

Chapter 6

Oral History

Oral history is the unwritten knowledge transmitted by family and community members over time. The oral histories of individual community members combine, like the interwoven threads of a weaving, to form a shared oral tradition.

Oral history is being used in the courts, comprehensive and specific land claims processes, treaty interpretation, land use and occupancy studies, and as an educational tool. The individual, family, and community histories in the oral tradition help to bring complicated issues to life. They also support archival and archaeological evidence, particularly for issues where there is little documentary record.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss oral tradition and the research of oral history within communities. The focus is the methodology of oral history research. However, it also discusses the purpose of this type of research.

Cultural Knowledge and Oral Tradition

Oral tradition within Indigenous cultures is the communication of history, beliefs, values, activities, concepts, experiences and worldviews. Oral tradition is a way of maintaining and passing on knowledge within communities. It is a way to record our history for generations to come. Oral historical tradition can vary from Nation to Nation and the Indigenous approach to history can take many forms, including dance, stories, ceremonies and verbal accounts. Oral tradition may be more formalized in some communities; for example, it may be told through ceremonial events or a structured organization. In other communities the oral tradition may be expressed in a more fluid or flexible way, such as through informal discussion between family members.

Oral tradition is a living process shared among community members. In some communities all members are important sources of historical knowledge, while in others only a few members retain this type of knowledge. Elders are particularly important to cultures that teach through oral tradition because they are often the primary source for oral history.

Oral tradition has an intrinsic value within Indigenous communities. It is a dynamic process that, like western systems of knowledge, attempts to interpret the world around us and tries to make sense of the ways in which the past influences the present. Oral tradition is not simply a means to record or remember history; it is a symbolic tradition that provides meaning, context and lessons derived from past events for future generations for the continued benefit of the community.

Oral history can be used in different ways. There are many different people collecting

oral histories for different purposes, including:

- Individuals collecting information about their own families.
- Community researchers collecting information for community education and preservation purposes.
- Lawyers collecting information for legal purposes.
- Historical and academic researchers or field technicians collecting information for particular types of studies.

“Oral history can present greater opportunities for understanding historical events than the recitation of bare facts. It can reveal the intellectual, social, spiritual and emotional cognition of the event for the group in question.”

– John Burrows, *Listening for a Change: The Courts and Oral Tradition* (Toronto, ON: *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 39, 2001)

Oral History Research

Many of the topics discussed here are also examined in the context of documentary research in Chapter 2: Research Methods. Please see Chapter 2 for an extended discussion of research ethics.

Oral testimony is not something simply to be recorded and stored away. This knowledge is very valuable to Indigenous Peoples. Therefore it is important to keep in mind a number of fundamental principles when conducting oral history research:

- Respect
- Responsibility
- Confidentiality
- Sensitivity
- Ethical conduct

Planning and Coordinating your Research

Outlining your research plan

Before you start an oral history project you should have a written account of your overall research plan and approach to doing research. This will help keep you stay focused and on track. If your project is interrupted for some reason, this information will also help a future researcher to use your findings and carry on the research. Your research plan may also be necessary at some point in the future to help defend your research findings. Your project records should also include the resumés and qualifications of all the people who have been involved with the project. Being organized and following a good research plan will contribute to the quality of your research and to the ease of any follow-up work.

Assessing the scope of your project

Oral history projects can be carried out over a number of years and include a large number of community members or they can be more focused and be carried out over a few days. For example, oral testimony collected for a specific purpose might consist of fewer than half a dozen interviews undertaken in a few days, while collection of oral evidence for comprehensive claims or land use and occupancy studies could span years and involve almost every member of the community.

A project may follow a specific pattern. For example, a community concerned about recording the wisdom of its valued Elders may focus first on the oldest members of the community with the intention of interviewing others over the longer term. Next, it may collect valuable information from other community members, such as middle-aged adults who have taken the time to talk to Elders, learn the stories and have been able to acquire this knowledge from the Elders before they passed on.

