Testis Unis, Testis Nullas: One witness is no witness

Criticisms of the use of oral history in nursing research

Abstract

In research, there is no perfection: no perfect method, no perfect sample, and no perfect data analyses tool. Coming to this understanding helps the researcher identify the inadequacies of their preferred method. This paper discusses the criticisms of the oral history method, drawing reference to its challenges and difficulties in relation to its use in nursing research. Oral history has the advantage over more traditional historical approaches in that the narrators can interpret events, personalities...
and relationships within the interview that are not accessible from written sources. The oral history interview may also provide a forum for unveiling documents and photographs, which might not have been otherwise discovered. Nonetheless, oral history, like most methodologies, is not flawless. This paper discusses the limitations of oral history and suggests ways in which a nurse can use oral history to provide an account of aspects of nursing history.

Introduction

Oral history is the recording of an oral record of an individual’s personal account of an event, as a direct participant and/or as an eyewitness. Despite evidence that oral history has been used for centuries (Thompson, 1978; Moss, 1984; Prins, 1991), an American historian, Professor Allan Nevins of Columbia University, first chronicled the term ‘oral history’ in 1948. According to Lucy Taksa (1989), the method was first used to record the narratives of significant members of the community, such as politicians or the wealthy. The Second World War had a significant international impact on numerous aspects of societal, political and intellectual attitudes, including the pursuits of life histories. By the 1960s, Australian historians had become increasingly interested in social history, and readily implemented oral histories to uncover the lives of the working class (Douglas, Roberts & Thompson, 1988). Eventually, definitions of oral history began to change from histories of significant individuals to becoming a more ‘everyday people’ oriented research method, where the lives of the ordinary person were valuable and fiercely sought.

By the late 1970s, historians were undertaking oral history projects on a grand international scale (Thompson, 1978). North America readily adopted oral history for projects. Countries including North and South America, Australia, Africa, Israel, Italy, Holland, France, Scandinavia and Britain embraced oral history with vigour in order to place new and richer dimensions on national history. Oral historians began by undertaking research about indigenous history, women’s history and working and lower class history. In 1988, the Australian government funded an oral history project to coincide with the Australia’s Bicentennial, called the Bicentennial Oral History Project, chaired by Paula Hamilton.

Like many other approaches to data collection, oral history has received its fair share of criticism. The Latin statement ‘testis unus, testis nullas’ translated means ‘one witness is no witness’; a sentiment which is often expressed by historians in their criticism of this ‘new’ history method such as Collingwood (1965). At some time in our lives, we have all participated in the game of ‘Whispers’ where one person passes a message to another person who then passes it on to another person, and so on. Inevitably, the message final message differs significantly from the initial message. The implied weakness of oral histories, like the game of ‘Whispers’, is considered by some to be ‘irreparable’ (Prins, 1991) and few ‘traditional’ historians would embrace such data as central to any historical study.

Human memory

One of the persistent arguments against oral history relates to the reliability of human memory (Vansina, 1965; Osbourne & Mandle, 1982; Seldon & Pappworth, 1983; Murphy, 1986; Behrendt, 1994). It has been suggested that if a participant or witness of an event is presented with new (and false)
information after the event, what is actually recalled about the event may be significantly affected by the new information (Cohen, 1996) a process known as ‘false memory syndrome’ (Perry, 1998). Psychologists have conducted experiments on this subject for decades, and are yet to agree on a hypothesis as to how or why it occurs. Some psychological researchers purport that the original memory and post-event information coexist and are both recoverable and alternated unconsciously (Loftus & Loftus, 1980; Berk- erian & Bowers, 1983). Whereas other psychological researchers have hypothe- sized that people do not recall the information wrongly when they respond with the false post-event information, they are just selecting the wrong response (McCloskey & Zaragoza, 1985; Zaragoza, McCloskey & Jamis, 1987).

Memories are catalogues, organisations, or synthesis of knowledge. It is generally ac- cepted that the memory process occurs as a result of perceptions. In order to memorise something, we must first comprehend it, and to comprehend we must understand it. This comprehension of information is then ar- ranged into catalogues of understanding enabling greater recall of the information. For the majority, memory immediately after an event is clear and usually accurate, re­ sembling photographic memory. However within a few minutes, the memory is organ­ ised and catalogued by a selection process in the brain. Over time, items of memories are discarded, usually quite drastically ini- tially (Collins, Gathercole, Conway & Mor­ ris, 1993; Cohen, 1996). This process occurs to similar degrees for every kind of human memory, although much is still not known.

Autobiographical memories, the type of memory recalled in oral histories, are epi­ sodes of personal experiences recollected from events in the life of an individual (Con­ way & Rubin, 1993) and are stored without conscious intention to commit them to mem­ ory (Cohen, 1996). Apart from life events, these memories also incorporate goals, emo­ tions, moods, significant others, and per­ sonal meanings of events and actions. Additionally, autobiographical memories are intensely attached to self-concept, inasmuch as the self both experiences the event and is the product of that experience.

