

Feminist Oral History Research Methods

Reflexivity, Subjectivity, and
being a 'halfie' researcher

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Feminist Historians and Oral History

- Why did feminist historians embrace oral history?
 - Lack of focus on women in traditional sources
 - Oral histories help integrate women back into national/ethnic/religious/social/political/economic etc. histories
- What are the ethical concerns?
 - How do we interpret other women's lives through oral history?
 - What theoretical approaches are most effective in conceptualizing this methodology?



Joan Sangster: “Telling Our Stories”

- Feminist oral history: enhanced by post-structuralist insights, but firmly situated in a materialist and feminist context
 - Oral history – a collaborative production of a narrative
 - NOT simply a “fill in the blanks”
 - NOT compensating for the lack of other ‘better’ sources
 - NOT unmediated
 - NOT simply an individual account of life experiences
- Reconstructing women’s lives
 - Narrative form: familial life and religion
 - Gendered memories: expression, intonation and metaphors
 - Silences and/or omissions: violence, harassment and shame



Example

- Denial of discrimination based on religion in the workplace and in the streets at night during WWII in Canada
 - Other sources contradicted women’s silence on the topic
 - Downplaying harassment and violence in ‘veiled references’
 - Language/articulation of ‘harassment’ and other modern terms (‘favouratism’)
 - Denial of violence often a resistance to combating the problem out of fear and/or fear of recrimination
 - ‘Listening’ to women’s words and contextualizing dominant ideologies that shape their narratives



Ideology and Experience

- Why might women have been reticent to uncover the discrimination they faced in the workplace in the 1930s?
 - Understanding how ideology shapes experience
 - Silence does not mean omission
 - National context: “the people’s war” and commemoration
 - Women “breaking down gender roles”
 - Defining the context – how did women understand ‘liberation’ in their own terms?
 - Liberation through abandonment of marriage
 - Liberation of a new status as ‘working women’



Employing a Feminist Ethic

- What does it mean to employ a ‘feminist ethic’?
 - Power and privilege
 - Are power differences in the interview negated when both researcher and participant are women?
 - ‘Sharing authority’ (Michael Frisch)
 - Can authority within the space of the interview be ‘shared’?
 - ‘Equalizing the interview’ (Ann Oakley)
 - Can we make the interview a cooperative (or equalizing) venture?
 - Listening vulnerably (Ruth Behar)
 - Should the interview ever be a one-way transfer of information?
 - Reflexivity (Daphne Patai, Lila Abu-Lughod, Biyani Subeidi)



Theoretical Dilemmas

- The post-structural *problema*
 - How to use oral sources to explore the relationship between language, subjectivity, and the construction of cultural meanings and social organization?
- Empirical training and ‘objective’ research
 - Does death necessarily create distance and objectivity towards historical subjects?
- The ‘right’ to write a particular history
 - Is there a “real and knowable” women’s past?
 - And if so, who should write that history?
- Power imbalances re-imposed
 - Do we run the risk of sympathizing or condescending to our subjects?



Post-Structural Turn in Oral History

- Deconstruct the interview:
 - Layers of meaning (beyond simply what is said)
 - Structure/script of the narrative
 - Contradictions in the narrative (and why)
 - Cultural discourses that might be disclosed
 - Silences or omissions
 - Tone and metaphors



Example: Sensory Histories and Metaphor

- “Iraq is a dish that has been poisoned, and we are forced like dogs to eat from this dish. Saddam has forced us to take in his poison and carry it with us. You think we are free here to be like one community – no we are not free, actually, because we always remember the things that they forced us to believe. That the Sunnis are the chosen people, that we are not Iraqis, that we are from somewhere else, that we must worship Saddam the dictator. *That* is why ethnic groups cannot come together in America. This hatred follows us and eats at us inside.”

- Interview with author, Detroit 2009.



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'Reading' Metaphors for Meaning

Original interview question: why do you think that Iraqis are so divided as a community in the U.S.?

- Multiple meanings:
 - Food and national memory
 - History of Sunni ascendancy in Iraq
 - Hegemony and the B'ath regime
 - 'Rewriting History Project' and manipulation of history
 - 'Consuming' what is known to be 'poisoned' or corrupted
 - Dehumanization of ethnic and religious minority groups 1979 to 2003
 - Presence of narratives of resistance or counternarratives
 - Iraqi diaspora and sectarianism



Beyond 'Event-Centered' Memory

- Non-narrative form/sensory experience through memory
- Michael Lambek: Western memory production “freeze(s) words and images...put(s) frames around them”
- David Howes: “The anthropology of the senses is primarily concerned with how the patterning of sense experiences varies from one culture to the next in accordance with the meaning and emphasis attached to each of the senses...only by developing a rigorous awareness of the visual and textual biases of the Western episteme [can we] hope to make sense of how life is lived in other cultural settings”



Diaspora and Inherited Memory

“I remember our garden in Baghdad. Rose bushes lined the walls and orange trees hung over the blossoms and dark leaves. A date palm stretched high over the foliage, intermingled with a few fronds from the palms in the large garden that backed onto ours. We had a pomegranate tree that bore small fruit that my younger sister liked to eat. We grew mint and parley for salads and my mother even nurtured a loofah plant that she harvested for household sponges. A grapevine crept over a trellis on a patio behind the house, giving us shade in the heat of summer. The grapevine reminded my father of his home village in Syria but the vine didn't produce grapes. The climate wasn't right for them to ripen. But my mother wrapped fresh *dolma* in the leaves.”

