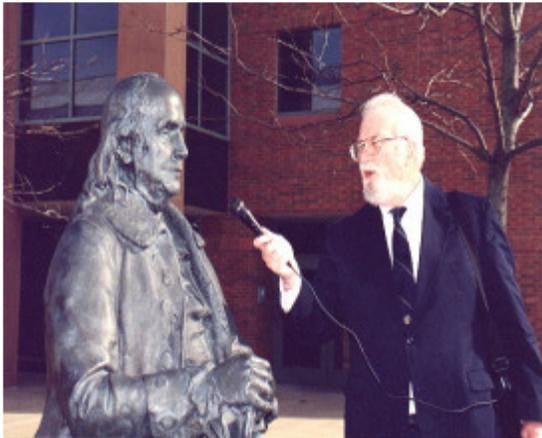




Introduction to Oral History and Interviewing
Webinar
November 2013

Introduction: What is Oral History?



“[The] **compilation of historical data through interviews**, usually tape-recorded and sometimes videotaped, with participants in, or observers of, **significant events or times**. [...]

In creating oral histories, interviews are conducted to obtain information from **different perspectives**, many of which are **often unavailable from written sources**. Such materials provide data on individuals, families, important events, or day-to-day life.

The discipline came into its own in the 1960s and early 70s when inexpensive tape recorders were available to document such rising **social movements** as civil rights, feminism, and anti-Vietnam War protest. [...]

By the end of the 20th century oral history had become a respected discipline in many colleges and universities. At that time the Italian historian Alessandro Portelli and his associates began to study the role that memory itself, whether accurate or faulty, plays in the themes and structures of oral history. Their published work has since become standard material in the field, and many oral historians now include in their research the study of the subjective memory of the persons they interview.”

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Testimony **vs** oral history interview

THE truth **vs** THEIR truth

Objectivity **vs** Subjectivity

Factual **vs** Personal Experience

Introduction: Phases

collect



process



disseminate



- Planning**
- Research / training**
- Outreach**
- Pre-interview**
- Interview**
- Blog**
- Etc.**

- Edit**
- Archive**
- Database**
- Analyse**
- Etc.**

- Digital stories
- Online
- Films
- Art
- Performance
- Audiowalk
- Exhibitions
- Etc.

Interviewing: Types of Interview

- **Life story**

Long, chronological, multiple sessions

The life story is a multidisciplinary research method that comes from psychology, ethnography and oral history. It clarifies individuals' life stories, shows how these represent a coherent history and highlights the relation with other individuals' life stories and with the community as a whole. The life story allows the participants to express the complexities and contradictions of their deepest personal feelings.

- **Short / topic specific**

- **Group / couple**

- **Walking**

Interview while walking with the interviewee in their neighborhood, home town, etc.

- **Mapping**

Using old or recent maps, exploring the interviewee's memory of space.

- **Objects, documents, artifacts**

Using personal objects, photo albums, or documents to start the conversation.

Interviewing: The Process



Interview with Muy Len Pong, Cambodian Working Group, *Montreal Life Stories* projec

Interviewers training

(General and complementary)

Recruitment of interviewees

Pre-interview, appointment and equipment

Interview sessions

Written reflections

(Within 24 hour)

Interviewing: Equipment



High-tech / low-tech

Adapt your equipment depending on the kind of interview you want to conduct as well as on the dissemination needs.

Video / audio: let the interviewee choose

Become familiar with the equipment before the interview.

Use your on device

(iPod, iPhone, other smart phone, laptop, etc.)
If you do not have access to professional equipment.

Interviewing: Video and Audio Recording

Choose the recording format according to the project's needs and resources:

- Does your project require video or audio recordings? Both? Do you want to let the interviewee choose?
- Will the recordings be disseminated? Will they be used in a film, broadcast on radio, or published on the Internet? What quality level is required?
- Where will the recordings be preserved? Are there any requirements from your archival service/institution that you need to respect?
- Do you have the financial, material, and human resources needed in order to process an important number of video recordings?



Interviewing: Overall Principles

Carry out interviews in a highly sensitive manner and respectfully.

Be an attentive, responsive and empathetic listener. The main goal is to listen to the participant for as long and as much as he or she will be willing to speak.

Guide the person being interviewed through their memory retrieval process.

Try to obtain “personalized” as opposed to “generalized” life stories. Ask open questions that encourage the participant to answer and develop his or her story. The interviewer should be able to control the conversation without being over controlling, discouraging or patronizing.

