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HOW TO RETELL THE PAST USING ORAL HISTORY

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Summary: This paper considers the method of oral history within the qualitative approach to research. It also sheds lights on its relevance in historical documentation. Oral history is a method of historical documentation, within which the researcher conducts interviews with living participants and observers of the time being investigated. It collects information about the past not available in written records about certain events. The method involves interviewing, recording and transcribing eyewitness' accounts of historical events, which provides a special perspective on an event. The nature of memory – both individual and community – is part of the collected oral history. Oral history can reveal how individual values and actions shaped the past and how the past shapes present-day values and actions. It is an invaluable resource for understanding individual experiences, or experiences of a group within a certain historical period. This method cannot be used as a surrogate for analysis of traditional historical written materials (official documents, letters, etc.). It can, however, reveal the role of individuals in shaping the past and the way larger trends are related to the individual himself.

Keywords: narrative inquiry, oral history, qualitative approach.

The increasing importance and value of qualitative research

It has been noticed that recently, the qualitative approach is being used more boldly. There are some well-founded reasons why nowadays researchers prefer the qualitative approach. Firstly, the individual's role has been re-valued in the history of society. Secondly, researching historical events that happened in the last fifty years has also been re-valued after the political changes in Hungary. The role of narrative inquiry has become important in parallel with the role of the participants who took part in the historical events. Those events happened in the past 40-50 years and still have living participants who can share their experiences and tell their own stories from their point of view and not from the point of view of the official political communication.

Until the 1990's it was extremely difficult to access written documents about events that happened in the socialist regime in Hungary, so the importance of living survivors and their spoken stories became very important for those people who wanted to know the real truth without any censorship.

Basically, there are several essential characteristics which can be found within the qualitative approach encompassing ethnography, narrative inquiry, fieldwork, participant observation, interpretive survey, life story, memoir, diary, personal correspondence, or mail log. Qualitative research is a form of inquiry that helps us, who are living in the present, not only understand, but also explain the meaning of human's behaviour in specific circumstances. The key philosophical assumption in using this research approach is the significance of the participants' interests and the way they can form an event.

Qualitative research focuses on meaning, i.e. understanding of the participants' role. It attempts to identify the living survivors and collect their insider perspective. Using the qualitative approach, the researchers – as outsiders of the given event – have an opportunity to understand the phenomenon of interest from the participants' perspectives. Interacting with the participants, the researcher gains insight into their experiences and feelings in relation to the event. The researcher and the participants become partners during the research.

It refers more to the perspective of the participants' involvement in the historical events, rather than mere facts and data. It can be said that oral history is an alternative research, as it collects information in a democratic way from participants and observers. In this way, particular, unique contexts can be made visible, which would not have been possible using solely written materials and data.

The specificities of oral history

Oral history can be considered a preservation of a part of history. It preserves history with the help of its survivors. It is a method of historical documentation, using interviews with living survivors of the time being investigated. Oral history collects information from observers and participants of that past. It records the memories of living survivors and collects useful and primary information in an authentic way from those who were themselves involved in the event. It is based on the average person's everyday life. It gathers data not available in written records about events or people. Oral history can reveal how individual values and actions shaped the past and how the past shapes present-day values and actions. During recollecting, the individual himself comes into the foreground. The subject is in the centre of the research. Thompson (1978), one of the pioneers of oral history as a research method states that oral history gives history back to the people in their own words. Furthermore, he claims that there is an unknown majority of people who are not leaders, and oral history allows them to be heroes and helps them towards a future of their own making (Thompson, 1978). In this way these unknown individuals' roles disclose in shaping of their own history.

Oral history records eyewitness' accounts of events, which have historical importance. It is a systematic collection of living people's testimony about their own experiences. These could be historical events, specific events, survivors' recordings including all classes of society: war veterans, minorities, underprivileged people, natives... Tóth (2000) subsumes this method under historiography. Oral history is the methodical collection of everyday memories of everyday people. Gyáni (2002) claims that oral history is a „primer source” because it reveals individual experiences in the participants' stories (Gyáni, 2002, 140).

A short history of the oral history method

Stories are the fabric of our lives. Stories about families, stories of people or groups can be transferred by word of mouth. All the stated types of stories and many others can be collected within the method of oral history, as it is a special kind of story-collecting. Considered in this way, this method is of the same age as humanity.

The history of using oral history as a method goes back to the late 19th century in America when anthropologists started collecting Native American folklore on phonograph cylinders (Thompson, 1978). In the 1930s interviewers collected accounts from various groups, including surviving witnesses of the American Civil War, and other historical events. Some researchers recorded traditional American music and folklore. With the development of audio tape recordings, the task of oral historians became easier. In America, at the end of 1940s, a historian established the first Oral History Research Office, with a mission of recording, transcribing and preserving oral history interviews. In 1967, American oral historians founded Oral History Association and in 1969, British oral historians founded the Oral History Society. There are now several national organizations and there is an International Oral History Association, which holds conferences, publishes journals devoted to oral history theory and techniques. In Hungary, the Oral History Archive of 1956 was founded in 1985. The aim of establishing this institution was to gather and archive the oral reminiscences of the 1956 Revolution. In mid 1980's collecting oral history interviews regarding the revolution was against official party-state narratives, and access to written documents was limited. Recently, Vértesi (2004) also collected facts about certain historical points using oral history.

