

# Reusing Oral History Interviews in Food Research at the British Library



The  
University  
Of  
Sheffield.

Lauren Blake  
PhD Student  
University of Sheffield and the British Library

UK Data Service

Secondary Analysis of Qualitative Data: an advanced  
training course

23<sup>rd</sup> May 2014, UK Data Archive, University of Essex

# PhD Research

- Collaboration of the British Library and Sheffield University
- Record 15-20 oral histories interviews for a new collection on Food Activism to be held at the BL to be the basis of my PhD research and thesis
- Collected 17 oral history interviews (ranging from 4-16 hours in total length)
- From a range of organisations and movements, covering environmental, health, social and economic issues, such as: organic agriculture, animal welfare, local and seasonal food provision systems, fair trade, vegetarianism, nutrition/health, food safety, food security
- Also used other material at the BL, including other relevant oral history interviews already in other collections as secondary data

# Oral History

- Emerged as a discipline during C20<sup>th</sup>
- Seen as 'giving voice' to the marginalised
- Fought for respect against orthodox historical research methods considered objective, scientific and delivering the 'truth'
- Oral history acknowledges multiple truths that are subjective and seeks to explore how the past is understood and its relationship with the present
  - "the present itself is historical" (Bertaux 1983)
  - "memory is living history, the remembered past that exists in the present" (Frisch 1990)
- Crosses disciplinary boundaries such as history, human geography, psychology, sociology, anthropology and linguistics
- N.b. oral history life story interviews are on average between 4 and 20 hours long

# Research Questions and Thesis Topics

- Food and Identity in the context of food activism
  - social class, gender, health, consumer, parent, etc.
  - particularities of food compared to other types of activists
  - how activists define themselves in relation to food, how food features in their lives
  - food activists' commonalities
- What oral history contributes to understanding food activism:
  - nuances and practicalities of the method
  - advantages, disadvantages and limits
  - food as a vehicle for exploration in oral history
  - memory and narrative of food activists
- How can British food activism be defined
  - national identity, historical context, food activists' commonalities

# Summaries

- Summaries obligatory for archiving at the BL
- Less detailed, technical and time consuming than transcription
- Key words, names, historical events, people, places, topics, style
- Useful process for analysis
- Invaluable for use as secondary research (identifying interview as resource, locating relevant parts, getting overview without listening to whole)

# Sampling

- Mapped the existing BL collections at the start of my research
- I researched relevant collections as well as key words to identify what was already there, what I could re-use, and what the gaps were
- Found about 26, of those 3-9 relevant
- Listened to parts of some of them
- Did my own research
- Once finished my own OHs and identified themes of my thesis, returned to analyse the other OH's in relation to this and in comparison to my own
- Used 4 in particular...

# Secondary Use of Oral Histories

- **Peter Melchett**  
(2010, Louise Brody, home, 5 sessions over 4 months, 11 hours)  
BL Collection: National Life Stories Collection: General  
Policy Director at Soil Association, previously Director of Greenpeace, minister in House of Lords, farmer
- **Michael Barratt Brown**  
(2008, Louise Brody, BL, 5 sessions over 2 months, 11 hours)  
BL Collection: Pioneers in Charity and Social Welfare  
Founder of Northern College and Fairtrade Movement
- **Tim Lang**  
(2004, Polly Russell, BL, 4 sessions over 6 months, 11 hours)  
BL Collection: Food: From Source to Salespoint  
Professor of Food Policy, Advisor for numerous national and international organisations
- **Joyce D'Silva**  
(2002) (Barbara Gibson, home, 1 session, 6 hours)  
BL Collection: Animal Welfare Activists  
Director of Compassion in World Farming, previously Campaigns Office and RE Teacher

# Practicalities

- Digital or tape
- Summaries

# Pros, Cons and Reflections

- Interviewing technique
- Context
- Issues I wanted to explore (beyond documenting activities) and focused on in my interviews:

(food and identity, food activism vs other political activism, growth and professionalisation of British activism, oral history as method in food research)

- Personal diet, food habits, relationship with food, family
- Crossover of food issues
- Image/appearance
- Optimism
- Social class
- Childhood influences

# Pros, Cons and Reflections cont.

- Assumption that food is so everyday it would be bound to come up in most oral histories... to some extent
- Some themes were nearly always talked about, whether intentionally or not... perhaps the ultimate test for my analysis and thesis!
- BUT I couldn't pursue things mentioned and question and discuss them further
- However, many topics and themes did emerge, I was still able to get some great quotes, and confirm that the themes I'd identified were important and quite common to most food activists
- As a bonus I also got a great quote to support my definition of activism!

# Conclusion

- There are limits and frustrations of re-using oral histories
- But, still possible, useful, valuable and fairly easy