- Leila Nadir, *The Orange Trees of Baghdad*



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Sensory Inherited Memory

- Proustian analogy of the scent of orange blossom transporting her back and forward through dimensions of reality, forgotten memories, and dreams
 - “This is not my recollection. The picture is hidden inside my father’s memory. Like all our mythical origins, his beginnings are in a garden.” (Nadir)
- Living histories of loss and displacement
- Piecing together a family/collective narrative
- ‘Sensory journey’ that defies time and place



Reflexivity and Reciprocity

- Binaya Subedi: “Theorizing a ‘halfie’ researcher’ identity in transnational fieldwork”
- Spivak (1990): “wild anthropologists”
 - Positionality of postcolonial researchers who come from ‘dangerous’ places/spaces of non-existence
- Lila Abu-Lughod (1991): ‘halfie’ researcher “whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, parentage,”



Postcolonial Post-Positivity

- Behar (1996): “a personal voice, when creatively used, can lead the reader, not into miniature bubbles of navel-grazing, but into the enormous sea of serious social issues,”
 - Reflexivity as a means to critique subjectivity
 - Women of colour and the question of ‘objectivity’
 - Accountability in practices of representation
 - Critical reflection of what we know and how we know
 - ‘Vanity ethnography’ and re-centering the West



'Halfie' Transnational Researchers

- What is the 'field' for halfie researchers?
 - Field as home; living transnational lives
 - Going home and unlearning/relearning
- Insider/outsider status
 - Positionality with and to the community of research
 - Positionality within the Western academy
- "Rethinking reciprocity"
 - Parameswaran (2001) (of postcolonial researchers) that they disrupt "notions of power and difference that are typical of debates about Self and Other in traditional ethnographies wherein the Self is the White, Western academic"



'Halfie' Positionality

- Halfie researchers: positioned (and not always by choice) in opposition to dominant discourses and structures of power
 - Challenge the 'we' in disciplinary research
 - Embody multiple identities (national, ethnic, linguistic, gender)
 - Migration experiences and 'living transnationally'
 - Privileged Western-style education



Educational Privilege as a Discourse of Power and Colonial Hegemony

“Formal education is, after all, also a process by which we learn to avow and remember certain knowledges and devalue and forget others. We grow up repudiating the local and the personal in favor of what will get us ahead and away—thus coming of age within an intellectual field that, by no means arbitrarily, creates disinterest and oversight in some areas and directs desire elsewhere. It is within such an interlocking mechanism for the production of knowledges and ‘sanctioned ignorances’ that our subjectivities are forged. This apparatus makes our transition to first-world institutions, especially in the United States, quite possibly among the smoothest within the third-world system.” (John 1989, p. 11)



Critiquing 'Sameness'

- How do we define who is 'inside' and who is 'outside'?
 - Cultural background and insider status
 - Language and 'proving' legitimacy
 - 'Intimate insiders' as cultural ambassadors
 - Double consciousness (Du Bois)
 - Hybridity (Homi Bhabha; G. Spivak; Paul Gilroy)
 - Belonging as a 'local'
 - Privilege of 'foreign' passport holders



Negotiating Gendered Assumptions

“I was asking them to be honest and was trying to find out what their lives were like, but was unwilling to reveal much about myself. I was presenting them with a persona. They knew nothing of my life in the US—my friends, family, university, apartment—in short, much of what I considered part of my identity. I felt compelled to lie to them about some aspects of this life, simply because they could not have helped judging it and me in their own terms. In that scheme, my reputation as a young woman would have suffered. So I doctored my descriptions, and changed the subject when they asked about me, but I felt uncomfortable doing so.”

(Abu-Lughod 1988, “Fieldwork of a Dutiful Daughter”)



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The Politics of 'Whiteness'

- What does it mean to be positioned as culturally 'white' researcher?
 - “White” as a category of exclusion from the 'inside'
 - “Whiteness” as cultural and economic categories
 - Unmarried women researchers
 - Linguistic nuance and translation
 - ‘Standard English’ and the production of knowledge
 - Community-based knowledge



Reconceptualizing the 'Field'

- Dichotomy of local to global ('home' and 'field')
 - 'Field' is not a foreign place where a researcher goes to collect data or master the 'local' culture
 - 'Home' is not a safe and stable point of return where the researcher analyzes the data
- 'Translating' knowledge
 - Living transnational helps you to understand the sociopolitical frameworks of power and privilege differently
- Complicity – and transparency - in the research process
 - Rethinking the assumptions of 'insider' knowledge



Group Assignment

- Please form small groups based on your University/national affiliation
- In groups, discuss the following:
 - In what ways could employing a feminist method shape your research, and why?
 - Do you find the concept of ‘halfie’ researcher to be useful, and why?

