

From search to exploration:

Barriers and opportunities in using oral history archives as data resources



Exploring Spoken Word Data in Oral History Archives

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Barriers and opportunities in using oral history archives as data resources



„I’m a social scientist, Michael. That means I can’t explain electricity or anything like that, but if you ever want to know about people I’m the man.“

Structure of my talk

(I) The barriers

- Oral history as a resource (and topic)
 - Epistemological barriers
 - Methodological barriers
 - Technical barriers

(II) The opportunities

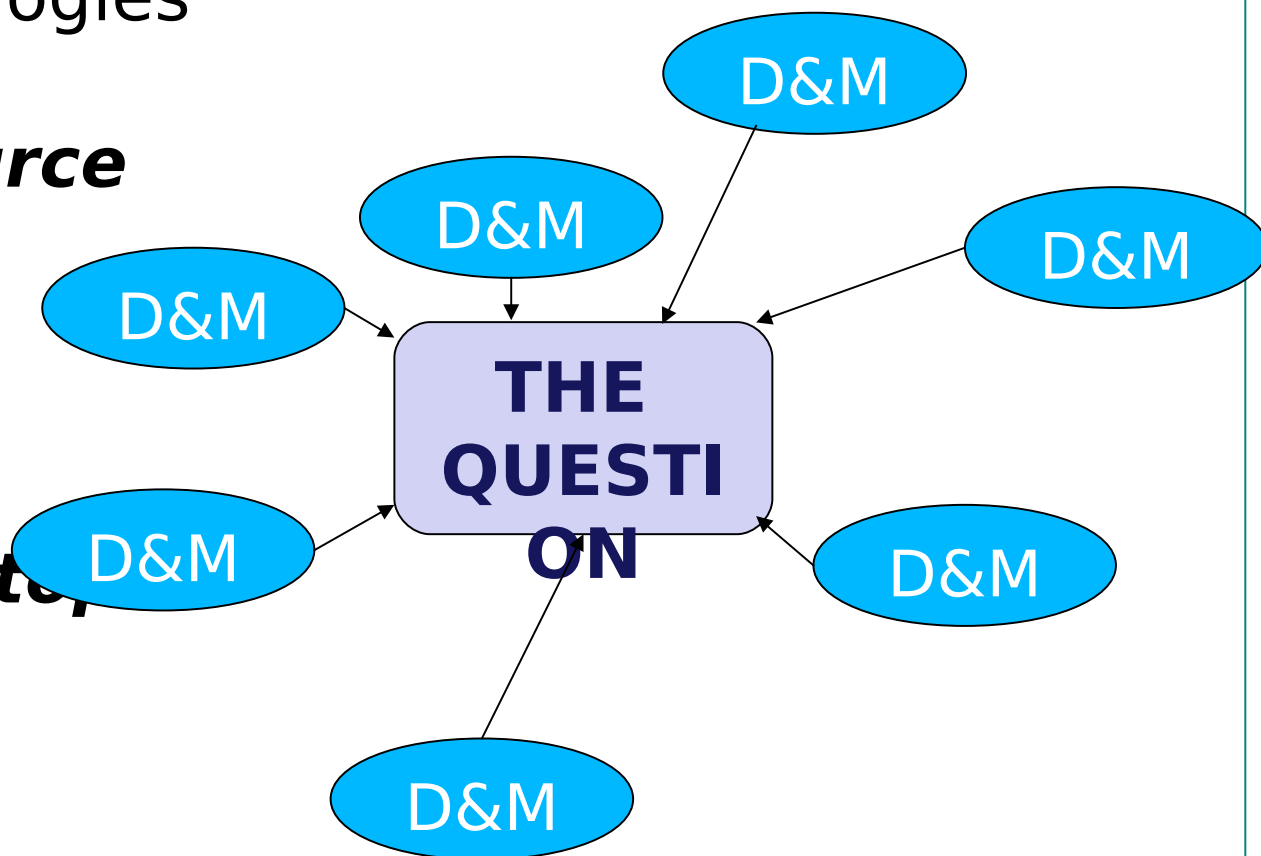
- Oral history as a topic (and resource)
 - Opportunities in multidisciplinary
 - Opportunities in ICT facilitation
 - Opportunities in new research