As part of the process of deciding how large your project will be, you will want to thoroughly review any earlier oral history projects that have been done in your community, as well as any other kinds of documentation available, such as academic studies and local histories. Records relating to these projects may be kept by the band or tribal council, individuals living in the community or, in some cases, local museums and archives.

Try to contact the people who worked on these earlier oral history projects, as they may have additional useful notes and materials. People who contributed to published sources about your community (anthropologists, historians, linguists, ethnographers and archaeologists) might also have helpful interviews and notes. If appropriate, get permission to use their material for your project.

By carefully reviewing previous projects you can avoid subjects that have already been thoroughly researched. Develop a list of people who you would like to interview for your project. Have this list checked by someone else in the community as they may be able to come up with additional names. Building an interview schedule will help you keep on track and focused. A schedule will also assist you in determining the size of your project.

Determining the resources required

The resources you will need will depend on the scope of your project. Money, training, staff, and equipment are all resources that need to be organized before doing any interviews. Compare notes with other researchers in communities who have done projects similar to the one you are planning. They may be able to advise you about avoiding some of the challenges they faced.

It is advisable for every community to develop a long-term flexible plan for the collection of oral history. This plan could outline a number of key topic or themes for oral history research. Part of this strategy should also include a plan for the proper storage of the information including the audio tapes, videotapes, digital media and transcripts. A plan will encourage the most efficient use of resources. It will also help to deliver high quality research with the widest possible range of uses.

A Note about Equipment

Recording technology is constantly changing. The best approach to selecting equipment is to talk to someone with experience. Most importantly, choose equipment that you feel comfortable using.

Preparing For Interviews

Communicating with interviewees

Whatever the size of the project, it is ideal that you start off with people you know well. This will help you practice your technique. Regardless of age, be sensitive to the stamina of the person being interviewed. Let that person know at the beginning of each session that they can take a break or end the interview whenever they like. An hour and a half is the length of an average session so you may need to do a series of interviews.

It is important that the people you interview know exactly why you want the information and how it will be used. Explain why you want to collect the oral history well in advance of the interview sessions. Explain how you plan to record the interviews including whether you prefer to interview them alone and where you would like to interview them. It may be appropriate to let a family member pass on your request for an interview before approaching them yourself. It may work best to arrange to have a family member accompany the interviewee.

The key to preparing for interviews is to build trust and demonstrate respect for the person being interviewed. Different approaches may be appropriate for different individuals, and you may find yourself making adjustments on a case-by-case basis. For example, some individuals may respond better to an informal session where you drop in and have no recording devices or notebook with you. In this case, you would write up your notes immediately after the interview. You may have to be prepared to delegate the interview to someone the interviewee knows well. A good rule of thumb is to treat the person being interviewed as you would your own grandparent.

Schedule the interviews at the convenience of the participant. You may need to remind them of the upcoming interview session. This is especially important if you will be interviewing someone from outside your own community and will be making the trip to their community to conduct the interview(s).

Creating the appropriate environment for the interview

The interview should take place in a location where you are both comfortable and will not be distracted. If possible, arrange to be left undisturbed during the interview session. If the interview will involve consulting maps or other documents, a table and good lighting are useful. You may find it helpful to bring along photographs, books, photocopies or maps; these can all help to stimulate memories and discussion. Try to anticipate your interviewee's needs. For example, the person being interviewed might need to bring their reading glasses, or they may prefer tea to coffee. Try to create a relaxed environment.

Practice interviewing

Practice is important to allow yourself to feel comfortable while interviewing. You should feel confident with skills such as note-taking, operating audio or video tape recorders, and conducting the actual interview. You may need to practice lighting if you are using video equipment, or "miking" if you are using audio recording equipment. Use good quality equipment and get a volunteer to do a practice run with you so that you can familiarize yourself with the equipment.

Lastly, rehearse your questions. This is particularly important when you are working from a set list of questions. In land use and occupancy studies, for example, all participants

must be asked exactly the same questions in exactly the same way. Seemingly minor changes to wording from one interview to another could have a serious and negative impact on the data collection.

