

REPOSITIONING THE ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Reciprocal peer interviewing within a transgenerational frame

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INTRODUCTION

This essay signals a departure from conventional models for the oral history interview to allow the participant voices to occupy a position of greater prominence in a collaborative process of co-creation. Reciprocal peer interviewing is an adaptation of focus group interviews; a technique that positions the narrators at the forefront of the interview process whilst the researcher takes on a secondary role as facilitator and observer. My research applies the reciprocal peer interview technique to explorations of lesbian identity and life experiences through oral testimony within a transgenerational frame.

The interview lies at the heart of oral history; an intensely personal activity that provides recorded information in oral form (Fyfe and Manson, 2006). Indeed, analogies to dramatic representations are common in the literature, describing the interview as a performance during which two people interact across multiple channels of reception and transmission. Traditional interview modes place the researcher/interviewer at the forefront, engaging in an interrogatory dialogue with the narrator/interviewee. Despite an uneasy relationship with historians who at times, have viewed oral history as populist, partial and selective, one may argue that the recording of a life story is no different to an interview used as a mainstream data collection instrument in qualitative research commonly applied in the social sciences. Ultimately, one must adhere to the *raison d'être* for historical study as stated by Thompson (1978, p 21) that "all history depends ultimately upon its social purpose."

ENGAGING WITH THE NARRATIVE

Narrative engagement allows us to make our experiences meaningful; recognising the authenticity of lived experiences permits us to recognise the social reality within which we live our lives. Individuals are able to do this by reflections on the past, understandings of the present and expectations of the future (Cohler and Hammack, 2009). Oral narrative is frequently used to allow the voices of those previously denied the opportunity, to contribute their testimony to society; it also gives voice to the lives and experiences of people 'hidden from history' (Rowbotham, 1977); both themes to which we will return later in this essay.

Meanings will vary across generations, in response to context and social change and according to individual life courses. Our lived experiences will move and shift according to the cultural context and identity construct of the individual (Cohler and Hammack, 2006). Our knowledge of a person is deepened when we understand their identity and life story (McAdams, 1995). The narrative approach to explorations of identity provides a context that is both meaningful and intensely personal. As Cohler and Hammack discuss "Personal identity itself is constructed in the creation and sharing of the life story" (Cohler and Hammack, 2006, p 153) and it is through narrative that meaning is constructed. If "identity represents a historically relative measure of the meaning made of life experience" (Cohler and Hammack, 2006, p 151), then the construction of personal identity is shaped by the historical, social and cultural context of the individual. Furthermore, Barker and D'Augelli & Patterson remark that the era of one's lived experiences plays a significant role in shaping identity – the influence of the generational cohort is paramount (Barker, 2004); (D'Augelli and Patterson, 1995). Our identity and thus our narrative reflections are shaped by the specificity of time and place.

QUEER SCHOLARSHIP

Whilst not central to the focus of this essay, the following brief sections serve to contextualise the methodology described here and clarify the rationale for its development by summarising queer scholarship and lesbian oral histories both globally and in New Zealand.

Oral history can provide a stimulating alternative focus on the life experiences of sectors of society who have been and/or still are under-represented or missing from the traditional historical record. Indeed, narrative enquiry is an accepted means of documenting queer¹ history and more specifically lesbian life histories and experiences although as Boyd cautions, self-disclosure is only one of many ways to find out more about a person despite its increasing popularity (Boyd, 2008). This research builds on the work of Cohler and Hammack (2006)

¹ Used as an umbrella identity term encompassing lesbian, questioning people, gay men, bisexuals, non-labeling people, transgender folks, and anyone else who does not strictly identify as heterosexual

discussing gay male identity in which the importance of generational and socio-historical change is acknowledged.

Legitimacy of the queer historical record is demonstrated in the growing archives in such countries as the United Kingdom (Hall Carpenter Archives, 1989) and further explored by Jennings (2004) and (Remember When Project, 2006); the United States Sophia Smith Collection (Oral History Project, 2010), (Cohler and Hammack, 2009); (GLBT Oral History Project, 2010); (Christensen, 2008); (Kennedy, 1995) and South Africa (Martin, 1998). Furthermore, the digital archiving of queer oral testimonies is increasingly becoming an accepted means of preservation and record (Chenier, 2009); and note the collection of LGBT testimonies by OurStory Scotland in the Scottish Life Archive of the National Museums of Scotland (www.ourstoryscotland.org.uk).