Use of the method

This method can be used in different fields of history, anthropology, folklore, sociology, and other disciplines that study the experiences of specific social groups. Oral history focuses on special groups such as marginalized social groups, workers, minorities, peripheral groups, women and ethnic groups.

In the field of history, researchers assume they are able to understand the experiences of people in the past. Oral history can be an invaluable resource for understanding individual experiences, or experiences of a group within a certain historical period. Alongside the traditional historical sources, it constructs a more democratic record of the past. In a way, it is a special kind of story-collecting. Oral history interviews cannot be used as a surrogate for analysis of traditional historical materials like official documents, letters and newspapers. It can, however, reveal the role of individuals in shaping the past, making people more aware of their own history. As Vértési (2004) states, the picture that oral history can transmit about the past is much more complete and rich.

Folklorists study culture as it is expressed in everyday life, and often use oral history projects to gather materials, traditions to preserve and study in the future. Interviewing individuals is one of the primary means of accessing folklore and culture.

Archaeologists use oral history to learn more about the life of people who have no living descendants, or to locate sites for archaeological excavation. A cultural anthropologist could use this technique to understand the ways that individuals think of themselves in relation to the rest of the world. This method can help anthropologists understand the ways that culture shapes individuals either consciously or unconsciously. Gyáni (2000) believes that if tradition and memory (recollection) transform into history, then individuals come into prominence, and your responsibility is to define your identity. He further states that if you remember your past, you will know who you are (Gyáni, 2000).

This method can also be used amongst sociologists and journalists who study marginalized social groups such as women, ethnics, workers etc. In these fields, conducting and analyzing an interview is a way of uncovering experience that may be underrepresented in mainstream culture. Dominant culture has a tendency not to notice the experiences of certain subgroups, viewing them as peripheral rather than central. Academic fields have emerged to explore the experiences of marginalized groups, and these fields tend to value experiential knowledge. Oral history method can be a way of accessing this resource. As Kanyó (2002) believes, oral history is a voice given to the voiceless; a democratic method that provides an opportunity to those who are characterized by dumbness. Of course, documentary directors also use this method.

Advantages and disadvantages of the method

Among the advantages, there are several points to be mentioned. Oral history is a method belonging to the qualitative approach to research. It is a practical method for researchers who prefer working with “real” people and their living memories, as opposed to working with statistical data. In this way oral history is more than just a method, it is a view that conforms to the researcher’s interest. The method’s prominence is reflected in its consideration of the man himself, the individual and his stories worth researching, instead of the object of the research. The focus is on individuals. During the recollecting, the individual himself comes into the foreground. Anyone can be part of a historical event. The subject is in the centre of the research. The researchers are collecting the memories in their natural surroundings, so the readers are able to get a real, live picture of the area. The stress is on the interviewees’ presenting of the progressing time. Through an individual’s reminiscences about the past, an overall interpretation can be ensured. With the help of reminiscences, the language, habits, traditions, and way of thinking of a certain area can be deduced. Historical events can be reconstructed.

In using oral history method, the stress is on verbalism, as the survivors themselves report on their experiences in oral presentation, the research records the memories of participants, and can therefore be called spoken history. Analysing narratives, based on subjective researches, language use can be very meaningful. The language itself can express the relation of the one reminiscing with the experienced events. The rich and poor usage, the mode, the style, the intonation, the volume, mimic and gesture can all refer to how much the storyteller himself was involved in the events. Sommer and Quinlan (2009) believe that because of the narrative character of oral testimony, the analysis of the text constructed by the storyteller is also of great importance. Minorities, special groups, subcultures can be studied well using this method. The average person’s everyday life and everyday memory is in focus. It preserves the unwritten, ordinary stories. Anyone is able to employ the method and collect the stories of his or her surroundings. The conservation of the oral values, traditions, habits and experiences enriches the next generations.

Some of the disadvantages have to be mentioned, as well. This method does not rely on written documents, records or sources. It cannot provide an objective approach, as the researcher himself is part of the study. Szabolcs (2001) states that users of this method are charged with partiality and subjectivity. Several researchers deal with the following questions: Does this study serve anything? What is the gathered information useful for? What is the study good for? Employing this method takes up quite a lot of time. First, the researcher interviews participants, then re-listens the interviews, digitizes them, transcribes them, and double-checks them. Principles and generalizations can-

not be deducted from the results. There is the problem of validity and reliability. Its result cannot be measured objectively. The researcher himself handles information from the remembering ones. The time during which the interviewees are able to remember is limited. There is a fear of the limits of human memory. What is the time span of remembering? Why do the participants want to remember something? How do time and the present alter the participant's memory? Also, there is the awareness that contact between the participant and the researcher can affect the study.