The process of memory is therefore significant to the interpretation of oral histories. According to Australian military historians Glen Pratten and Glen Harper (1996), researchers have indicated that memory can be a selective and often unreliable historical tool, as memories are constructed to make some sense of the individual’s past and present life. The authors define memory as ‘an artificial construction of the individual rather than an accurate account of what really happened’ (Pratten & Harper, 1996:4). Alistair Thomson agreed stating that the act of recollection can also induce a distortion of events, where particular memories are emphasized while the individual intentionally ignores other memories (Thomson, 1991). A predominant argument put forward by historians critical of oral history is that relying on an individual’s memory of past events lends to inaccuracies and retrospec­ tive hindsight (Murphy, 1986; Taksa, 1989). This would be an accurate concern if the oral historian were seeking to tell the ‘true’ story of history. Australian social historians, Martyn Lyons and Lucy Taksa, suggested that a life story is not hard data, but rather a subjective re-imagining of lived experience (Lyons & Taksa, 1992). The authors further suggest that the oral historian’s task is not to accumulate that story but analyse and interpret its meaning. What oral sources offer for analysis are perceptions and atti­ tudes of the narrator, not factual or concrete truths. Oral narrators do not tell us what they did and saw, but what they thought they saw and what value they placed on it then, and at that moment what they believed they did. In essence, they place their own personal filters on the event and it these ‘filtered accounts’ which are of interest.
Remembering and forgetting

It is agreed that in the construction of an oral testimony, some of the past is forgotten. Research has indicated that the transaction of forgetting may not be voluntary (Gregg, 1975; Ross, 1991). Both Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud agreed that forgetting was frequently linked to trauma, or, in other words, individuals did not want to remember unpleasant events or associations. According to Jung:

it becomes ... clear that the forgetting does not apply to irrelevant reactions but to the significantly complex reactions ... One usually comes up against amnesia (‘I don’t know’, ‘I have forgotten’, etc.) where the important matters (Jung, 1973: 56).

Naomi Norquay (1999) suggested that there is always a connection between what is remembered and forgotten, but discovering that link is often difficult. As has already been established by other oral historians, age, changing personal values, and nostalgia can influence memory. Some of the factors that tend to make an event memorable will influence the recollection of private memories. For most people, the events that are remembered effortlessly are those that are personally or professionally significant, extraordinary, emotional, unexpected or foreign. For example, in a study currently being conducted by Biedermann, the narrators remember effortlessly the types of injuries or wounds sustained by soldiers in Vietnam, and yet cannot recall the colour of the walls in the surgical ward in the Australian Military Hospital in Vietnam in 1969.

Influences on remembering and forgetting

Human memory is influenced by myriad factors, including pathological, psychological, and physical. Additionally, other popular or socially acceptable versions of an event or experience influence one’s memory (Thomson, 1994). A war veteran need only watch a war movie to see particular behaviours portrayed in the movie as ‘real and acceptable’ and begin shaping his memories in accordance with these images. Several nurse veterans commented, almost apologetically, to Biedermann that they did not remember Vietnam like it was presented on China Beach, the American television series in the late 1980s. Additionally, individuals modify past reality for a specific purpose: to justify oneself, to make a special claim on the interest and the sympathy of the interviewer, or to give meaning and adhesion to one’s experience. The remembering that takes place in an oral history interview will be inevitably influenced by the context of the interview, by the situation and identity of the narrator, and by public representation of the past that is being recalled.

Another significant point to consider when the narrator is drawing upon their memories to recall events is if the event actually occurred. It is possible for the narrator to imagine that an event or situation took place just as vividly as if it had actually occurred. ‘Reality monitoring’ is the ability to distinguish between externally derived memories that emanate from observation and internally derived memories that originate from imagination (McGinnis & Roberts, 1996; Johnson, 1998). Events that occurred, objects that were perceived, actions that were performed, and written and spoken words are all examples of external memories. Conversely, internally derived memories are events that were only imagined, actions that were planned, considered or intended, and unspoken words. The influence of the memory of others, known often as collective or popular memory can be extremely powerful (Thomson, 1991). For example, one can be sure that they remember specific events from when they were a very young child, such as the birth of a sibling or death of a grandparent. However, one cannot really be sure if they actually remember the event in as much detail as they think. It is possible that one
may think they remember the event because their family may have described it to them sometime in the past. It is also possible that parts of their recollections are intertwined with their own imaginative reconstructions. It may sound trivial, but many memories are a combination of both real and unreal material (Anderson, 1984). For the Australian nurse veteran, watching episodes of China Beach or reading the plethora of personal accounts written by American Vietnam veteran nurses (see for example: Walsh, 1982; Van Devanter, 1983; Walker, 1985; Marshall, 1987; Palmer, 1987; Norman, 1990; Van Devanter & Furey, 1991; Hampton, 1992; Smith, 1992), it is possible that the line between their own true experience and that of another individual becomes foggy. Over time and repetition, the true memory includes the imagined memory. Furthermore, although deficient reality monitoring is generally a characteristic of schizophrenia, dementia, delirium, intoxication and other types of mental disorders that involve hallucinations or obsessions, lucid intelligent adults frequently display impaired reality monitoring (Cohen, 1996). It is therefore an important consideration in the conduct of an oral history project.

