

Understanding Ethnography
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Lecture 42
Oral History and Ethnography

Hi, this is Indira Chowdhury, and I teach up the Centre for Public History in Srishti in Bangalore, and one of the things we do a lot of is recording oral history, and I think that is what I want to talk about here. So, I will begin with the question all of us really worry about how do we define oral history and especially in you know a place like India where there are so much of oral traditions there is so much of folklore that is oral. We tend to often use the two terms interchangeably.

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But as an oral historian when I talk about oral history, I do not mean oral traditions. I mean the long interview which is recorded, and that is what I want to talk about now

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So, what is oral history and this is what we often break our heads over that is it the recording, is it what you record, is it what you transcribe or are we referring to the method of gathering evidence in this manner as a research method that is oral history and what most of us have discovered is that oral history is all three. It is recording, it is the transcription, but it is also the method by which you do the research.

So, often we use this term almost interchangeably with the life story interview of the life review interview or the personal narrative, and I think what I am going to emphasize that in oral history there are two people involved. There is somebody who is asking the questions the questions are being framed by an oral historian.

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And the function of the oral history is really to jog the memory of the person who is being interviewed, and I think when we look at how social sciences look at oral history often, I think in the beginning there was a lot of distrust of this method because social scientists are taught not to manufacture evidence, and this was seen as you know the prompt of the oral historian was seen as something that was trying to create evidence.

But actually, when oral historians started thinking about it, they came up with a different explanation because they said what is happening is this is the creation of evidence, this is not really manufactured evidence and then it further by saying this is not just creation of evidence, there is co-creation of evidence and that is where I think oral history differs from other modes where the interviewee and the interviewer together create something.

And that is what has been interpreted whatever they are creating, and that is often new knowledge, new information, but more and more there has been an emphasis on how do people make meaning, what is this process of meaning-making that happens when we start doing these oral history interviews and here I think there are some concepts that we have to pay attention to.

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And that is the historian Michael Frisch who did both oral history and public history gave us this concept of the shared authority.

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And shared authority is a term that he talks about where there is shared responsibility, where the listener and the person who is taking, who is speaking actually have an equal responsibility in creating and interpreting what you want new knowledge they are moving towards, and I think this becomes very valuable.

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Then the other objection like often social scientists have to oral history was that you know this is not objective research, how do you deal with that.

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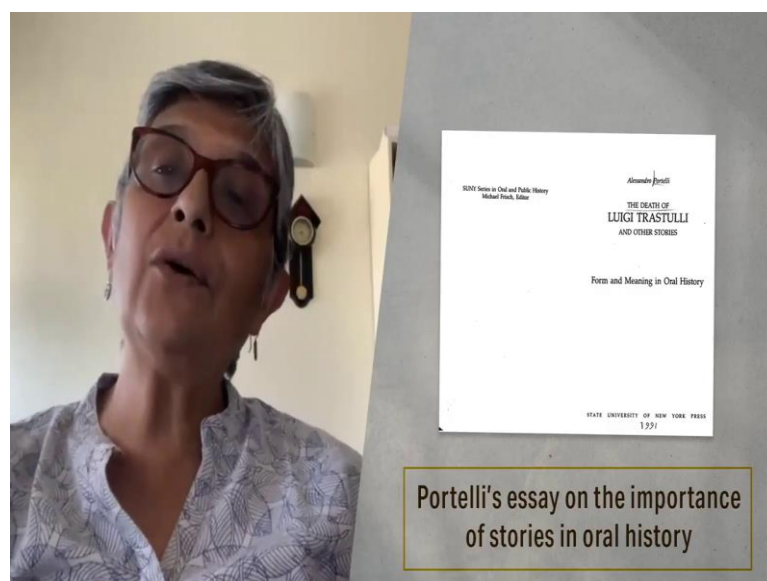


And oral historians like Alessandro Portelli has alerted us to the fact that why cannot we look at it as to why do not we take subjectivity and turn it on his head and say this is research that is subjective. So let us try and understand what is happening there is no objective position and he says that because he says that as a listener, as an interviewer you are expected to also modify your position, the way you think of yourself, your own awareness of yourself in the course of the interview.

And therefore subjectivity, but also inter-subjectivity, the subjectivity of you yourself as the interviewer and the interviewee both become very, very important and I think sometimes and what is very, very important to oral historians is that we work with memory and that is why often they are acquisitions oh is it not memory unreliable? Is it not there is something that you are not going to quite get right.

