

AISO

(Italian oral history association)

GOOD PRACTICES IN ORAL HISTORY

Presentation

Oral history, oral sources

Oral history is the methodology of historical research based on the production and on the use of oral sources. The result of interviews with witnesses and bearers of memories, the oral sources are strongly intentional, carried out because part of a research, and therefore different from written sources. Oral sources normally consist in an in-depth account of personal experiences and personal reflections, made possible by granting the testimonies sufficient time to give his/her story the fullness that they desire. As first-person narrations, by one or more witnesses usually identified by their full names, oral sources almost always contain sensitive or confidential information. Moreover, as sound or video recordings, they include elements intrinsically linked to the personal and physical integrity of the narrator, such as his/her voice or his/her image.

For all of these reasons, the acquisition, preservation and dissemination of oral sources require special protections.

AISO

The Italian Association of Oral History (AISO), affiliated to the International Oral History Association (IOHA), was established in 2006 to facilitate the communication among the many actors related to the historical inquiry with oral sources, promoted in Italy by individuals and public and private entities, institutions and associations.

One of the AISO primary activity is the training in the practice of oral history (both in the preparation of new scholars and researchers and in their continuous on-going training) and on the awareness of the legal and ethical aspects that are peculiar to this methodology.

Good practices. Why and why now?

The document "Good practices for oral history" proposes itself to be an information and mindfulness tool. It does not intend to impose narrow standards for research, but to recommend best practices to help those who do research in the field to perform well their job. It helps to fill a gap, as it is hard to find institutional options that prepare for an adequate consideration and reflection on some of the basic critical areas in historical research on oral sources. In particular, in making history with oral sources, the responsibility of the ethical aspects are often left solely on the shoulders of the individual researcher, on his/her training in the field - and often on his/her individual interpretation of research experiences of historians that have preceded them.

Moreover, in recent decades, three major drivers - a) new information technologies (in particular the Internet), b) the increased concern of individuals to the protection of their privacy rights and of their personal identity, c) new procedures laid down in national and international bodies to research projects that deal with "human subjects" - have posed new problems to the attention of those who deal with oral sources. These changes question the responsibilities in

the conduction and in the organization of the interviews. This calls for a continuous adaptation of the practices to the social context in evolution, and above all for a renewed awareness of the methodological specificities when working with oral sources.

To draw up this document, AISO has launched a broad and open discussion in the scientific community, sharing and promoting the idea of conscious research practices and emphasizing the respect of all involved in an oral history project. The value of the following statements is based essentially on this.

General principles

The collection of oral sources and their use in any form require adequate training in the principles and practice of oral history.

Anyone who promotes projects aimed at the collection, preservation, processing or use of oral sources from third parties is required to inform the participants on the legal, ethical and professional implications of their work. This need is particularly felt by faculty and educational institutions, which have the responsibility to make students and trainees aware of the peculiarities of oral sources and the specific measures they require.

The oral history interviews are the context and the result of a personal relationship based on mutual respect. Each interview is a gift, and, for the person interviewing, it is a learning experience. Therefore it is good practice to carefully prepare oneself to exercise the art of listening without having rigid settings and without interrupting the digressions of any unplanned topics, which often might open up new trails of investigation.

Each interview is unique and unrepeatable. From the preparation phase, researchers and their collaborators think about which recording tool fit best the type of research carried out (audio, audio-video, etc.). They make use of the appropriate recording equipment or, more in general, of any suitable expedient in order to reproduce accurately the narrator's voice and, if appropriate, related sounds or images. They arrange, from the start of the research, for the optimal preservation of the original recording and of its related documents.

Collection of the Interviews

The interviews are the result of a conscious and informed choice.

The informed consent to the recording of the interview can be achieved either by signing a written release form or recording an oral statement; in the latter case, the consent recorded at the beginning of the interview. Necessarily subject to prior agreement and consent are the following essential information: the interviewee and interviewer names; the date and location of the session; the purpose and subject of the research for which the interview is carried out; any client, sponsor or institution on behalf of which the research is conducted or from which it is financed; the use and dissemination that will be made of the interview itself, with the greatest possible detail. It is appropriate that the researcher also communicates in advance where and how the recorded interview will be archived.

The consent on the use, access and dissemination of the collected material is stressed at the end of the interview. The consent granted orally must be

recorded with the interview. The agreement may include restrictions put on the use of the interview. It is preferable that the agreements relating to any possible dissemination through the web or audio-video broadcasting of the interviews are agreed upon and signed in a written consent release form.