Do your homework about the historical and social context.

Do not claim to know what the participant is about to say. Do not pass judgment or jump to conclusion, never question what the interviewee is stating.

Ethics: 7 Guiding Principles

1. To respect peoples' dignity

2. To respect free and informed consent

- The interview has to be held on a voluntary basis.
- Consent must be informed (objectives of the project, identity of the researcher, possible uses).

3. To respect vulnerable people

- Children, the elderly, refugees, members of displaced communities, victims, disabled or any vulnerable person or person who could become vulnerable by participating to a life story interview.

4. To respect confidentiality

- The respect of peoples' privacy is a "fundamental value"; not respecting this value can cause harm.

5. To respect justice and inclusion

- Oral history projects must do justice to the communities or groups they are studying and be just and proper towards them.
- It is essential to allow divergent voices to be heard and opposite points of view to express themselves by collecting a wide spectrum of testimonies.

6. To evaluate advantages and disadvantages

7. To reduce negative consequences as much as possible

Ref.: *Oral History Association's Principles and Standards*

Ethics: Sharing Authority



Interview with Sary Chhun,
Cambodian Working Group,
Montreal Life Stories project

Authority

- Interviewer's authority
- Interviewee's authority

The « sharing authority » principle

Sharing the authority is intrinsic to the collaborative work of oral history.

It implies cultivating and maintaining a relationship based on trust, respect, shared decision making and collaboration with participants.

Instead of being considered research objects, the participants should be considered as real partners in the dialogue.

« Working with » vs « working on »

Ethics: Sample Consent Form (1/2)

We recommend that consent forms only give the researcher a right of use instead of a copyright.

The participant therefore retains all the rights on his or her personal story. The right of use can be defined in different ways, as long as it includes both the access and the dissemination aspects.

Detail of the consent form of the *From Balconville to Condoville* project:

OPTION 1: Open public access

My identity may be revealed in any publications or presentations that may result from this interview.
(Please choose only one sub-option: 1-A or 1-B.)

SUB-OPTION 1-A

I agree to the possible broadcasting and reproduction of sound and images of my interview by any method and in any media by researchers of this project.
I consent that my interview, or portions of it, be made available on the internet through web pages and/or on-line databases of the project.

OR

SUB-OPTION 1-B

My interview may be accessed on-site by researchers and the public by viewing it but the sound and images should not be reproduced or disseminated.

OPTION 2: Anonymity

My identity will be known only to the interviewer, project staff, and the project director; others will not gain access to my identity unless they gain special permission from me, the interviewee. Once the interview has been transcribed and approved by me, the recordings will be destroyed (though a copy of the interview will be given to me). The transcript will then become open public access and will potentially be broadcasted or reproduced by any method and in any media.

Ethics: Sample Consent Form (2/2)

Second detail of the consent form of the *From Balconville to Condoville* project:

In cases where personal photographs or documents are scanned or photographed:
(Please choose only one option: 1 or 2)

OPTION 1

I agree to let the project researchers digitize personal photographs and/or documents for use in the project publications only and for their being archived with the interview recording

OR

OPTION 2

I agree to let the project researchers digitize personal photographs and/or documents for use in the project and for their being archived with the interview recording. I likewise give permission to let future researchers use these images in their publications.

→ **See sample on the webinar's page.**

Interview Techniques: How to Start an Interview and Ask Questions?



Interview with Geneviève Channareth Srey,
Cambodian Working Group, *Montreal Life
Stories* project

There is not only one good way to start:

Create a relax and comfortable atmosphere (water, tissues).
Explain the project and its purposes.
Start with easy questions (Where were you born? What was your childhood like?)

The discussion should be interviewee-led. Be flexible!

Don't insist on sticking to the interview guide! Conversations as opposed to Q&A.

Give the interviewee time. Do not interrupt.

Some silence can be healthy as they formulate responses to difficult questions.

Use simple open-ended questions,

uncomplicated language, one at a time. Repeat language and do not introduce controversial terminology unless the interviewee does (e.g. "rape" or "survivor").

