Reusing Oral History Interviews in Food Research at the British Library

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UK Data Service

Secondary Analysis of Qualitative Data: an advanced training course

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PhD Research

• Collaboration of the British Library and Sheffield University

• Record 15-20 oral histories interviews for a new collection on Food Activism to be held at the BL to be the basis of my PhD research and thesis

• Collected 17 oral history interviews (ranging from 4-16 hours in total length)

• From a range of organisations and movements, covering environmental, health, social and economic issues, such as: organic agriculture, animal welfare, local and seasonal food provision systems, fair trade, vegetarianism, nutrition/health, food safety, food security

• Also used other material at the BL, including other relevant oral history interviews already in other collections as secondary data
Oral History

- Emerged as a discipline during C20th
- Seen as ‘giving voice’ to the marginalised
- Fought for respect against orthodox historical research methods considered objective, scientific and delivering the ‘truth’
- Oral history acknowledges multiple truths that are subjective and seeks to explore how the past is understood and its relationship with the present
  - “the present itself is historical” (Bertaux 1983)
  - “memory is living history, the remembered past that exists in the present” (Frisch 1990)
- Crosses disciplinary boundaries such as history, human geography, psychology, sociology, anthropology and linguistics
- N.b. oral history life story interviews are on average between 4 and 20 hours long

Perks & Thomson 2006, Thompson 2000
Research Questions and Thesis Topics

• Food and Identity in the context of food activism
  • social class, gender, health, consumer, parent, etc.
  • particularities of food compared to other types of activists
  • how activists define themselves in relation to food, how food features in their lives
  • food activists’ commonalities

• What oral history contributes to understanding food activism:
  • nuances and practicalities of the method
  • advantages, disadvantages and limits
  • food as a vehicle for exploration in oral history
  • memory and narrative of food activists

• How can British food activism be defined
  • national identity, historical context, food activists’ commonalities
Summaries

- Summaries obligatory for archiving at the BL
- Less detailed, technical and time consuming than transcription
- Key words, names, historical events, people, places, topics, style
- Useful process for analysis
- Invaluable for use as secondary research (identifying interview as resource, locating relevant parts, getting overview without listening to whole)
Sampling

• Mapped the existing BL collections at the start of my research

• I researched relevant collections as well as key words to identify what was already there, what I could re-use, and what the gaps were

• Found about 26, of those 3-9 relevant

• Listened to parts of some of them

• Did my own research

• Once finished my own OHs and identified themes of my thesis, returned to analyse the other OH’s in relation to this and in comparison to my own

• Used 4 in particular...
Secondary Use of Oral Histories

- **Peter Melchett**
  (2010, Louise Brody, home, 5 sessions over 4 months, 11 hours)
  BL Collection: National Life Stories Collection: General
  Policy Director at Soil Association, previously Director of Greenpeace, minister in House of Lords, farmer

- **Michael Barratt Brown**
  (2008, Louise Brody, BL, 5 sessions over 2 months, 11 hours)
  BL Collection: Pioneers in Charity and Social Welfare
  Founder of Northern College and Fairtrade Movement

- **Tim Lang**
  (2004, Polly Russell, BL, 4 sessions over 6 months, 11 hours)
  BL Collection: Food: From Source to Salespoint
  Professor of Food Policy, Advisor for numerous national and international organisations

- **Joyce D’Silva**
  (2002) (Barbara Gibson, home, 1 session, 6 hours)
  BL Collection: Animal Welfare Activists
  Director of Compassion in World Farming, previously Campaigns Office and RE Teacher
Practicalities

- Digital or tape
- Summaries
Pros, Cons and Reflections

• Interviewing technique

• Context

• Issues I wanted to explore (beyond documenting activities) and focused on in my interviews:

  (food and identity, food activism vs other political activism, growth and professionalisation of British activism, oral history as method in food research)

  • Personal diet, food habits, relationship with food, family
  • Crossover of food issues
  • Image/appearance
  • Optimism
  • Social class
  • Childhood influences
Pros, Cons and Reflections cont.

• Assumption that food is so everyday it would be bound to come up in most oral histories... to some extent

• Some themes were nearly always talked about, whether intentionally or not... perhaps the ultimate test for my analysis and thesis!

• BUT I couldn’t pursue things mentioned and question and discuss them further

• However, many topics and themes did emerge, I was still able to get some great quotes, and confirm that the themes I’d identified were important and quite common to most food activists

• As a bonus I also got a great quote to support my definition of activism!
Conclusion

• There are limits and frustrations of re-using oral histories

• But, still possible, useful, valuable and fairly easy