But actually what oral historians have found is that even in the written document it, they may be inaccuracy, inaccuracy of a certain kind. So, what they have gone on to argue is that there are two levels of engagement. You try to find out why the person says what he or she does say, and you also want to find out how this memory works in this context.

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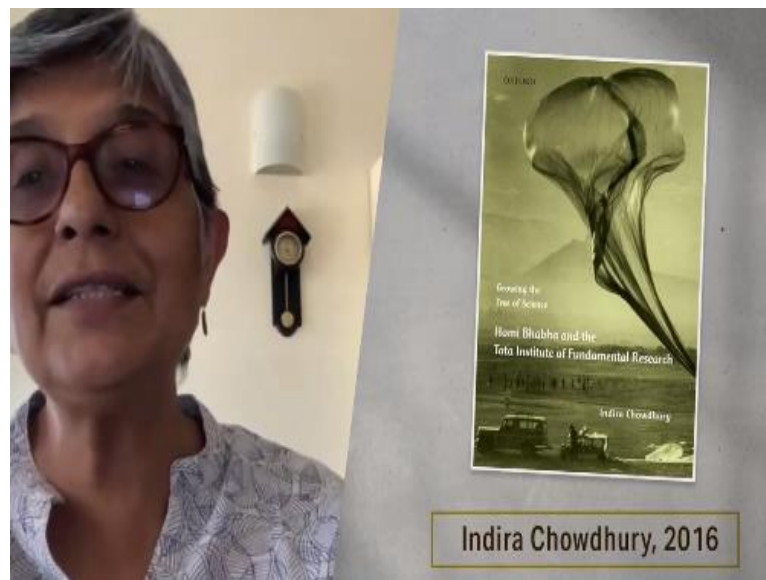
And I will give a little example one is from Portelli's famous work which is called the death of Luigi Trastulli and other stories the main essay in that book is called the death of Luigi Trastulli. Now Luigi Trastulli is a union worker in a steel factory interneer, and he died in 1949.

The entire town, when Portelli starts doing his work say that no, no he died in 1953 and of course this would be enough ground to say look memory is not reliable, so do not try to believe them, but he says no this is not a matter of belief. Let us try to find the reasons why they say 53 and therefore Portelli has very powerfully argued that it is important to look at all this what is called misinformation or misremembering.

And when he starts doing the research, he says that there are many versions, people have many ways in which they want to talk about this one death. And then he finds out that in 49 it is really protested that was about NATO, it was about peace, it was not about the factory and at the same time he also finds out that when he was shot dead, the entire union had said we would not let people rest. We will really do something about this terrible injustice that had happened and the course of this research he finds out actually they did nothing.

And in 1953 when the union actually rises up in arms and does a protest that is noteworthy, that is when memory channels everything to that moment and he has a very powerful argument about how memory is used, and I think you know it tells you about how people remember, how people choose not to remember and therefore batters as historical as if you gave the argument that this was a memory that was misremembering then you do not have much, but you know since he pursues it you get a very rich history.

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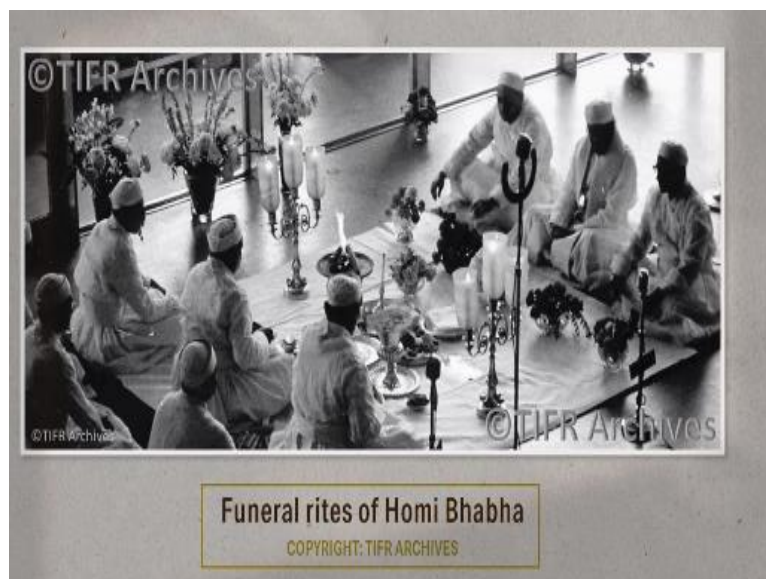
From my own experience while doing the oral history archives of Tata Institute of Fundamental Research which was set up by Homi Bhabha.

