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Abstract

Oral history, the insider becomes an outsider: Using a qualitative approach in a doctoral study by distance education.

The focus of this paper is the use of oral history as an alternative medium for gathering data for a doctoral study. It will investigate the advantages and disadvantages of taking such an approach, where the researcher becomes privy to 'insider' information but remains an 'outsider' in an attempt to maintain academic distance.

Defining the parameters of the research, the ethical considerations of how the information will be gathered and used is involved in any project. These complexities are further intensified when writing a doctorate as a distance education student in a small community. The community member as a researcher has their own 'insider' perspective, with prior knowledge of the lives of others through established relationships. This allows for the collection of 'privileged' information, based on trust and rapport.

The participants' narratives become the data and subsequent framework of the thesis.   Questions arise as to how much data needs to be collected and how many participants need to be involved. How does the researcher maintain 'insider' community status and 'outsider' academic status?   What are the social and cultural implications?

KEYWORDS:

Alternative forms of doctoral study

Social and cultural issues in a doctoral study

Introduction Oral history

Storytelling is an ancient tradition used to pass on information. It preserves customs, beliefs and events of significance. In the western world, the use of storytelling as a means of recording history has undergone a change in status. The recognition of the value and insights which oral traditions offer into a culture's historical background is a fairly recent phenomenon (Rabbitt, 1994, p. 15). Over the last 30 years the method of recording experiences orally has grown in popularity both internationally and in Australia. It provides the opportunity to assemble tangible information and life experiences that have not been previously documented. Recording people's everyday experiences has become a crucial element in broadening the scope of research.

Oral history is a medium used to record accounts of people's lives and the past. Listening to and recording the first person accounts of a cross section of people is another means of gaining and documenting information.

Those interested in preserving the stories of marginalised people who did not lead prominent lives, such as the poor and working class, women, ethnic and Indigenous minorities, began to use this medium to record accounts of people's lives, and their interpretations of the past. It has become an essential means of gathering evidence for Native Tittle hearings which rely on Indigenous testimony.

It is an alternative approach to accessing information that cannot be found in secondary sources, yet its validity has been questioned. International debates about oral history focus upon theoretical discussions of memory and subjectivity (Thomson, Frisch, Hamilton 1994). These include theories of remembering and forgetting, and the various cultural forms that shape the storytelling, which in turn informs new ways of understanding. The relationship between memory and personal identity has been analysed. "Memories are coloured, in the end, by events and feelings over a lifetime" (Prentice, 1999, p. 35).

Reliance on individual memory as a means to provide an authentic

account of an event or experience is a major criticism of the use of oral history. The reliability of memory as a historical source has been queried (Thomson, Firsch, Hamilton 1994). Physical deterioration of a person's memory and nostalgia in old age may result in a distorted truth. The narrator's story, their version of the 'truth' differs from other eye-witness and first person accounts (Thomson, Firsch, Hamilton 1994, pp. 33 & 40). A general conclusion made was that in today's society images of the past are intertwined in history and memory and therefore our culture.

Yet, personal narrative is a subjective process depending on many factors such as the narrator's social construction of themselves and their worldview, which may be constantly changing. Doubts have been raised relating to the reliability of the source and the validity of anecdotal evidence (Gluck & Patai, 1991, Gluck, 1994, Thompson, Frisch & Hamilton 1994, Leydesdorff, Passerini & Thompson 1996 & Hamilton, 1996).

Other issues broached include the impact of the storyteller knowing that the testimony will become a public document. Narrators may tell the researcher only what they think the researcher wants to hear by including some information to the exclusion of other details. Versions of the truth may be modified to suit the audience.

Conversely, the observations of the researcher, method of research data collection and conclusions drawn are all related to our own personal, subjective and cultural position. Our explanations are grounded in our worldviews, "culture-laden paradigms" which are not static (Nielsen, 1990, p. 13). Societal constructs, such as gender, race, religion, age, sexuality and class affect the objectivity of the researcher.

Further criticisms then arise as to the collaborative process and how the events are retold and dramatised by the narrator and how the researcher interprets the information (Hamilton, 1990, p. 130). Oral histories involve a 'two way process of interaction' that cannot be recorded free of cultural bias, experiences and emotive factors. "Transcripts in the form of the typed written word cannot give the reader the full flavour, passion and verve of how the

stories were narrated. The written word cannot fully portray emotions, such as the intonation of the voice, the laughter, or the tears, as they were recorded in the original dialogue" (Rabbitt, 1994, p. 24).

Transcribing the recorded voices of the storytellers produces a written script of their stories. Verbatim quotes are referenced as personal communications (American Journalists Association, 2001, p. 214). On paper, the verbalised story takes a different form as written document. Thomson, Frisch and Hamilton (1994, p. 34) wrote of their concerns that the final product may not be what the narrator had anticipated and could be interpreted as being a breach of trust and confidence. They were also apprehensive about the use of selected sections of the transcript and argued that specific comments may be referred to and quoted but its use may differ from the narrator's original intent.