If the interview is interrupted and postponed to another date, it is recommended that useful references (notes on time frames, interruptions and the subsequent resumption of the activity) are recorded every time, so that single excerpts of the overall recording and their informed consents can be linked.

To the extent that it is considered relevant to the specific nature of the topics under investigation, it is appropriate that the interviewee is informed of the possibility that - in exceptional cases - the interview recording can be acquired by the judicial authorities.

The interviewee has the right to withdraw from the interview and terminate or suspend the registration at any time, and he/she has the right to issue statements with the recorder switched off. In addition he/she has also the right to grant the interview anonymously or under a pseudonym, or to request anonymity for a time established by him/her. In the latter case, anonymity has to be guaranteed even by the archival institution that is going to preserve the oral source in the future.

After the interview and in a separate occasion, it is appropriate that the researcher summarizes the information deemed relevant for future users of the oral source, the conditions and restrictions put on the uses and the dissemination of the interview: the researcher may do so orally, recording a statement in the appendix to the interview, or in a written form to be associated with the recording.

Interviews Uses

The interview is a dialogical narration which involves both the interviewer and the interviewee. The owner of the recorded interview is the person who has carried out the interview.

The choices on the transcription of the interview and the final editing pertain to the researcher, unless otherwise agreed upon with the interviewee. However, the researcher may carefully consider, depending on the nature and on the complexity of the interview, to give the interviewee the opportunity to review parts of the transcripts or the full text and agree with him/her on the modality of the transcription.

The interviewee has the right, at any time, to revoke the consent to the access or publication of the interview. This does not negate the right of the researcher to keep the recording of the interview in its original form and use the information contained therein without reference to the identity of the interviewee or to elements that may render the interviewee recognizable.

It is good practice to leave a copy of the recording to the interviewee, in the format considered most appropriate to the circumstances.

The researcher, in the interview where there are references to third parties, shall, before publishing the interview, apply every precaution designed as not to harm the image and reputation of other parties involved.

Interviews Conservation

The oral source is an audio or video recording of an interview. It is distinct from the transcript, which is a reduction or textual approximation.

The oral source has to be stored and kept properly. It must also be made accessible to scholars, except in cases where the interviewee has otherwise set forth. It is up to the researcher to identify the most appropriate place to deposit or store the source, taking into account the best guarantees of preservation and custody, but also the requirements of use that characterize it.

It is appropriate for the interviewer to draw up, to safeguard and to deliver to the institution charged of the preservation and access of oral history interviews a detailed description or other written guide to the contents. On this sheet there should be indicated useful information as to identify the interviewee - except in the case of anonymity - as well as the time, place, context and circumstances in which the interviews were held. On the sheet any restriction of access, consultation and disclosure of the interview should be explained. The sheet may also include: a transcript and/or an indexing of the interview, information and documents, such as photographs, writings or other records connected to the same oral source and useful for future users, and any references to the results, products, publications of the research.

The interviews recorded in the past without the expressed consent of the interviewee can be used as provided by law, always considering the good faith effort of adapting to these best practices, given the possibility.

When depositing the recording at an archive or any other conservation institution, the duty to comply with the letter and spirit of interviewer-interviewee agreement (included any restrictions on the access, the use and dissemination of the interview), are transferred from the interviewer to the repository in charge of the conservation.

Research on a commission bases

The researchers and their colleagues, when working on behalf of another public or private entity, are responsible for the integrity of the research and of the dignity of the people interviewed. In particular, they will always exercise their powers of independent judgment on how the information collected will be used.

In the agreements between client and researcher, the right of the researcher to select, filter, or possibly not deliver all the collected interviews should be guaranteed, if he/she considers that this could damage the integrity of the research, of the persons interviewed and their personal professionalism. In addition, it must be ensured that the holder of the research has the right to keep a copy of the interviews produced and to use in any future scholarly publications.

In all those cases in which the transcriptions or the use of the interviews should be entrusted to other researchers, participants or agents, the protection of the source must always be ensured, by providing explicit agreements concerning each phase of the collection and research work.

The institution which has commissioned the research has to be informed on the need to carefully manage the preservation of the research products carried out with oral sources (products, such as: interviews and their transcriptions, work-in-progress or summaries of the collected material, etc.).