Oral history as a resource and topic

Oral history (OH) ~ digitally available archives of (audio)visual recordings of interviews, conducted with an explicit reference to—and in accordance with—the oral history methodologies

OH as a data resource

OH as a particular topic

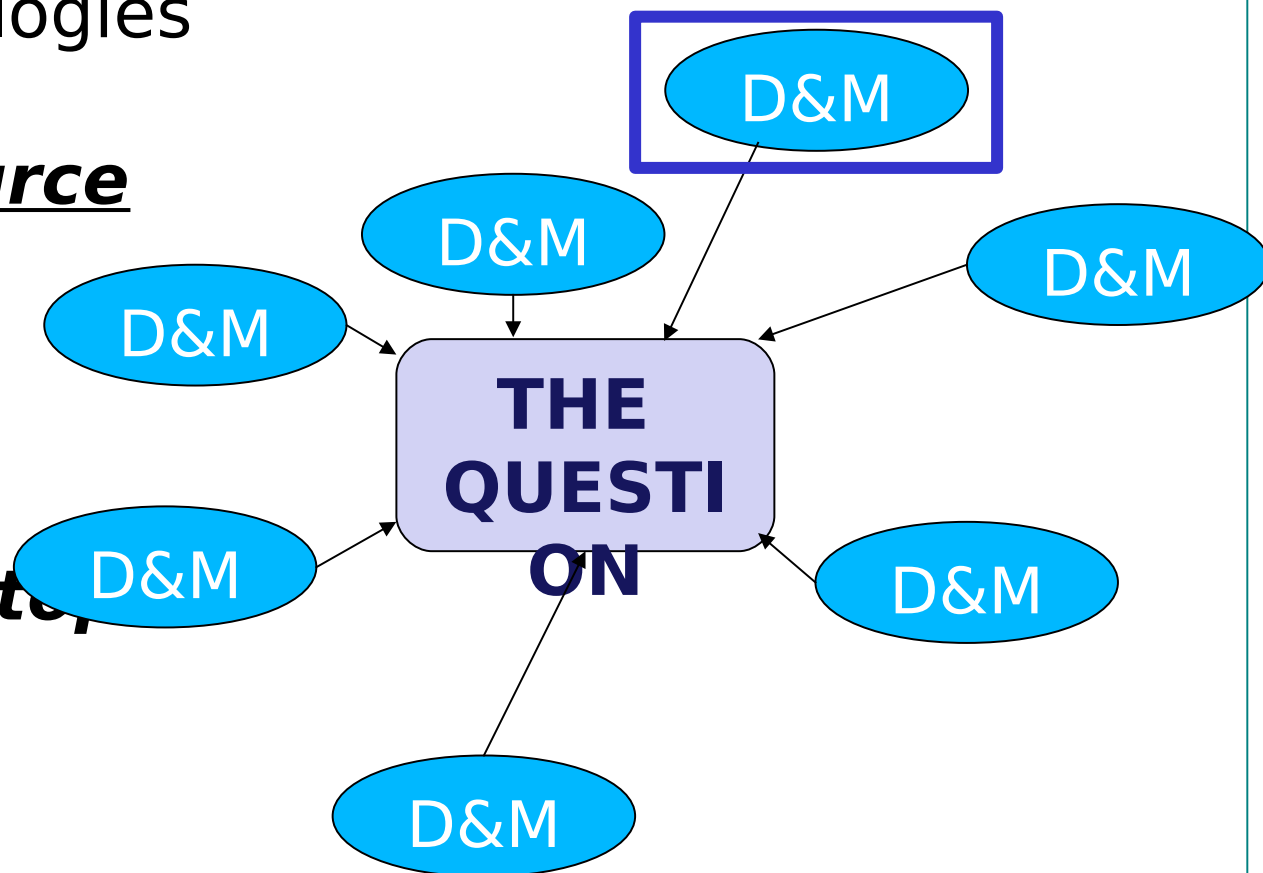


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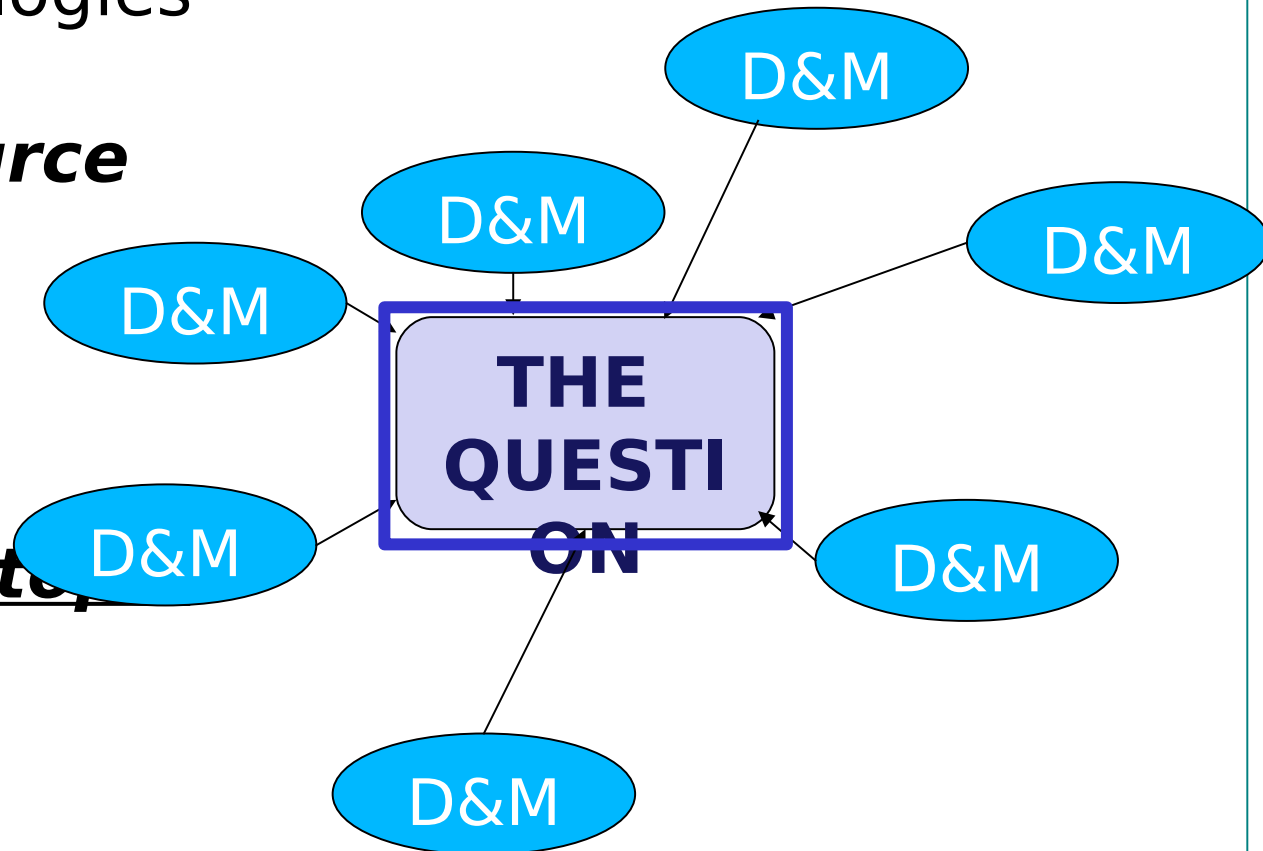