Contradictions have been raised as to the value the researcher places on the narrator's stories and how it is interpreted and used. The researcher values the perspective of the narrator as a source of information. The stories are used to theorise and validate the research (Theobald, 1999, p. 12). Conversely, the storytelling may not meet the expectations of the interviewer. The researcher may be disappointed with the oral history produced. The information the researcher wished to hear may not be 'within memory' of the narrator (Theobald 1999, p. 15). The stories told are social texts, records of interaction that have been entrusted to the researcher.

Such concerns can be alleviated giving the storytellers their transcripts proving the opportunity for comments and changes prior to analysing their stories. As the researcher I collaborated with the narrators after the interviews to ensure their words spoken to me had been transcribed in the way they desired. I explained that I was interested in aspects of their stories relating to the emphases or line of research which was the focus of the interview and subsequent interpretive process.

These criticisms created a basis for reservations about the validity of the oral history movement in Australia. However Hamilton (1996, 44-46)

argued that by the 1990s the fears relating to the isolation and professionalisation of the practice of collecting oral histories had been allayed. The publication of the *Bringing Them Home Report* (1997) provided further evidence of oral history's worth. This was the largest oral history project to be undertaken in Australia, whereby the lives and circumstances of Indigenous peoples were documented using oral testimonies.

These issues and contemporary theoretical debates are significant considerations in the use of oral history as a source of data. These criticisms are similar to those made of secondary sources. It is a myth that history is objective (Leydesdorff, Passerini & Thompson 1996, p. 6 & Theobald, 1999, p. 15). Historic representations are biased in that they reflect the identity and experience of the observer. They are not value neutral. The researcher selects the content and produces a document that is not free of bias. The validity and accuracy of traditional histories based on written manuscript sources, letters and other documentation is questionable.

Defining the parameters of the research, the ethical considerations of how the information will be gathered and used is involved in any project. These complexities are further intensified when writing a doctorate as a distance education student in a small community.

Role Management

Role management was an important consideration in my position as a researcher undertaking an oral history project in my own community where I am a long-term resident. As a community member I am not anonymous. I am not a visiting academic on a short sojourn seeking to collect research data that would be masked to maintain anonymity. Rather, I see many of the people I have interviewed going about our community activities and socialise with others. I see them as a part of my day-to-day life. I am a 'situated knower' a participant in the actual process of inquiry and discovery (Smith, Dorothy, 1999, p. 6). These dynamics place the researcher in a position, which would have differed if the storytellers had been strangers, or lived elsewhere.

The process of interviewing was selected as the most appropriate tool to create new understandings of the research topic. My decision to use interviews to create alternative histories was made with considerations of potential narrator's personal styles of communication and their potential to work with me, a member of the community. The directions of other histories further supported this choice. Some story tellers prefer to use a pseudonym others do not.

A number of first person accounts of experiences over time provide an alternative viewpoint to representations in the media or in primary and secondary sources. Therefore, personal renditions provide other options for accessing information. They often challenge mainstream representations of stories as they reveal another aspect or representation of the past which opposes conventional notions.

Knowing of or knowing a broad spectrum of community members made the selection of potential participants a simplified process. At the introduction to the interview an explanation was given of my intention to present a copy of the transcript to ensure that information had been accurately noted. This gave the women the scope to change any of the material. I was aware that this was beyond the necessary university, ethical parameters but felt that a transcript would not only protect confidentiality and privacy, it would be a useful historical resource for the participant.

Prior to the tape being turned on, and commencement of the interview, a verbal explanation of the introductory letter and parameters of the research was given. As each person agreed to be a part of the study they signed a consent form and their verbal consent was put on tape. It was understood that the stories could be withdrawn from the project at their discretion, at anytime. The signing of the agreement confirmed the relationship between the two parties for the purpose of the project.

From the outset of this project I understood the challenge of the dual role of researcher and community member. I was privy to 'insider' information but remained an 'outsider' as a university academic. In all the interview

situations I used my discretion, as it was of paramount importance to me both personally and as a professional to maintain a relationship between the two parties. In some situations I was able to re-phrase the question, give an example, or come back to it later. Whereas in other instances this was not possible due to an unspoken uneasiness felt by both of us, or out of respect for cultural sensitivity (Gluck, 1994, p. 77). At times I would interpret the women's body language, or notice the woman was distracted so digressed to another topic.

At times the 'insider' relationship within the community and family is a disadvantage. A respectful distance has to be maintained with all respondents but this is exemplified when there is a high level of familiarity with the person. Due to prior knowledge of the participant's lives, some questions are not asked or topics broached as a means privacy and personal sensitivity. Particular components of the information may not be elaborated upon, or conversely over emphasised. An 'outsider', anonymous in the community may be made privy to a differing rendition and provided with another perspective (Smith, Linda 1999, p. 66).

However, from my perspective as the researcher, I viewed my knowledge of and friendship with some of the women as an advantage rather than a disadvantage. A further benefit was being introduced to the women I did not know by people whom they trusted. Yet, despite my insider perspective at times with no prior knowledge or warning, questions asked, with all good intentions, hit on sensitive issues that the women did not wish to deal with or discuss. There was really no common denominator as to the topic or type of question.