Turning to New Zealand, recent queer scholarship has focussed on collections of academic research offering varied perspectives on queer studies (Alice and Star, 2004) whilst lesbian research has either taken an historical approach (Laurie, 2003) or focused on the lives of famed lesbians (Glamuzina, 1991). The work of Mark Beehre (2010) represents the most recent collection of oral history narratives of gay males chronicling, through intimate photography and transcribed conversations, the lives of 45 gay men - 14 couples, 14 single men and one trio. To date, research of this nature has not been extensively replicated in a lesbian context. Amongst a limited scholarship, Laurie's (2004) documentation of pre-1970 lesbians allows their voices to 'speak the unspoken' and articulate their challenging lives and experiences. The oral history of the dancer Freda Stark (1910-1999) and nurse Beatrice Arthur (1915-2002) illustrates the 'enforced invisibility' that characterised lesbians of that era. In terms of audio-visual records, the Charlotte Museum (www.charlottemuseum.lesbian.net.nz/index.html) has a growing digital archive of lesbian oral history recordings (Thompson, 1978).

RECIPROCAL PEER INTERVIEWING WITHIN A TRANSGENERATIONAL FRAME

I was interested in exploring the interplay between lived experiences and the development of lesbian identity over variable timeframes. A transgenerational frame allows for flexibility and fluidity and in doing so acknowledges the unique qualities of the individual and their life experience. The sharing of common understandings has been usefully described by Habermas (1981) who applied the term 'lifeworld' to suggest mutual participation; a concept further developed as one of sharing authority across a series of narrative discourses (Frisch, 1990). The methodology discussed here encouraged participants to share experiences, to gain understanding and to empathise; it offered the opportunity for participant involvement and engagement in ways that signalled a departure from conventional interview modes.

In contrast to the conventional interview in which a 'passive' interviewee responds to questions, the construction of knowledge using an 'active' interview technique (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004) allows for the cultivation of meaning by both the interviewer and respondent, encouraging greater flexibility and creativity. A primary motivation for this research was a desire to depart from the traditional interview–interviewee model and explore a more collaborative, dynamic, and potentially more empowering process of shared authority between the narrators in which intellectual authority was restructured (Frisch, 1990). I was interested in removing the researcher/interviewer from the forefront of the interview and allow each participant pair of a younger (under 30 years) and older (over 50 years) lesbian to perform both roles as narrator and listener. In this way, the issue of power relations between the researcher and the researched could be minimised to allow a redefinition and redistribution of intellectual authority.

The reciprocal peer interview technique has been developed by feminist researchers in the United States (Porter et al, 2009) from focus group methodologies wherein the dynamics of interpersonal communication are allowed to occupy a position of greater prominence. In a radical departure from traditional interview norms, the concept of shared authority is extended to foregrounding the narrators and diminish the role of the researcher to one of facilitation and observation. Despite its innovative approach, the technique can be seen as a logical development of participatory action research and thus addresses issues of reciprocity by encouraging mutual contribution and shared ownership of the conversation.

The research frame juxtaposes past and present; it explores lesbian identity across generation cohorts by exploring the space between; comparing and contrasting key life experiences drawn from autobiographical content. A guiding topical protocol provided suggestions for the participants allowing a discursive mode for reflection covering personal, social, spiritual, professional reflections and experiences. Suggested topics included: memories of childhood and adolescence; early adulthood; education; experiences of family, marriage and parenthood; reflections on friendships; relationships; sexual experiences; identity and appearance; media framing; spirituality; the significance of belief; experiences of working and the workplace; thoughts on social and cultural activities; leisure time; thoughts on aging; challenges faced and how they were overcome; current feelings about the experiences and learnings to share with younger/older lesbians. However, the main focus was on allowing the women to share their lived experiences, reflect on commonalities and remark on distinguishing features.

Participants were carefully selected for their capacity to be self-reflexive, willingness to engage and share stories and finally, ability to evaluate and offer constructive feedback; these qualities were identified in discussions of suitability with the advisory panel and subsequently in the preparatory meeting with participants. The outcomes of a pilot study in which two sets of interviews were

held and evaluated were affirmative and led to a further series of interviews in Auckland, Wellington and Dunedin. Dual recording methodologies were used, both audio and audio-visual. The process was deliberately designed to allow participants the opportunity to reflect and consider their experiences, prior to the actual interview and following it. Participants were invited in their pairs to an initial briefing meeting when the purpose of the research was explained and the interview process discussed. Participants also received a short guide to interview techniques. Sufficient time elapsed to allow the participants to reflect on the forthcoming interview, to consider the questions they might pose and the responses they might make. The main interview took place 7-10 days later and finally, participants took part in a post-interview evaluation with the researcher when their individual reflections on the interview process were also recorded.