Obtaining consent

The issues of intellectual property, copyright and the appropriation of Indigenous oral traditions and traditional knowledge are complicated. It may be appropriate to obtain informed consent forms from all persons being interviewed to ensure that you will be able to use the material and to provide protection and assurances to the person being interviewed. Informed consent means that participants know and understand the conditions of the project and what you plan to do with the information you collect. Further consent will be required if the research will be used in any form other than that agreed upon by the participants. A release form or informed consent form should include the following information:

- Date
- Name of interviewee and interviewer
- Where s/he is from (community)
- Description of the purpose of the project
- The expected use of the interview tape
- A stipulation that the interviewee will have the opportunity to review and approve the transcription of the interview
- An acknowledgement the interviewee's right to use the information for other purposes or in other formats
- What the interviewee will receive for participating such as an **honorarium**, a mention in the publication's acknowledgments, a copy of the tape
- A provision for royalties (in exceptional cases)

It can be intimidating if the informed consent form is produced the first time you meet the person you wish to interview. Instead, introduce the matter during informal contacts in the period leading up to the actual interview session. It may be appropriate to give the form to a family member who can review the language and go over it with their relative.

Confidentiality

It is important that you and all the participants are clear on the confidentiality aspects of the project. The interviewer should carefully explain confidentiality measures to each person who is to be interviewed. Raise the issue of confidentiality when making the request for an interview and again at the beginning of the interview. The nature of an oral history project may have some bearing on the need for these confidentiality measures. For example, confidentiality may be a far more complex issue for a project involving residential schools than for a project about resource use. Personal information is confidential and should not be shown to anyone without the participant's permission.

As time passes, the confidentiality issue may become more complex. As a responsible researcher you must consider the final destination of oral history records, documentation, and tapes. An important question to consider is who will decide who may access this information if the participant is unable to grant permission? As a researcher you should consider this possibility and discuss potential solutions with family members and/or Chief and Council.

Conducting the Interviews

Interview settings

Try to conduct interviews with one person at a time. If that is not possible it may work to have at least one other person present. For example, some may prefer that a husband, wife or good friend accompany them. In all cases, try to avoid doing a formal interview in a room full of interview participants. In such a situation, it is difficult to record everyone properly, take clear accurate notes and pursue lines of questioning with a particular individual. Group sessions can be excellent for informal discussion. They provide a good opportunity to explain the purpose of the project and the need to conduct individual interviews. If the scope of the project is small and you need to talk to individuals in the community who have knowledge of a specific issue, an informal group session like this will help you to identify individuals for one-on-one interviews.

Local protocols

In some communities, there are established protocols for taking oral testimony from Elders. Many community researchers will already be aware of these protocols. These protocols differ among Nations and among communities. You should also be aware of internal or family politics and the community's prior experiences with other researchers. This may be more difficult if you are from outside the community. If you are an outside researcher, be aware of your role and remember that respect and responsibility are top priorities.

In a formal interview setting, it may be appropriate to present an Elder with a gift or an honorarium. This may be done before or after the interviews are completed. If you are not sure what the protocol is in your community, ask around. Many Elders have some experience with being interviewed. In all cases you should provide the person being interviewed with a copy of the interview as an acknowledgment of their assistance and a memento for their family.

The interview process

It is very important at the beginning of your interview in your audio, video or digital media recording to identify the person being interviewed, the interview date and the location. It is also standard to identify all other people present at the interview and their functions, whether they are present as witness, interpreter, or video camera operator. To keep the atmosphere relaxed and informal, you can record this information before the interview begins. If any additional people join the session, the interviewer should read their names into the record at the first opportunity.

At the beginning of the tape you should also state the purpose of the interview, its intended use and the authority for the project. For example: "We are interviewing Mary Samuel for the book *Stories from Our Village*. The contents of this interview may not be used for any other purposes unless Mary Samuel gives her permission in writing. This project is being carried out under the authority or direction of the tribal council." Some people recommend taking a still photograph of the individual at the time of the interview for the record.

Even though the information is being recorded, it is helpful if someone takes notes about what is being said. This helps corroborate the taped record, and allows for the noting of details about the interview session which may not be captured on the tape, such as

pointing, indicating measurements or other non-verbal gestures. It is recommended that these session notes be recorded in bound hardcover notebooks, and that these books be stored with the other interview materials.