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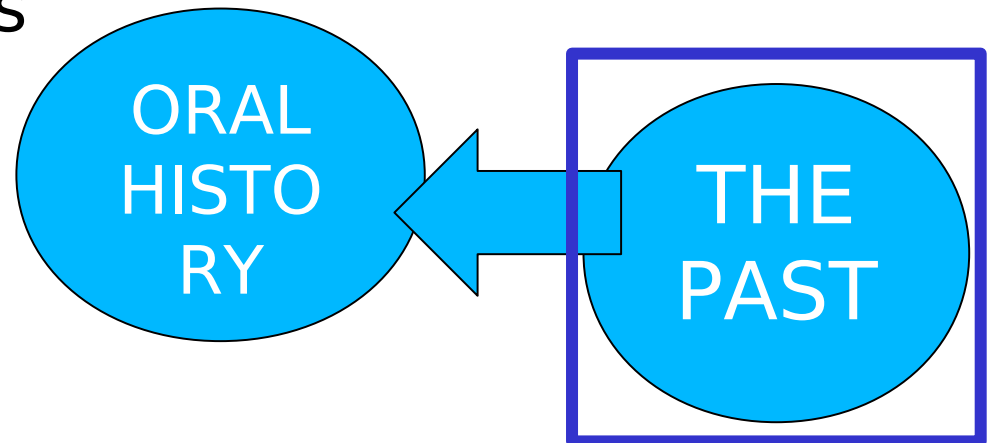
OH as a particular topic



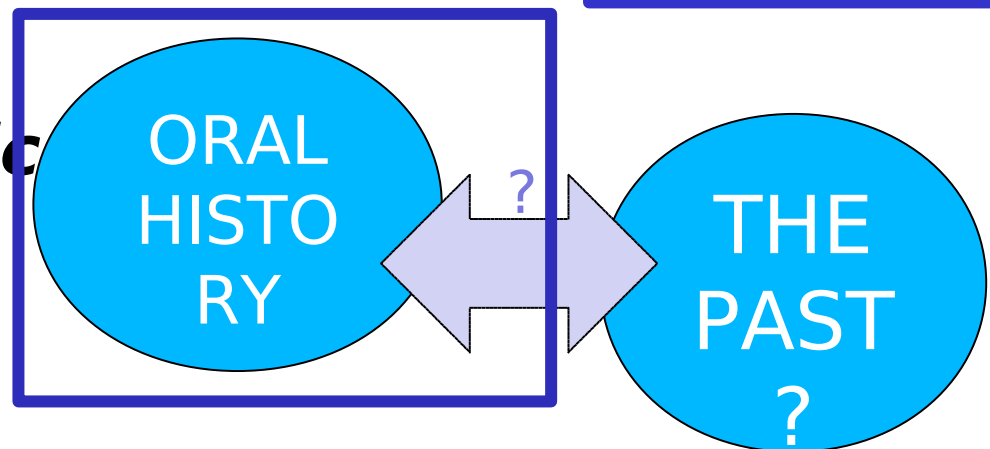
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OH as a data resource

- pre-existing research question, independent of OH itself
- search for particular fragments of interviews
- OH is usually combined with other archival resources

OH as a particular topic

- researching OH itself as a recording of social interaction
- exploration into the nature of this (or related)