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I found that there was a moment when all scientists were telling me about his sudden death. As you know, he died in an air crash quite unexpectedly, and the whole institute was mourning. Now when I asked them okay how did you get the news, what did you do that day almost all of them told me that you know we had a condolence meeting and then we went back to work because that is what Doctor Bhabha would have liked.

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Now a few months later when I start setting up the archives, I found these photographs which were of a Parsi death ritual happening right below the library staircase in TIFR and at that point, I go back to the scientists to some of them to ask that what is this you know there is

obviously something happening here which is not quite as you have told me that this is not a condolence ceremony.

So he said oh yes, of course, we did this, this was done for his mother because you know his mother had wanted this and this seemed the appropriate place to have it. He told me that there were several ways in which people remember, official memory becomes very strong sometimes in the universe in the institutional context, but the other thing was it was a very personal connection that this institute had with the family is something as the institute grow up it was not always remembered.

And so you will have the different ways in which memory functions and it gives you interesting insights about the institutions or how people remember. Now coming now to other forms of interviews that I think you are course is looking at particularly because you are looking at ethnography.

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I think one of the things that happen in ethnography is ethnography works with time and space. It asks people at a particular time, in a particular space about whatever the ethnographer wants to find out and the ethnographic interview often the interviewer has to revise questions as he or she learns more about the place. Now in the case of oral history interviews, we actually work more with memory and more with meaning-making than with your time and space.

Of course, we are looking at the time because we are looking at telling me what happened on that first day of independence in 1947, but we do not really look at something that is in the present because we believe as oral historians that we think of the past in the present. When we are doing an oral history interview, it is the document that is created in the present, but it is about the past.

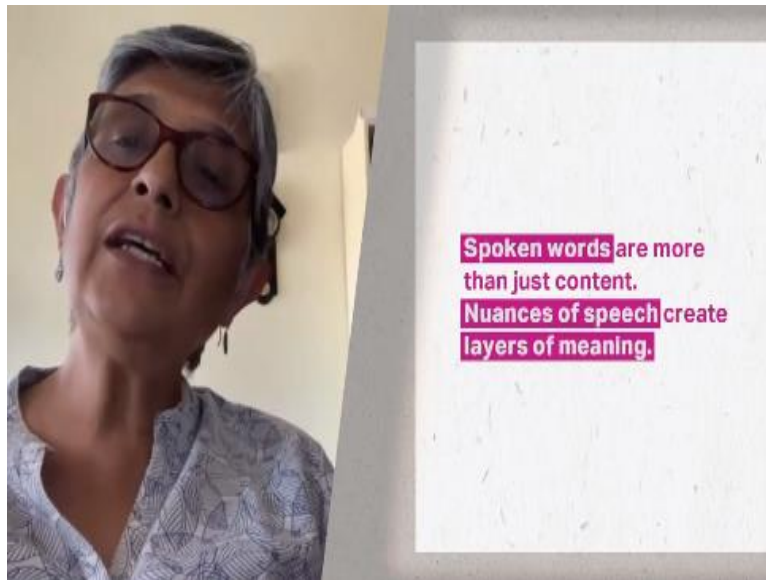
So you have a very rich sort of layered history that comes to you, of course, the long interview is also something that sociologists do as the qualitative interview, and the qualitative interview again is different because the qualitative interview often has a subject. It is trying to understand from a group of people about something.

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Whereas in oral history we focus on individual memories, and we try to locate those memories and contextualise them and see how is this remembering happening at this time and so that is, those are the differences. And I think when we look at the oral history interview, and what we are left with in the end, I think oral history demands from us a certain kind of shift in the way we look at that material because you can look at the transcription.

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But it is not enough because if you listen to it if you listen to the interview, you would find the way in which people speak, the volume, the repetitive speech all of these are also there is of meaning. It is not as if you know only the content gives you that process of meaning-making. So, I think this is what we do which is different from other forms of interviewing and of course we are focused on the past.

We are trying to understand the past, but the present is always there. So, basically, I think the oral history method goes into a lot of details of a person's life, and I think in an ethnographic interview might gain from some of its methods because you might get a deeper context to what you are doing.

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For example, I have done interviews with scroll painters of Bengal the Pata Chitrakars, and you know that they sing a lot of songs which are about disasters, which are about the tsunami or about the floods.