Arguably, the withholding of information affects all investigative studies, and is ultimately the storyteller's choice. In this study, at times due to my own 'insider status', information or hearsay, I was aware that there was perhaps more to the story than was being revealed. This is a sensitive issue that must be handled with great care and diplomacy. The well being of the storyteller must be protected (Rabbitt, 1994). Therefore, despite any notions that it may be the researcher's 'duty' to challenge the silences, to rectify misconceptions

of other histories, it is imperative that the researcher be familiar with correct cultural protocol, to ensure the line of questioning is ethical.

This raises ethical dilemmas as to how far a researcher can probe, the repercussions of disturbing the narrator's composure; the psychological effects and the question of letting people speak for themselves (Thomson 1994, p. 237). Tensions may arise, particularly when the researcher explores and questions popular myths and challenges the narrator on issues, which are comfortably ordered and composed in the participants' minds. For example, sensitive issues relating to land ownership, pastoral leases and Native Title.

My questioning influenced the type of information sourced, but I argue that the storytellers always controlled the flow of information. They had the information and the 'power' to choose how to respond and may give a "socially desirable answer" (Fontana & Free 1994 pp. 364-376). At times, some of the storytellers ignored the theme and answered the question on another tangent, inserting their own interests and emphasis. At other times the women also had the power to choose not to respond to certain lines of questioning at all.

Agreeing to tell their stories in an interview situation can be a form of empowerment for the project participants. Being approached to be a part of a study may have satisfied or aroused a desire to be heard (Gluck, 1994, p. 75). In some instances, the narrators may have been fulfilling a psychological need to have their stories recorded (Hamilton, 1996, p. 45).

The final transcript is a collaborative process between the researcher and narrator. The outcome, was a document produced that was mutually acceptable. The only words edited were the names of other people to whom reference was directly made. I did not transcribe sections of some interviews that were on topics, which in my opinion were not relevant to the research project.

Questions arise as to how much data needs to be collected and which stories are given precedence over others. In my attempt to be 'inclusive' rather than 'exclusive', as a researcher on the 'inside' I focused on

interviewing a sample of people whom I perceived had varied life experiences. Determining the number of people to be interviewed to validate the research takes careful consideration. There are numerous ways of grouping and re-grouping people and many variables that cannot be anticipated.

In selecting the method of obtaining participants for the study I relied upon the extensive network previously described, rather than employing advertising medium such as media or community notices used by researchers external to the town community. In the majority of cases, I met potential narrators in an informal situation as we were going about our business in the community.

Bearing in mind my dual role of community member and researcher, much consideration was also given to the type of letter that was sent to potential participants and in particular the language used to meet university requirements. Most of the project respondents knew me as a long-term resident, from my associations with community groups and as a former representative of the media, not as an academic. I wrote to them as a researcher stating my intentions and requesting the taping of their stories.

Further considerations include the current circumstances of the narrator. The availability of potential narrators maybe dependent upon family commitments, their health and workload rather than an unwillingness to share their story. This varies with the individual. Other factors which may impinge upon the interview process are a suitable time and venue for the interviews and the anticipated length of time the story telling will take. This has its difficulties as some narrators are more verbose than others and upmost discretion must be used. Every effort must be made to understand the needs of the narrator and to recognise the potential for subjectivity and bias, when conducting the interviews.

In the interpretive process, the researcher becomes familiar with the stories by undertaking a meticulous examination of the data by revisiting the transcripts or tapes over time. Contemporary local, national and international debates become stating points to explore some of the issues raised in the

stories. The collated information is scrutinized. Parallels are drawn and contradictory and varying accounts noted. The stories which are now the data are critiqued.

Conclusion

Technological advances have also changed the way in which memories are recorded. The oral tradition of recording memories and stories has been supplemented with a host of modern day equipment such as films, videos, tapes, CD ROMs (Hamilton, 1996, p. 44).

The ways in which stories are reiterated are profoundly shaped by the narrator's lived experiences. Stories may be reconstructed according to changing political ideologies to suit attitudes of the day or to reinforce a myth. Cultural, political, social and economic changes have impinged upon the storyteller's lives. They have been affected in many diverse ways and this in turn affects the storytelling process. They have their own personal reasons for partaking in a research project, where they know of, or know the researcher or the researcher's family. Some oral historians have suggested information gathered from oral history may need to be supplemented by empirical sources and historical scholarship (Hoffman, 1984, pp. 69-71, Thomson 1994, pp. 8-11).

The complexities of how stories are remembered, retold, relived and recorded have been outlined. Emphasis has been placed on the relationship between the narrator and the researcher and the implications these relationships have for theory and practice. In particular, I have examined my stance as a researcher in a small town and the complex web of ongoing interrelations I have with the narrators. I have interviewed people whom I consider to be my peers, the majority of whom were known to me - living together in a small community. With this attitude the academic research project is not a history from the 'bottom up (Gluck, 1994, p. 75 & Theobald, 1999, p. 12). Rather, the oral history becomes a valid representation or version of the past, based on the narrators, own lived experience.

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