Vértesi (2004) thinks we must confront the information from the written documents with the oral history interviews. Studying the differences and sameness can enrich and deepen our information about the past. Donald (according to Vértesi, 2004) claims the participant's direct memory is too valuable not to consider it. Gyáni (2000) states that all types of written documents must be considered subjective, if they have been written with a special purpose, for example charters, official documents of the Middle Ages.

It can be concluded that oral history sources must be treated in moderation. The fact that they are authentic is undisputed; they are a hidden reserve alongside written documents. They give primer footings; however, they must be compared and contrasted with written sources.

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Oral history is a method that can help create a more genuine picture of the past, documenting the lives, viewpoints and feelings of all kinds of people. Collecting oral history, there is a sense of catching and holding on to something valuable from the receding tide of the past. Collecting and preserving the valuable oral treasure, this method enriches the present and future generations. It can be evaluated alongside the traditional sources of history to construct a more democratic way of preserving historical information, protecting oral tradition and constructing a more diverse and accurate portrait of the past. The knowledge locked in people's memories can add vital information and unique human perspectives to our collective understanding of the past. Documenting that information in a systematic way adds value to the storehouse of human knowledge. If we do not collect and preserve everyday memories, oral traditions, then one day they will disappear forever. Using oral history as a method is our duty of reminiscence.

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Kako prepričati prošlost koristeći se usmenom poviješću

Sažetak: Ovaj rad razmatra metodološki postupak usmene povijesti unutar kvalitativnog pristupa istraživanjima. Također ukazuje na njegovu važnost u povijesnoj dokumentaciji. Usmena povijest postupak je povijesne dokumentacije unutar koje istraživač provodi intervju sa živućim sudionicima i promatračima vremena koje se istražuje. Skupljaju se informacije o prošlosti koje nisu dostupne u pisanim zapisima o određenim događajima. Taj postupak uključuje intervjuiranje, snimanje i transkripciju iskaza svjedoka, što daje posebnu perspektivu određenom događaju. Priroda sjećanja – individualnog i kolektivnog – dio je prikupljene usmene povijesti. Usmena povijest može otkriti kako su individualne vrijednosti i radnje oblikovale prošlost i kako prošlost oblikuje današnje vrijednosti i radnje. Ona je dragocjeno sredstvo razumijevanja individualnih iskustava ili iskustava određene skupine unutar određenog povijesnog razdoblja. Taj postupak ne može se koristiti kao zamjena za analizu tradicionalnih povijesnih pisanih materijala (službenih dokumenata, pisama itd.), no može otkriti ulogu pojedinca u oblikovanju prošlosti i način na koji su veći trendovi povezani sa samim pojedincem.

Ključne riječi: narativno ispitivanje, usmena povijest, kvalitativni pristup.

Wie man die Vergangenheit mit Hilfe der *Oral History* nacherzählen kann

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Beitrag behandelt das methodische Verfahren der Oral History innerhalb des qualitativen Forschungsansatzes. Er verweist auch auf ihre Bedeutung in den historischen Dokumenten. Die Oral History ist ein historisches Dokumentationsverfahren, bei dem der Forscher Interviews mit lebenden Beteiligten und Beobachtern der erforschenden Zeit führt. Es werden Informationen über Vergangenheit gesammelt, die in schriftlichen Aufzeichnungen über bestimmte Ereignisse nicht zur Verfügung stehen. Dieses Verfahren umfasst Interviews, Aufzeichnung und Transkription der Zeugenaussagen, was einem bestimmten Ereignis eine besondere Perspektive verleiht. Die Natur des Gedächtnisses - individuell und kollektiv - ist Teil der gesammelten mündlichen Überlieferungen. Die Oral History kann zeigen wie die individuellen Werte und Aktionen die Vergangenheit geprägt haben und wie die Vergangenheit die heutigen Werte und Handlungen formt. Es ist ein wertvolles Mittel zum Verständnis der individuellen Erfahrungen oder der Erfahrungen bestimmter Gruppen innerhalb einer bestimmten historischen Periode. Dieses Verfahren kann nicht als Ersatz für die Analyse der traditionellen historischen schriftlichen Materialien (offizielle Dokumente, Briefe, etc.) verwendet werden, jedoch kann es die Rolle der Einzelperson bei der Gestaltung der Vergangenheit aufdecken und die Art und Weise enthüllen, auf die die größeren Trends mit der Einzelperson verbunden sind.

Schlüsselbegriffe: mündliche Befragung, Oral History, qualitativer Ansatz.