

Thematic guide: oral history (using qualitative data)

Importance of individual stories to be understood

Introduction

Oral history is a method which records and explores the biographical accounts people give of their own lives and those of their preceding generations.

This method allows the opportunity to study living history through first-hand accounts of those people who have personally experienced it, as well as a unique opportunity for the often marginalised, 'ordinary person's' voice to be heard in these historical accounts.

Oral history projects allow for the importance of individual stories to be understood as a part of a wider social context. Furthermore these projects help to construct an important account of local community and family histories which can be preserved and passed through the generations.

The archive holds a number of significant and important oral history projects.

Paul Thompson deposited one of the first major oral history projects carried out in Britain, Family Life and Work Experience Before 1918, 1870-1973 (Edwardians).

Another key oral history project by Thompson is his study Families, Social Mobility and Ageing, an Intergenerational Approach, 1900-1988 (100 Families), which was an investigation into geographical and social mobility and the role of ordinary families in intergenerational terms from the perspective of gender and migration.

Searching for related materials

The [UK Data Service catalogue](#) can be searched for data on oral history using subject terms such as:

- local history
- community life
- life histories
- households
- labour force
- oral history
- social class
- social history

Every data collection is accompanied by comprehensive documentation. These are open access and available to the public from the website and it is not necessary to be a registered user to access and download them.

The [Pioneers](#) website offers an insight into the backgrounds of a group of classic researchers, their motivations for undertaking particular pieces of research and some interesting observations about studying sociology in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

This web-based resource includes thematic extracts and experiments in the use of audio data (i.e. the audio recordings). It allows browsing of text and audio in unison. The website includes more information about the Pioneers project, and the following information about each pioneer: a biography, a list of publications, themed extracts from the interview with MP3 audio recordings, and a list of data collections.



Other resources on oral history

[International Oral History Association](#)

[Museum of London - – Life Stories and Oral History Collection](#)

[The British Library Sound Archive, Oral History](#)

[The Oral History Society \(UK\)](#)

[Imperial War Museum Collections and Research](#)

[The Monticello African American Oral History project](#)

[Waltham Forest Oral History Workshop](#)

Summary of selected qualitative studies on oral history

Study name

[SN 2000 Family Life and Work Experience Before 1918, 1870-1973](#)

Thompson, P. and Lummis, T.

The major part of the collection comprises life story interviews originally collected as part of the study The Edwardians: Family Life and Work Experience Before 1918. The interviews were undertaken in the early 1970s and formed the basis of the first national oral history project in the United Kingdom.

Coverage

Sample: men and women born between 1870 and 1908

Data: 449 interviews and 444 quantitative cases

Topics

- age
- birth order
- childbirth
- community
- families
- marriage

Study name

[SN 4938 Families, Social Mobility and Ageing, an Intergenerational Approach, 1900-1988 \(100 Families\)](#)

Thompson, P. and Newby, H.

This is an enhanced qualitative study. The study explored geographical and social mobility and the role of the family in inter-generational terms from the perspective of gender and migration.

Coverage

Sample: Men and women aged 30 to 55 and married with children and older or younger (over 16) members of the family

Data: 170 interviews

Topics

- education
- politics
- family
- marriage
- housing
- leisure

Study name

[SN 6099 'Brain Drain' Debate in the United Kingdom, c.1950-1970](#)

Balmer, B., Gregory, J. and Godwin, M.

This qualitative project sought to provide an analysis of the 'brain drain' debate of the 1950s and 1960s as a social phenomenon. The term 'brain drain' was adopted in the 1960s in the context of concerns the United Kingdom was losing skilled scientific and engineering personnel to other countries.

Coverage

Sample: Scientists and civil servants who participated in the 'brain drain' debate concerning skilled migration in the 1960s

Data: 19 semi-structured oral history interviews; one witness seminar (panel discussion) with 4 participants

Topics

- education
- employment
- history
- migration
- brain drain
- cold war

Study name

[SN 6226 Pioneers of Qualitative Research, 1996-2007](#)

Thompson, P.

This collection includes the full interview transcripts and interview summaries of detailed interviews with a number of pioneers of social research. Conducted by oral historian Paul

Thompson, and his colleagues, the interviews cover each individual's background and research and provide a valuable insight into their lives and careers.

Coverage

Sample: pioneers of classic social research based in the UK, interviewed from 1996 onwards

Data: five full interview transcripts and five interview summaries

Topics

- family
- social background
- intellectual and career development
- key influences

Study name

[SN 4890 Severalls Hospital: Interviews for 'Madness in its Place', 1913-1997](#)

Gittins, D.

This research is based on the life stories of patients and workers at a large psychiatric hospital in Essex and presents a social history of British psychiatric care in the twentieth century. The memories and narratives of patients and workers who lived, or were employed in Severalls Psychiatric Hospital provide a personal account of day-to-day life, contextualised both in relation to wider developments and issues in twentieth century mental health, and in relation to policies and changes in the hospital itself.

Coverage

Sample: past and present Severalls' staff and patients

Data: 30 interview transcripts (PDF format) plus 56 image files

Topics

- hospitals
- mental health
- psychiatric treatment
- doctors
- nurses
- patients
- gender
- everyday life
- institutions
- occupational life