EVALUATION

The outcomes of the interview technique are significant. Of note is the transformation of the traditional interviewer-interviewee relationship to one of alternating narrator-listener and listener–narrator in equal measure; a situation where participants shared autonomy in the co-creation and development of the narrative. Critical to the success of the process was the creation of an atmosphere of comfort and equality in order to generate empathy and trust for all parties.

This autonomy and reciprocity was a vital feature of the narrative process and considerably enhanced the quality of the discourse:

I couldn't quite imagine how it would work. I thought we might get really stuck and start sounding very stilted asking each other, "Well, can you tell me..." I thought well, I hope that doesn't happen. But I really did anticipate moments where there would be silence or one or the other would go "Oh, what's next or what else can I ask?" And so it more than met my expectations...

Another commented on the organic nature of the interview, which allowed for spontaneity:

It allows for an actual conversation, like a dialogue to take place.

Of course, the issue of interviewer competency, the ability of each woman to interrogate and respond, and thus the quality of the subsequent data is also relevant. An element of trust and faith in the participants and the process was a feature of the interviews and of course, the value and validity of the data. Several participants remarked on their initial apprehension:

so I came along thinking it might not work...

And another observed:

*To be honest I was a little apprehensive of going into the actual interview process after meeting **. But it was interesting for me because I kind of prejudged ** a little bit, in the sense that from the first meeting I kind of, I felt she was quite shy and a little bit nervous and I thought "Oh, this is going to be really hard work." But I was totally blown away with how easy the whole process was and how well prepared she was.*

The participatory model is an empowering way to engage participants and in doing so lessens the social distance between the researcher and the researched (Porter et al, 2009). This way of privileging the participants is a significant feature of the research from several perspectives: firstly, in divesting control from the interviewer/researcher and transferring it to the interviewees as 'surrogate researchers,' and secondly in the autonomy granted to the participants which encouraged reciprocity and mutuality in the ensuing conversation; the result being an increase in rapport and thus the richness of the dialogue. I concur with the observation of Porter et al (2009), "...reciprocal peer interviewing appeared to have involved the women in a holistic way, engaging body, mind and spirit as they responded to questions that asked them to share their ways of living and being" (p 302). Many women remarked on how privileged they felt to share in the conversation and be a part of the research:

I thought it was really really valuable for me – and its great that its contributed to something else as well, but I got a lot out of it. Thanks.

And similarly:

From my perspective its been a privilege to be involved with it as well, so thank you so much.

Another woman commented:

The process of having these conversations has been really invaluable in ways that are more far reaching than in ways which can possibly be contained within a study...

Several participants remarked on the enriching nature of the experience and the unique nature of the learning that had taken place during the conversation and the fact that such an opportunity was not one they would otherwise have experienced.

... and I came away thinking, "Gosh, that was really rich and didn't we cover a lot?";

Whilst another remarked:

... that was to learn something about a generation of lesbians who I don't have a lot to do with in everyday life.... I don't know much about the history of, or older generations or what people went through. So I really wanted to start, at least try and learn something about those who have been around longer than I have and dealt with different kinds of things than I have. So I can have more of an appreciation of who I can be now.

And from another:

It was really just the opportunity to have an intergenerational conversation with someone else who is older than me, and I don't really get the chance to sit down and do that very often.

This interactional technique both allows and encourages the participants to "speak in their own voice and exercise control over the interview process" (Porter et al, 2009, p 291). The researcher is withdrawn from being at the forefront of the conversation allowing for greater openness and exploration.

Whilst a relative lack of prescription could result in participants deviating from the suggested protocol, its benefits far outweighed the occasional forays 'off topic:'

I enjoyed that, it was really good. I did feel like...we got stuck a few times, but it was good to have your list, your guidelines there. But no, I think it went really well. It was quite nice because it seemed to let the conversation flow a little bit more organically... I think we talked about things that weren't even on the list but then came back to ... the main issues.

And from another:

I think that we just went with how we went and that felt right, and that felt good.