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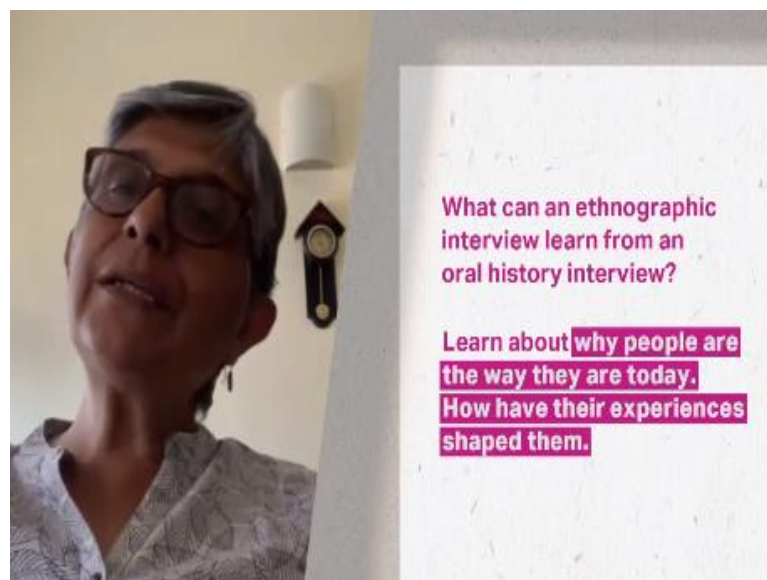
And I remember, and there is even one which is about 9/11, and you know it is so far removed from their lives. So I think it was because I was doing an oral history interview I asked them I said you know why do you sing about 9/11? You have seen it on television it is not something that you have experienced so what is this song really about. Is it because you felt these (()) (16:31) these scrolls will sell?

They said you know we could not write our song without really believing that we are, we are their part of the story. I said so how are you part of the story? He said look I think we have suffered so much we know, we have the experience of floods almost every other year. We know what it means to lose a family member to snake bite. We know about loss and because we know about the loss we could empathise with people who lost their own during this disaster.

And you know if it was at that ethnographic interview you would not have got the stay tune, he was relating this event to his life and telling me why at that point he felt that he could actually understand what these people whom he had never met in America or the people who suffered the tsunami went through and I think somewhere this empathy, of course, all interviews demand empathy.

But I think the oral history interview empathise with the people's lives and it also engages with their lives and that is why you end up asking questions which are about their life, which you can then bring as a different layer on to your ethnographic interview. So I feel it would gain if you asked a few questions that will more detail in depth and about that person's life.

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Now what the ethnographic interviewer can learn from the oral history interviewer is that we go into details of people's lives and try to understand why today they are the way they are? What is it in their experience that has shaped them? Well, I think one of the things that oral

historians do they actually engage with memory and I think sometimes they have been questions that you know can historians engaged with memory in this way.

And that is a very deep question because sometimes we pointed out that why to talk about memory as being unreliable because memory is helping you reconstruct, co-construct, a range of things and even if not (()) (19:19) today are talking about construction rather than just culturally representing something. So I think oral historians tend to bring in history and memory and talk about how the memory of something can help us reconstruct the past.

And you might do it with the help of photographs, documents and other things, but you would not dismiss memory at all because memory is part of an individual's experience. But oral history mainly engages with memory and with meaning-making. How does my experience of the past enable me to make a meaning about what history is, what does my experience tell me about what I am reading or what if I have my family talk about the partition, then what is it that they are doing in order for it to become meaningful for me.

So all the partition stories which I grew up listening to which were basically about the village they are left behind were really about making sense of their lives now, but it is very different from the hearing them now that the ethnographer is trying to capture and so that remains a difference, and you also ask about orality.

And of course one of the things about oral history is that we are looking at the spoken word, we are looking at people speaking about their experience. It is not a diary where someone has written about the past, but it is people talking about their past and orality is about the hearing now, it happens in time, it happens in the present, but this orality is about many things.

It is about how we speak about the past, what is the language in which that past becomes most meaningful to me. For example, my grandmother would only speak in her dialect of East Bengal when she recollected those times, but if she spoke about how she struggled to become a teacher in Calcutta and how aware she was that she could never go back to that place after 1947.

She would use a very different language which is not that dialect of a village, and I think oral historians are also very aware of these kinds of differences that you see and even going back

to my example of the Pata Chitrakars or the scroll painters, there they are used to singing or telling their stories in a particular way, and if they were to look at the oral history interviews and compare it to the way in which their other oral narratives are shaped, you would find similarities and differences. And I think that is why for oral historian language is so important the oral is so important because it communicates so much more than just content of all this being said.