Practical suggestions for conducting oral histories and semi-structured interviews in the pilot-phase

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Data collection

ORAL HISTORIES

The collection of oral histories has very little pre-structuring and attempts to be unobtrusive, to let the speaker express his/her views and narratives without imposing the researcher’s schema on them.

The only structure is provided by the selection of a specific point in time as the focus of the research. The narration has to emerge from it. A very general indication for the oral histories you will have to collect can be starting from 1984, the year of famine, which also saw the first massive involvement of the international community in Darfur. You can then move to the change in regime of 1989 and analyze how the interviewees frame this. After having collected the narrations of these events and transitions, you can proceed towards the more recent ones.

In addition, choosing a point which is far enough from the most current events can help in setting a relaxed environment for the narration and in reducing some of the resistances the informants may have at the beginning.

The unobtrusiveness of oral histories consists in the respect of the local framing of events and opinions and in the translation of the interviewer’s knowledge into the interviewee’s one. In the social sciences this is expressed by saying that exmanent questions have to be reformulated as immanent ones. Exmanent questions are the ones emerging from the researchers’ background knowledge and interests as well as from the languages and vocabularies they use. Immanent questions are those which translate the researchers’ knowledge and languages using only the words and expressions emerging from the interviewee’s narration.

For example, if the researcher is interested in learning how an interviewee saw the first deployment of the AU troops but from the narration nothing such as “AU troops”, or “foreign troops”, etc. has been mentioned, it would be misleading to ask a question such as “Do you think that the deployment of the AU troops made a difference in providing security?”. A good strategy, since you know or can easily find out the dates of the deployment of the AU troops, would be asking “Did you notice any difference since mm/yyyy?”, “Has the life in the camp changed at all since mm/yyyy?”.

How to structure the interviews

The collection of oral histories does not have a rigid scheme. You can feel that your interview is successful if a good number of in-depth and lengthy narratives are produced as a result of your questioning. On the contrary you can realize it is failing if your questions produce short answers and no long narrations emerge.

Despite that oral histories are not so rigidly structured, I will sketch a hypothetical schema that may be helpful for the interview. Consider that the collection of oral histories can proceed through different waves. Long narratives during which the interviewer’s main role is mainly listening may be followed by tighter interactions between the interviewer and the interviewee, and than come back to new narrations.
In the initial phase it can be important to ask unproblematic questions, such as “Where were you born?” (which is different from “Where are you from?”) and be more personal, demonstrating interest more for the person who is in front of you than for the information he/she holds. Oral histories, as well as biographies, can be considered the techniques which give the highest importance to the individuals who are in front of us, to their exceptional traits, as compared to their mere opinions, and the possibility of positioning them along a scale. Being personal, demonstrating interest for the person who is in front of you is not just a strategy, but a natural way to build a “rapport”. If you are asked for example “How much time will it take?” it is important to show that you don’t have particular limits, that you can stay until necessary and are available to come back if needed.

In a second phase, when a rapport is built, you should be able to elicit a narration pointing to a particular period or event. You should propose a period (for example “1984”) or an event (for example “the famine”) and ask where the informant was, what happened, etc. You can ask more questions on the event, etc, until the narration starts, and at that point you will become mainly a listener, showing interest for what is being narrated.

In a third phase you can ask “immanent” questions, trying to point to events and opinions of particular interests, or moving on using the kind of images, language, etc. as emerging from the previous narration. In this phase you should avoid “Why” questions.

In a fourth phase, when the narration of a particular event or period of interest come to a natural conclusion you can ask “Why” questions if needed. They shouldn’t create an atmosphere of cross-examination, but, showing interest for the person who is in front of you, try to explore some of the motivations that led to a particular decision, or opinion or action.

While collecting oral histories it may help to have in mind the words of one of the most important-not just because he is Italian ;-) oral historians, Alessandro Portelli:

“The first thing that makes oral history different is that it tells us less about events than about their meaning. […] Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did […] Oral sources are credible, but with a different credibility. The importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge” (Portelli, The death of Luigi Trastulli and other stories, pp. 50-51)

**Recording and ethics**

Whenever it is possible the oral histories have to be recorded. This is very important and it should be done by audio recorder. It is important to explain to the interviewee the scope and rationale of the interview and ask for his/her consent in the use of the data. Ideally the consent should be given at the beginning of the interview and recorded. The interviewee should say his/her name and that he/she give the right to the researcher to use the material that will be collected.

At the same time, because of the problematic security situation on the ground some options may not be available. The nature of certain data can compromise the interviewee, and if it is requested, anonymity must be granted. Some people may refuse to be taped. This will require the interview techniques to be particularly flexible, offering to the interviewee a variety of options, along a continuum going from taping the whole interview with the possibility of quoting the source, to granting anonymity through conventions such as the Chatham House rule ("When a meeting, or part
thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed”), to taking detailed notes if using a recorder is not an option. If the interview is being taped it may important to take notes at the same time. In particular, because of the very short time for carrying out this pilot project, when something particularly relevant for the scope of the interview is articulated, it is useful to write down the time from the recorder as to be able to reach the portion of the text more quickly during the analysis without having to listen to the whole file.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

The semi-structured interview will have both a complementary and an independent role.

1. Semi-structured interview with other members of the community may provide a fundamental context to the main stories. They can offer a reality check for the oral histories, situating them in time and space, adding further details, uncovering contradictions. Some themes can be taken from the oral histories and addressed during a semi-structured interview.

For example, if we see that a number of women from a certain community have addressed a particular conflict over water resources as a key issue but NGOs have done nothing to address the issue, we can ask to an NGO representative if that is true, if he or she agree with the reconstruction of facts as emerging from the oral histories, if there is miscommunication between different stakeholder in defining what is relevant and what is not, etc.