Oral history as a data resource

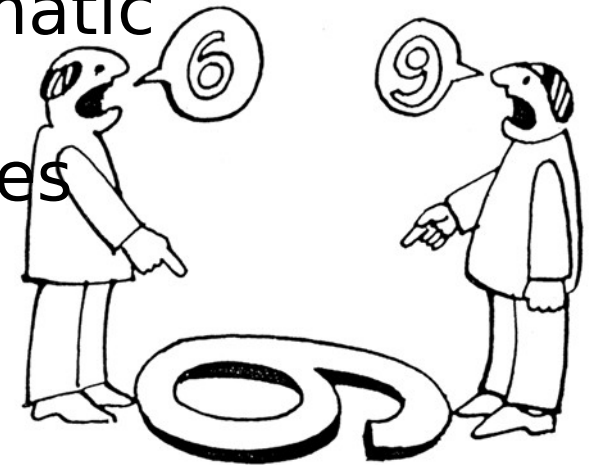
- pre-existing research question, independent of OH itself
 - typically within the stable disciplinary borders
 - sociological (e.g. national identity), historical (e.g. everyday life during the communist era), psychological (e.g. coping with trauma) and other phenomena
- search for particular fragments of interviews
 - typically by using metadata (index) or full-text tools
- OH is usually combined with other archival resources
 - the interview is approached as an *account of past reality*

Exemplar: What can I learn about the publication of the *Kamarád* magazine in the Theresienstadt Jewish ghetto? Let's go to the OH archives to find out. There is a keyword "*cultural activities in Theresienstadt*", but that's too general. Let's do full-text search for terms "*magazine*" and "*Kamarád*". Oh, I found some mentions. Now let's go to the memorial's museum

Epistemological barriers in using OH

What is the “status” of OH as a resource?

- social sciences and humanities are profoundly fragmented fields with many paradigmatic controversies
- diverse theories and research practices
- the answers are often quite different

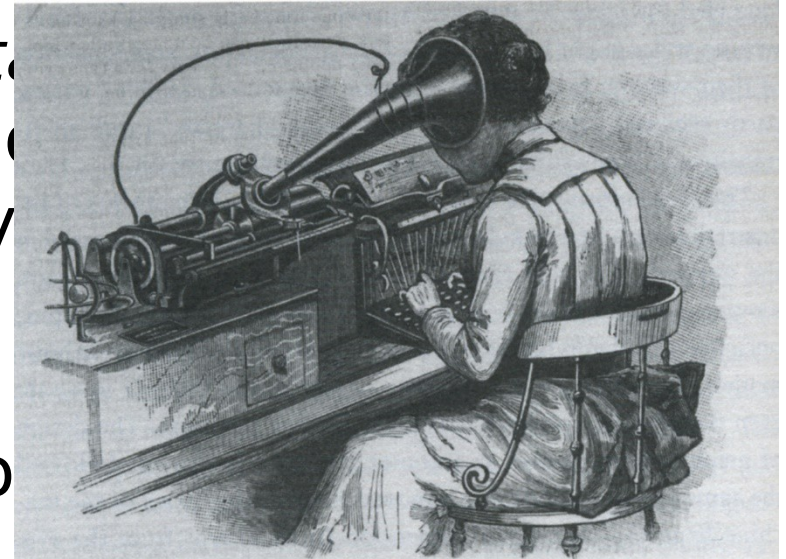


... and this applies to other issues as well:

Should we reuse OH data at all? Is it possible to get anything valuable from the secondary analysis of the interviews? Is it possible to gain some relevant and new insights from the interviews? Is it better than—or at least as good as—conducting our own interviews or

Methodological barriers in using OH

How should I analyse the OH data?
-there is no universal procedure of
interview transcription and analysis
-result of the theoretical and
epistemological approach
-primacy of content / context / focus



... but also more fundamental questions:

How do I locate the most useful OH collection for my research topic? Is it readily available and accessible? On-line or off-line? Does it allow me to use data in the most suitable way? What can I actually do with the recordings? Are there any ethical or legal limitations? And how much do I know about the context of the

Technical barriers in using OH

What is there to make it easier?

- for some of us, the ICT is a barrier by itself
- the technical tools shape and frame the users decisions
- “overwhelming effect”

... not to mention concerns like:

How much can I do in the OH archive interface? I don't have much time to learn about the specific tools, is it worth it? Does everything work properly? How can I learn about how it actually works? Can I download the interviews and analyse them in external software tools? How much will it cost?