Start the interview by chatting casually with the person you are interviewing. It is a good idea to establish when and where they were born. Be aware that some questions may be sensitive, such as “Where did you go to school?” Try to discuss the role of oral history in their lives and how the community’s history has been kept alive over time.

As an interviewer, your questions should be relevant and focused. Avoid questions that elicit yes or no answers. Do not ask leading questions where you are making a statement and forcing the interviewee to agree or disagree. It is best to ask open questions such as What can you tell me about...? Do you know anything about...? Is it your understanding that...? Do you remember when...? What do you remember...? Listen carefully. Never interrupt. Be prepared to pursue topics that you did not foresee on your questionnaire. Do not rush to fill in pauses in speech. Ask only one question at a time. Where appropriate, ask for examples.

Clarify how the interviewee knows the information he or she is relating to you. The most useful oral evidence comes from someone with direct knowledge of an event. They are reporting something that happened in their presence, within their living memory. In the course of an oral history project, you will hear many interviewees talk about events, people or activities that they do not know directly. Find out whether the information is something they saw or did for themselves, or heard about second-hand from somebody else? If so, who?

Remember that interviewing is an interactive process. It is nearly impossible to be objective in this process because the interview setting necessitates that the researcher take an active role in obtaining information. Even seemingly “neutral” questions can influence the themes, subject matter and agenda of the interview so design your questions carefully. Questions should be brief. If you must ask sensitive questions, choose your moment carefully. For a large oral history project involving the participation of all community members, it may be advisable to develop several sets of questions on different subjects (family history, hunting and trapping, fishing, for example). The more ambitious the project, the greater need for an overall plan and a phased approach.

Whether the information you are seeking is limited or wide-ranging, you should be prepared to respectfully and patiently listen to everything the interview participant has to say. Remember that story telling is an intricate part of oral tradition. You may be wondering what a particular story has to do with a question asked, but each story has a purpose. You may not understand the meaning until you have had time to reflect upon it.

Stories are enfolding lessons. Not only do they transmit validated experience; they also renew, awaken and honor spiritual forces. Hence almost every story does not explain; instead it focuses on processes of knowing.

– Battiste and Youngblood Sa’ke’j Henderson, *Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage* (Saskatoon, SK: Purich Publishing, 2000)

Interpretation and Transcription

Interpretation is the process of translating one language into another language in the oral form, in the presence of others. If you need to use an interpreter, you should know that, from a legal point of view, it is best to have an interpreter who is detached from the interview. This can be problematic because it is hard to find someone within a community who is detached from community issues and an interpreter from a neighboring community may not be detached either. Once you find an interpreter, rehearse with that person before you undertake recorded interviews so that the interpreter can practice verbatim (word for word) interpretation. It is not acceptable for the interpreter to paraphrase or put oral history into his or her own words.

It is important to understand that much of the context or meaning may be lost during interpretation. Although verbatim interpretation is important for accuracy, you can lose some of the intricacies and complexities that characterize a language. Some ideas that exist in an Indigenous language may not exist in the English language. Thus conducting the interviews in the Indigenous language means you are recording and preserving words and ideas that may not be found in the English language. It is also important to recognize that the words used in an Indigenous language or in English may mean something different to the speaker than what you understand the words to mean. For example, names of people or places may change over time or be different depending on the relationship. A good example is distinctions between family relations. The word “mother” may mean “grandmother” in some circumstances or “uncle” may mean “cousin.”

Translation is the process of turning one language into another language. Translating Indigenous worldviews or ideas into English presents many challenges. The process of translation involves taking what is expressed in the Indigenous language and filtering it through the Eurocentric worldviews of the English language.

Transcription is the process of producing a written record from a recorded interview. It is important to keep in mind that transcription, like interpretation, can be problematic. The tradition in which oral history is created can lose its meaning or spirit in the process of transcription. The process of writing down oral history ultimately changes it. This may damage or distort the original thought or meaning and therefore do more harm than good. This does not mean that oral history research is not worthwhile; it simply changes the active process of oral narrative to something that is fixed in print, static, stored away, and potentially usable for different purposes than originally intended.

