, is generally avoided, and has been replaced by expressions such as “his and her”, “s/he” etc. (Fennel, Francis, 2002). While these non-sexist devices can be comfortably employed now and then in a work, their constant and continual use becomes awkward. In this work, in order to avoid the annoying repetition of such constructions, we shall at times use the feminine pronoun (she, her, etc.) and at times, the masculine (he, him, his, etc.).

³ Not all historians and anthropologists share the idea of understanding this reality as a mere narrative. See Swen B. Ek’s reflections (1996).

⁴ “The memory embodied in the account is not subject to the experience that was lived, but recreates it in terms of the practical contexts in which the narrator is situated [...] The identity of the ego, in late twentieth- century society, is manifested as textual narrative—textuality which is constructed from what the ego tells of herself—not losing sight of the fact that this contrast occurs at different times—and what others say about her. Furthermore, the context of utterance in which the ego expresses herself is constantly changing, as is the audience to whom the narrative is directed. Let us be clear: the ego who enunciates her subjectivity configures this in different ways, depending on when and to whom she is speaking” (Mendiola, A., 1993, p. 10).

⁵ A question of confirmation would be, “Were those not years of intense political differences with the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD)? A question of clarification would say, “Did these differences have serious consequences for the electorate? A question of verification would be, “Were you a member of the PRD from 1996 to 1998?”