The value of the reciprocal peer interview technique is evident however, there are also limitations which we need to note. Selection of the participants is a significant issue. The researcher has no prior knowledge of the participants and initially relied on recommendations by the advisory group; latterly, participants were self-selected by a word-of-mouth, snowball technique. Additionally, participants needed to be self-reflexive, empathetic and have the mental agility to move between both frames as listener and narrator; they also needed to be able to explore personal and occasionally sensitive topics with a virtual stranger. Thus, the introduction of the participant pairs to each other at the initial briefing and explanation of the interview process was critical to the ultimate success of the research. These issues were checked at each subsequent evaluation:

I thought I only had a week ... so that was really good because I went back and did some more (preparation). And then I decided that, how to conduct, how to be part of that interview, I was going to just do what you said and see how it went.

And from another:

The (initial briefing) was helpful because it gave me more of a sense of what was going to happen and we got to ask questions.

Similarly:

The guidance notes were really useful and yeah, it gave me time to prepare questions that I wanted to know.

Interviews in Wellington and Dunedin were conducted over a shorter timeframe and lacked the intervening preparation time. On these occasions, the researcher explained the process, answered questions and then guided the participants directly into the interview. This was also not a problem:

I didn't have any idea of how the other process worked, and so I just worked with the process that we had, and it worked perfectly fine. I had absolutely no qualms about doing it more in a condensed form and I feel like it worked really well ... it wasn't detrimental to how it went because of that shorter time limit.

A feature of the semi-structured interview technique is the unpredictability and overall direction of the conversation; the possibility that the lack of prescription can potentially lead to deviation from the suggested topics. This is acknowledged however, it is counter-balanced by the rich quality of the dialogue and the opportunity for digressions that were as surprising as they were thought-provoking. Several participants commented on their delight in such forays off topic.

The positioning of the researcher during the conversation as a 'supportive outsider' also brings up the question of spontaneity and whether any advantage would have been gained from more specific guidance from the researcher. On this point, several participants felt that on occasions, this may have been useful:

I think it would have been fine for you to, at times, encourage us to stay with a particular topic for instance, or some sort of reflective question yourself based on what we are talking about, rather than from a list. That would have encouraged us to stick with something

However, a greater degree of specificity may have detracted from the spontaneity of the conversation:

The (lack of specific direction) seemed to let the conversation flow a little bit more organically... I think we talked about things that weren't even on the list but then came back to ... the main issues.

Despite the time-consuming nature of making arrangements for the initial briefing, the ensuing interview and the subsequent evaluation, this was more than compensated for by the richness of the narratives and an appreciation of the singular nature of the experience for all participants.

CONCLUSIONS

The narrative paradigm described here allows a way to move beyond the conventional interview to engage with multiple voices; the fluidity and intensity of lived experiences can be captured, considered and curated in ways that give authenticity and integrity to the life courses of the participants. The process foregrounds the narrators by privileging their life experiences thereby allowing the additional understandings that arise from the participants shared autonomy in the interview process. One can readily identify with its liberating dimension; an empowerment that allows for interactions of intensity and mutual fulfilment.

Despite the unpredictability of the outcome, the democratisation of the interview process privileges freedom of expression and provides insight into human agency where personality and the personal are brought to prominence. Moreover, the technique of the reciprocal peer interview has considerable potential to inform and be applied to a variety of contexts, themes and subject matter; its framing within a transgenerational context also has multiple applications. Repositioning the narrators in a place of prominence is engaging and ultimately empowering; the technique, whilst still at an exploratory stage, has considerable potential as a radical departure from conventional interview modes.

On a wider stage, Gluck's description of women's oral history as a "feminist encounter ... the validation of women's experiences ... the communication among women of different generations ..." (Gluck, 1977, p 5) retains its relevance and validity in the context of this discussion despite the passage of more than three decades. From a contemporary perspective, it is interesting to note a comparative absence of scholarship, queer or otherwise, discussing alternative methodological practices such as the one described here. Indeed, one of the more recent texts 'Bodies of evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History' by Boyd and Ramirez (2012), whilst making a significant contribution to queer studies, presents a conventional reflection on queer practices and methodologies.

As a coda, these oral narratives will contribute to the multiple meanings and evolution of lesbian identity and by doing so, inform representations of gender

and sexuality in New Zealand. By bringing a greater public awareness to lesbian life courses, it is anticipated that the testimonies will generate a more inclusive reality of lesbian identity and in doing so, make a valuable contribution to existing knowledge for all communities regardless of their sexual orientation. Finally, the project provides an opportunity to contribute to contemporary debate and to collect evidence from individuals hitherto excluded from dominant interpretations.

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