Additional issues in the interpretation and translation stage that need to be considered include whether the person being interviewed will have an opportunity to review and approve the transcription, and whether s/he will be paid by the hour or by honorarium.

Interpretation, translation, and transcription can be very time-consuming tasks. Make sure you plan enough time and dedicate enough resources to complete this very important part of your project. More importantly, be aware of the implications of this process and the challenges you may face when conducting interviews in an Indigenous language.

Dealing with the Information You Receive

Organizing your materials

Just as with archival research projects, it is important to organize your interview materials as you collect them. A large scale oral history project might involve hundreds of audiocassettes, digital files and transcripts. You must establish a system for identifying and tracking these materials before you conduct the first interview. This will assist you in finding what you need as you work and it will help future researchers locate tapes, digital media and transcripts quickly and easily. Researchers that have been involved with similar projects may be able to provide advice about organizing materials.

You may want to assign each person being interviewed a participant number and create a master “log” book. Label tapes or files with the name of the person being interviewed, his or her participant number, and the date and place of the interview. This logbook should list the name of the person, his or her participant number, dates of interviews, name of interviewer and witnesses to the interview. It should also identify the audiotape, videocassettes, or digital file corresponding to each participant. The logbook should also name the interpreter (if there was one) and the transcriber.

Storage and access issues

Your oral history materials must be kept safe and secure. It is not uncommon to hear about communities losing precious and irreplaceable materials to fire, flood, or vandalism. It is also not uncommon to hear about these materials being damaged through improper storage. To help prevent the damage and loss of these irreplaceable materials:

- Use high quality materials. Make sure that the archival audio, and videotapes or digital media that you use are suitable for long-term data storage. There is no point in recording unique, irreplaceable information on regular tapes that will wear out relatively quickly. For audio tapes, do not forget to punch in the two plastic tabs on the cassette after you have recorded your interview. This will make it impossible to record over the interview.
- Store all working materials in a safe and secure location. Find a storage location where your materials can be safe from physical damage and where access is limited to the oral history project team. Because oral testimony may be required in court, it is important to be able to demonstrate that the evidence has been stored in a secure place where it could not be tampered with, and where access has been restricted. For example, the audiocassettes should be stored in a bank office safe with a log recording the signatures of all authorized people who have had reason to temporarily remove the tapes. Transcripts should also be stored in locked file cabinets. Digital media can be backed up on CD. Ideally, your project plan should take the need for a secure storage premises into account.
- Keep extra copies. Prepare at least three sets of duplicate tapes, transcripts and reports and back up any digital files. Keep two complete copies at

the band or tribal council office (one set can circulate or be loaned out if necessary, while the office maintains another complete “master set” at all times). A third set of materials should be stored securely in a permanent off-site location.

- Make an index. If you need to find an interview record, you can use the master logbook to quickly locate the original tapes, interview transcripts, and interview notes.

Oral History as Legal Evidence

In recent years oral history has played an increasingly important role in Aboriginal Title and Rights litigation. Canadian courts have recently recognized the value of oral communication of history, laws, spiritual and other information in Indigenous communities. Of course, there are inherent challenges with using oral histories to prove historical facts. However, the laws of evidence are adapting to accommodate this type of evidence.

If the intention is to use the interviews for court (or some other legal process), it is highly recommended that you work with a lawyer to outline areas that should be covered in the interview.

Conclusion

Remember that oral history belongs to your community. Any oral history projects should be done on your community’s terms and for its benefit. Be wary about participating in projects where the guidelines and the resources are determined and controlled from outside of the community. The oral tradition is a system of knowledge that is highly valued in Indigenous communities, so measures must be put in place to respect, protect and maintain its value.

Resources

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http://www.firstpeoples.org/land_rights/canada/whats_new/oral_history.htm

Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, *Researchers Oral Traditions Manual*
<http://pwnhc.learnnet.nt.ca/research/otm/otrman.htm>

Union of BC Indian Chiefs Research Department
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