In the case of semi-structured interviews it may be less important to be unobtrusive, and more direct questions can be asked and a tighter topic guide can be developed. We can be more specific, having a clearer idea in mind of what dimensions we need to investigate.

2. Semi-structured interviews will also have an independent life. If the key individuals to be interviewed through the oral history methodologies are traditional leaders, sheiks, etc., through semi-structured interviews the focus may be shifted to a different population: local NGOs workers, journalists, politicians. People whose representations of the conflict and its possible solutions are more visible. People that for the kind of job they are doing and their educational background have a clearer idea of the process of interviewing, of the meaning of an independent research, etc. Of course some of the communication will be a strategic communication, telling a point of view that is highly specific, taking sides, etc. But this is of great interest nonetheless if one of the results we want to come out with this research is the sampling or, even better, the typification of different representations and interests at stake.

The goal of the semi structured interviews in this second case is collecting different representations of the conflict and the peace process, exploring the ways in which the informants frame the conflict, the interests at stake, what do they indicate as the major causes and the most promising solutions.
Data analysis

Main analytical strategy

In general, for the analysis of the material we can follow a stepwise procedure that will lead to the identification of a series of themes. Since we don’t have a theoretical framework, we don’t have a clear hypothesis to test on the ground, against the evidences, and the theory has to emerge from the data. Through the interviews we will behave more as pattern makers than pattern finders.

In the case of the analysis of the data concepts and typification emerges that have to be tested against the data itself. Competing theories emerge from the data and have to be tested against each others and against the data, through coding procedures and constant comparison.

At the end of the interviewing and transcribing phases we will have three different kind of data:

- **Core oral histories**: the oral histories with sheiks, women, elders, etc. who have been extensively interviewed. Transcripts of this interviews have to be available.

- **Additional material** for the oral histories: parts of the semi-structured interviews with other informants (e.g. NGO workers, local politicians, etc.) which address some of the issues as emerging from the oral histories or are aimed at developing a context for the main oral histories. In this cases only the most significant interviews have to be transcribed, while others were just annotated in the form of field notes.

- **Core semi-structured interviews**: parts of the semi-structured interviews which address other issues, as explained in the previous section.

There are different methods to analyze those kind of data. One can be derived by the five stages analytic process proposed by Grant McCracken (McCracken, 1988).

The same process can be used first with the core oral histories and additional material together and later with the core semi-structured interviews (or vice versa)

As far as the oral histories are concerned in the first stage, each interview has to be analyzed separately from the others, and the observations emerging will be derived mainly from its internal characteristics. In a second stage, these observations will be further developed, confronted with the literature and additional material and tested against the evidence in the transcript. The third level shifts the attention from the transcripts to the observations themselves, looking for potential connections among them. In a fourth stage a set of main themes has to be developed as a results of the former steps. The fifth and final stage will bring together the main findings of the research through the development of a set of theses. The main difference between method employed here and the one adopted by McCracken is that the additional material is also used in steps two and three, where in his case it is mainly the literature and background observations that are used to test the emerging observations.

For the semi-structured interviews the five step will be repeated, this time without the additional material.

**Additional analysis for the oral histories**

For the oral histories there may be an additional dimension of the analysis. There is probably not enough time or enough material to explore it during the pilot but it may be important to sketch a few points to explain it as to give you a perspective of how oral histories work.
This dimension depends on the fact that while an event happens at the same time along different levels, which are inseparable but logically distinct. Different interpretations for the same events are equally available, but these have to be selected accordingly to make the story telling possible. The interpretations that the informant gives and the level where he/she places the narration give useful hints on how to interpret the data.

Borrowing a literary category from the Russian formalists, in every story we can identify:

- a *fabula*, that is the chronological, casual sequence of a story. (This is what most historians are interested in)
- a *plot*, the way in which the story materials are arranged by narrators in order to tell their story (this is what we are interested in). Deciding what is to be told and what is not, and what should be told first, are operations related to the meaning that a plot gives to a narrative

Recalling the definition of Alessandro Portelli, what is important is to take a story as truth, both in its adherence to and its departure from facts. Or as a German narrative tradition would argue “the reality of a narrative refers to what is real to the story teller”.

It is in the **interplay between a fabula and a plot** that we discover the meaning of a story and, thus, the worldview in which our informants live. It is a highly interpretative work, but some instruments can be of help.

**Shift in modes**
Alessandro Portelli for example, identifies three different strata around which narratives are arranged:

- institutional: the sphere of politics, the national and international historical context
- collective: the life of the community and the neighbourhood
- personal: private and family life

The placing of one event in one level is **not intrinsic to the event itself, but to the narrator’s perspective**. A war can be narrated as he consequence of capitalism, as the catastrophe which caused the destruction of the hometown, or as a personal experience e.g. the tragedy of the loss of relatives and friends.

**Shift in time**
In a research Portelli did on steal workers in the Italian city of Terni, he noticed how the death of Luigi Trastulli, one of those workers, that happened during a peaceful demonstration against the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949 was shifted by many narrators to the violent protests against massive loss of jobs and for workers’ rights in 1953.

The explanation he gives is complex but can be summarized by the idea that for most narrators, interviewed in the 60s, the North Atlantic Treaty represented something abstract and far, while the loss of jobs had a huge impact on the life of many of them. This event, important in itself, the death of a friend, couldn’t belong to an unimportant dimension, but had to be motivated by something more crucial. Thus interpreting this shift in time is a good help in understanding Italian culture in the 50s, the values of certain groups and people, their attitudes.

Even if this stories don’t tell exactly the truth, the one that historians look after, they are important in understanding the life of a community.
From **individual trajectories** build by single narrators, **collective trajectories** can be assembled and interpreted.