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- Oral history as a topic (and resource)
 - Multidisciplinary approach
 - Facilitating the use of ICT
 - New research directions

Oral history as a particular topic

What does the OH itself tell us about the world today?
-macro-social aspects (societal functions of OH, “sign of the times”, political and historical context of the interview...)

-micro-social aspects (situated talk
social psychology, narrative and ide

***OH and the situation of the interview
is “the question”***



Interview as a “perspicuous setting”:
suitable for exploration of certain social practices and
phenomena

In such cases, most of the existing tools are not very

“The past” as a product of the setting



Visual History Archive
USC Shoah Foundation
December 1st, 1995

Refugee Voices
Association of Jewish
Refugees



Leon Greenman (1910–2008) — „An Englishman in Auschwitz“ (2001)

“The past” as a product of the setting

And then, I left France, I got my papers in France, all this whole particular... Through Belgium, very slowly, trains, into Holland. And I stood in front of the house where I used to live, on the 10th of October 1945, I've been away 3 years and 2 days. And I saw a young man on the street, this was an evening, and I said go there and there, there's Mr. Greenman. (TAPE CHANGE) (...), Tell Mr. Greenman his son will be in in about 10 minutes time.' I didn't want to jump in straight away, I wanted to prepare him. So when I got in, my father was very thin, very thin, starved. I saw the pictures on the wall, my wife and child, then I had a damn good cry. And... I went out the next morning, I got up early, my father said 'What are you getting up early for?' 'I gotta get out, I got no rest, I have to see who and what not. I couldn't find any family, I couldn't find friends. On one woman I found, December 1st, 1995, she used to dance, I used to sing... (...)

After that, it wasn't easy to leave France, you had to be seen to, you had to have papers to leave, so alright then, I went from France to Belgium into Holland, I had heard of my father coming out of Westerbork camp, by way of the Red Cross, and I went through Belgium into Holland arriving there in the evening or the early evening, I remember walking on the street in Rotterdam since three years or more, and I spoke to a young man there I said 'Would you like to go to number so and so, there and there', not far from where I was, 'And tell him that his son Leon will see you any minute'. And he did, and then I approached my father's house, and I saw my father, very meagre, you know, he had been in the camps, and I stayed there. The next day I went out to see how many of my family were alive in Rotterdam and Amsterdam, none of them were there. None of my Jewish friends which I knew from the clubs and all that, none of them there. One or two had hidden underground which I only knew later on, so it was everything really. A lot of non-Jewish friends, business people, they were not there. (...)

Refugee Voices
Association of Jewish
Refugees

Leon Greenman (1910-2008) — „An Englishman in Auschwitz“ (2001) **August 20th, 2004**

Multidisciplinary approach

OH as a topic

Human—Computer Interaction: The practical interpretive work that is taking place in different ways of using OH

- language technologies remind us that OH is a linguistic phenomena
- but there is also the topic of multimodality (audiovisual OH)

OH as a resource

Transversal topics (family, identity, language, memory, narrative, metaphor, violence, revenge, morality, transnational justice etc.)

- potential for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches

New research directions?

What is the role of technology? (“tool” × “spectacle”)

Are there any “**universal**” **software tools** that can be used in multidisciplinary projects? Should we have some?

Can we imagine (or create) software that could really help in the **stimulation of creative thought**, and lead us to ask progressive questions?

Transgressing the boundaries of the **qualitative (interpretive) and quantitative (formally descriptive)** approaches in the humanities and social sciences.

Summary

Key themes:

- using oral history as topic and resource
- different barriers in doing so (epistemological, methodological, technical)
- imagined possibilities, future opportunities and new research directions

Some of the current barriers seem to result from the fragmentary nature of social/human sciences, which is hard to overcome.

At the same time, facilitating the use of ICT provides environment for interdisciplinary cooperation, which often leads to interesting and ground-breaking research (but how can technology facilitate

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Garfinkel, Harold – Rawls, Anne W. 2002. *Ethnomethodology's Program: Working Out Durkheim's Aphorism*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Thank you!