**Other criticisms**

Taksa stated that a methodological problem involved in the use of oral history is that there is a tendency for participants to be imprecise about specific dates, thereby reducing the reliability of the data (Taksa, 1992). She also suggested that participants tend to 'telescope' significant events together and disregard the 'in-betweens'. David Henige, a renowned American historian, stated that as time passes oral evidence and event recollection change (Henige, 1982). Thomson agreed, suggesting that past criticisms of oral history have been that, as a historical source, oral testimony is unreliable because of divergence because of age, personality, bias and nostalgia (Thomson, 1994). He also noted that some critics have highlighted the altering influences that other testimonies or public perceptions, for example, have on the oral testimony. More recently, an additional criticism is that large amounts of data are gathered for 'no useful purpose' (Roberts & Taylor, 1998), although this dimension of analysis is not indicated in any other sources of criticism.

Oral histories are never simply told as the narrator will modify the order of events, stop and start, change direction of the narration and alter the emphasis of detail according to the needs of the interviewer (Norquay, 1999). Oral evidence is usually fragmented, silent in places where it needs to be explicit and elaborate where it best be silent, and seldom free from inaccuracies and faults. Yet, one could argue that it is this very subjectivity that adds a whole new scope of meaning to oral testimony.

Renowned American historian, Robert Collingwood stated that ultimately, history is believing someone else when they say that they remember something. The believer is the historian; the person believed is called the authority (Collingwood, 1965). This said, the 'believer' must appreciate that there is always the quandary that the 'authority' may deliberately falsify oral evidence (Sel­don & Pappworth, 1983). This voluntary fabrication of events may serve several purposes: to heighten their own image (referred to by Margaret Barter [1994] as the 'bullfrog' effect), to retrospectively justify their actions, or to use the exchange to attack former or current rivals. In their interviews with Biedermann, several nurse veterans used their oral histories as a forum to criticise the Australian government and the Army for their 'mistreatment' since returning from Vietnam. Therefore, like any piece of evidence, the oral historian must consider the agenda with which the narrator comes to the interview, and assess its reliability and validity in context.

Roberta Perkins argued that historians criti-
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The historical and the wider social aspect conclude that it is biased and consequently, less accurate (Perkins, 1992). Barter further suggested that 'traditional' historians contend that one person will only ever take part in a microscopic aspect of the event (Barter, 1994). Critics of oral testimony often use the issue of validity as evidence to its shortcoming. Validity refers to the degree of homogeneity between the oral testimony of the event and the recordings of the event in other primary material, such as document, photos, diaries and letters. However, some oral historians have argued that the sources of written history and their selection by the historian are also subjected to some degree of partiality (Thompson, 1978; Murphy, 1986; Perkins, 1992). Much of the documented 'evidence' used by historians comes from 'official' sources. Official sources, however, are not without bias, generally express the official or popular points of view and may not always reflect the 'true-ness' of the event or incident. It has been suggested that is impossible for an historian to present a transcript of a tape as 'factual evidence' of a certain event (Selby, 1991). Neither can a transcript 'tell it like it really was'. Oral historians acknowledge that the evidence has been subject to selective editing, loss of memory, political motive, a desire to please, and human error (Thompson, 1978; Seldon & Pappworth, 1983; Murphy, 1986; Selby, 1991; Thomson 1995).

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the main criticisms of oral history which are discussed in the scholarly literature. It has emphasised throughout the literature and in this paper that oral history relies on human recollections and memories. As such, researchers using oral history need to be mindful of its limitations. Nevertheless, whilst recognizing the 'flaws' of oral testimony as a source of history, it could be argued that most areas of nursing are a social milieu within which the voices of the nurses so often silenced in conventional studies are essential for a more complete understanding. In spite of its distinct divergence from objective accounts, oral testimony and its interpretation is vital. Oral testimony can encompass the emotions and vigour of the particular event, an element that is virtually unobtainable in the more traditional historical sources. Oral history renders individuals with an opportunity to record their life experience; individuals who would not have the skill, opportunity, or inclination to publish of their own accord. Finally, oral history offers a way of understanding the motivations and feelings not reflected in statistics and documents.

References


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