



African Contributions to Global Health

Audio Transcript

The history and methodology of oral history

TANJA HAMMEL: "A person who knows nothing of the historical events [...] lives his life with blunt teeth, he can't really get his teeth into anything he does", wrote the Xhosa poet and historian Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi. Knowing of historical events came from histories that had been passed on in oral form. After the Second World War, historians became interested in reconstructing African histories and started doing fieldwork and conducting oral history interviews. But: What is oral history and what is the history of oral history?

The accessibility of tape recorders in the 1960s and 70s led to the oral documentation of the era's movements and protests. Over time, scholars of African History convinced the historical establishment – who had hitherto only focused on written documents – that oral history interviews were just as valid as any other historical source. The development of digital databases and text-search tools have helped to establish digital oral history archives.

Let's listen to a short extract of an oral history interview. The German journalist Ruth Weiss asks Pamela H., a military nurse, Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army commander and employee at the Ministry of Information in Harare, Zimbabwe, a question. The interview took place in Harare on 20 April 1980.

RUTH WEISS (RW): You didn't yourself have to undertake any military training because of your nursing...

PAMELA H (PH): No, I did.

RW: As well.

PH: Oh yes. You can't join the forces. I mean. You can't be in the bush before you did military training. First of all, I went straight for military training and then later I became a medical instructor.

RW: I understand.

PH: And then I came into the bush also. And I was nursing and teaching even the masses, the girls. Civilian girls, I was teaching them basic first aid, so that if some comrades happen to have been injured in contact, the masses would take him straight away, withdraw him and then start treating him.

RW: The military training presumably was also necessary for your own protection?

PH: Yes of course. And I also wanted to be a soldier. Not just. I just wanted to nurse.



TANJA HAMMEL: The interview was part of Weiss' research on the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe and is part of the Ruth Weiss collection at the Basler Afrika Bibliographien. But how do historians prepare themselves for such an interview situation?

Historians have to determine interview partners, locations and familiarise themselves with the "local intersocial protocols". They then conduct research on historical events in archives and literature before they design interview questions. Before we examine that process, though, what are some of the problems that can come up in an interview?

Let's say a historian is working with an interpreter. An interpreter may distort questions and answers, and may inject their own views and opinions into the interview. Some words, concepts, abstractions, or idioms defy interpretation from one language to another.

Another complex problem related to field research is whether informants in low- and middle-income countries should be paid for their time, energy, and information. How should they be compensated?

These are issues that need to be thought through before any interview.

Now, how do we go about formulating interview questions?

Historians should use everyday vocabulary, neither voice their own expectations, make offers of interpretation, insist on clarification nor trigger negative feelings. Direct, suggestive, closed, aggressive or judgmental questions should not be asked. Difficult topics are treated carefully and addressed towards the end of an interview.

Suitable questions are then ordered thematically and organised into guiding questions to stimulate narration, questions that keep the conversation going without introducing a new topic, and detailed follow-up questions.

Historians only use affirmations such as "mhm" or "yes" to keep the conversation going and not to interrupt and influence the interviewee, as we have seen in Ruth Weiss' example.

For concentration's sake, an interview should not be longer than 1,5 hours. After an interview, the interviewer should write down impressions, observations, insecurities, and emotions.



Generally, each transcript is a construction. Nonverbal actions should be mentioned, but not interpreted. When the interviewee generally speaks fluently, signs of hesitation should be included.

Which method you use to transcribe depends on the research question. If you are not only interested in WHAT is being said, but also HOW it is being said, then it is important to include breaks, pitch, and other non-verbal signs of communication.

Qualitative social research has developed a standardised transcription system with signs you can use for this non-verbal communication. We generally transcribe everything we hear how we hear it. Most often, people transcribe in standard language rather than dialect.

After transcribing, how do we then analyse the answers?

We need to reflect on the context of how the source came into being. The difficulty in source interpretation is in the distance in time between the events and the interview. This is why we source critically reflect upon individual and collective forms of remembrance. If the interview is meant to shed light on historical facts, then it needs to be validated. To find out whether the information is credible, it is best to compare it to other contemporary witness statements and written documents of the time. Interviewees might also give different answers in the same sitting leading to discrepancies which can be indicated in footnotes.

Oral history interviews are a wonderful means in order not to "live our lives with blunt teeth" and to "get our teeth into anything we do", as it allows us to learn much about historical events.

After all this methodology, here's a final thought on how to approach an interview: oral historians should enter the field with an open mind. They should be very well prepared, but also able to stay flexible and ready to adapt to unexpected circumstances. Sometimes, the best and most insightful answers in an interview happen when you let the conversation flow naturally, even if that means going slightly off script.