

Personal Histories as a Research Project

Archival History

Goal: To produce a factual, “objective” narrative.

Sources: “Official” sources, with a preference for printed material & recognized authorities.

Bias: Tends to be a top-down approach to history, viewed from the vantage point of those with power.

We will NOT be doing Archival History

What we are interested in is *personal experience & meaning*. That is, what did certain media use *mean* to people? What might Uses & Gratification Theory tell us?

This is called Oral History, or if about you, Autoethnography.

Example

Former student of mine sharing her experience of *One Direction*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PYiu796Cbl&t=110s>

Oral History

Goal: To produce a faithful, “subjective” narrative.

Sources: The person(s) experiencing history, interviewed (personal letters & memoirs fit here too).

Bias: Tends to be a bottom-up approach to history, viewed from the vantage point of those affected by power.

Example : University Histories

Most are produced by officially designated university historians.

Tend to be top-down: Organized by presidential administrations. Lots of focus on building construction and numbers (faculty, students, budget).

Example : University Histories

Most are produced by officially designated university historians.

Tend to be top-down: Organized by presidential administrations. Lots of focus on building construction and numbers (faculty, students, budget).

What is Missing?

Deeper Dive: University Histories

Student protest in the 1960s (civil rights & antiwar protests) are described with two very different narratives:

Top-Down: Protest was a problem to be managed by the administration.

Bottom-up: Protest was a legitimate expression of grievances proved correct by history.

Example : Civil War Documentaries

Traditional Approach very top-down:

Focus on Generals, big battles, maps, & numbers.

Video Example A



Then Came Ken Burns

Ken Burns revolutionized documentaries.

Though he maintained certain traditions (such as the authoritative white male voiceover), Burns de-emphasized the top-down approach.

Added actors to give voice to letters and memoirs from frontline soldiers and officers seldom quoted.

Minimized “expert” talking heads.

Video Example B: *Warning: Graphic!*



Note the Differences

- Burn's narrative is brutal, thus a more honest depiction of war.
- Much more emphasis on how *those who were there* experienced it.
- Even his one talking head (historian Shelby Foote) is more of a journalist reporting than an expert announcing Facts.

Oral Histories as Useful Narratives

- Archival research is not “bad”; but in the effort to provide “objectivity,” the human experience is sometimes devalued.
- Oral Histories help put a human face on history. And this mindset is what has led to the rise of ethnographies and autoethnographies as well.

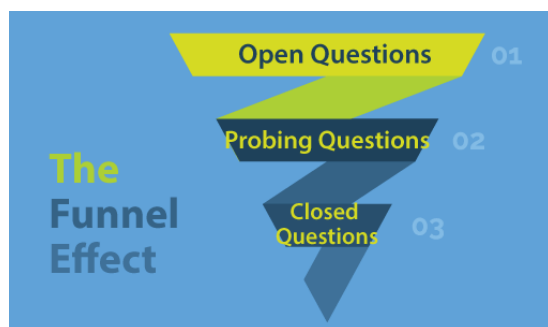
Personal Histories: Getting Started

1. Avoid explaining too much about the purpose of your project. Don't lead the witness, as the lawyers put it.
2. Explain that you want to interview them about their popular culture experiences before the age of 30.

The Key is Story Telling

1. People love to tell stories. You just have to get them started.
2. You need to prompt them to think about what we consider popular culture, then you can get more specific. “Tell me about a time when...”

Funnel Approach



Apply funnel approach

Start by asking for descriptions of how they entertained themselves:

- Music: live or recorded? What tech? Fave groups or songs?
- TV: Describe how & when, family time? Favorite shows?
- Movies: How & where? Favorites?
- Books: Read much? What? Favorites?

© source unknown. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>

Follow Their Lead

Maybe sports was the key, in which case you need to follow where they go.

Or maybe it was dancing, or attending art galleries, or writing poetry.

The point is to understand their experience, which is likely to be quite different than yours.

Remember the Funnel

- Once you get them talking, you can gradually zoom in on what you find most promising to talk about.
- Moving from general habits to “what was your favorite?” is the way to get to what we consider uses and gratification.

Focus on Narrative

- Who was involved?
- What did they do?
- Where did they do it?
- When (be specific)?
- Make sure you get all this before you turn to the question of **Why** (motivations)

Autoethnography: YOUR personal history

- Everything we have said applies, but YOU are the source.
- The point, again, is to get at your experience, then reflect on what it says about U&G (see paper descriptions).
- See reading by Bellot or watch video above as examples.

Sample Oral History

Cami Mejia

Sample Autoethnography

Edward Schiappa

MIT OpenCourseWare
<https://ocw.mit.edu>

CMS.621/CMS.821 Fans and Fan Culture
Fall 2024

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <https://ocw.mit.edu/terms>