Interview Techniques: Mr Paul Bard's Interview Excerpt

The screenshot displays the Montreal Life Stories website interface. At the top, the logo features three stylized figures and the text "HISTOIRES DE VIE MONTRÉAL MONTREAL LIFE STORIES". A navigation bar includes "English" and "Français" options. A search bar is present with the text "Rechercher : [input] dans : Personnes" and a "Recherche avancée" button. Below the search bar, a horizontal menu lists categories: "A-Z", "Cambodge", "Haïti", "Shoah et autres persécutions contre les Juifs", "Rwanda", "Éducation", "Représentation artistique", and "Jeunes réfugiés". The main content area shows a grid of profile cards for various individuals: Rupert BAZAMBANZA (Rwanda), Batia BETTMAN, Writu BHATTA (Népal), and Paul Bard. The Paul Bard card is highlighted, showing a video player with a play button and a thumbnail of him. Below the video player, there is a "Partager cette vidéo" section with a Facebook "J'aime" button and a "Description" tab.

Watch Mr Paul Bard's interview (*Montreal Life Stories* project) for an example of how to start an interview:

<http://ds.lifestoriesmontreal.ca/video-72>

Interview Techniques: The interview Guide

Sample Life-Story Interview Questions

Biographical Information

- a. When/where were you born?
- b. What was your father/mother's full name?
- c. Do you have any siblings?
 - i. What are their names?
 - ii. What are their ages?
- d. Are you/have you been married?
 - i. What is/was the name of your husband/wife?
 - ii. When/where were you married?
- e. Do you have any children?
 - i. What are their names?
 - ii. When/where were they born?

Family Heritage

- a. Can we talk about your mother's parents? Do you remember your grandmother? And your grandfather?
 - i. Were your grandparents from the same town/city/region as you?
 - ii. How did your grandparents earn a living?
 - iii. Did they help to bring you up? Were you close to them?
 - iv. Was either of them a strong influence on you?
 - v. [Repeat for father's parents]
- b. Do you remember any other relatives of the older generations in your family?
- c. Were there any other old people who were especially important to you as a child?
- d. Can you tell me about the relationship between your father/mother and your grandparents?
- e. Can we talk about your parents? Let's start with your mother?
 - i. Can you describe her character to me?
 - ii. Did she show affection? What about anger?
 - iii. Were you close to her? Was she easy to talk to?
 - iv. What kind of work did she do? Did she always do that kind of work? Did she continue working after she had her children?
 - v. Who looked after you while she worked? Was she ever out of work?
 - vi. How did you manage then?
 - vii. [Repeat for father]
- f. How would you compare your mother and your father as influences in your life?
- g. What do you remember your parents/grandparents telling you about their childhoods, about growing up?
- h. How do you think your parents were seen by others?
 - i. What were your parents' ethnicities/religions?
 - j. Can we talk about your brothers and sisters?
- i. Growing up as children, how did you get along?
 - ii. Do you have a favourite brother or sister? Can you tell me more about him/her? Was he/she an important influence on you?
 - iii. What are your brothers and sisters doing now? Are they married?

The interview guide should be used as a “general plan”, “a road map” to make the stories more complete and relevant.

However, it is the interview and the participant's personality that will determine in great measure the questions to be asked.

As much as possible, the questions should give the participant the opportunity of telling his or her story in his or her own way.

→ *See sample on the webinar's page.*

Interview Techniques: How to End an Interview?

Do not stop the camera before the very last second!

The greatest discussions often happen when the interview session is “over”.

Discuss the possibility of doing another interview session.

Explain the following steps:

processing of the recording, DVD and evaluation form sent by mail, etc.

Be grateful, thank, do not leave in a hurry!

Interview Techniques:

The interviewer and the videographer

Establishing a good relationship with your partner is important for the smooth running of the interview.

- Discuss the possibility of the videographer asking questions and/or contributing clarifications during the interview.
- Team members can switch roles during subsequent sessions if they wish to do so and if it is relevant.
- The debriefing after the interview is a very rich moment for sharing and reflection about the running of the interview and for preparing the next one.

Processing: Video and Audio Editing



Choose an editing software

Different editing tools are available. Some are free and easy to use whereas other high-end software require professional training.

Make sure you chose the right tool and have the appropriate hardware.

→ ***See our website for a list of editing tools:***

<http://storytelling.concordia.ca/toolbox/digital-toolbox/audio-and-video-editing>

Processing: Archiving

Develop an archiving protocol

- What is the original document? If you are recording on memory cards, will you keep the recordings on the cards and archive them? Or will you transfer the files on a hard drive and archive the drives?
- How will the recordings be sorted? (by project, by interviewee, by interview session?)
- What system will you use to number them?
- Where will recordings be kept? Is the space safe from fire, flood, theft, etc.? Will you keep copies elsewhere? Who will have access to the archive? And where will accompanying materials be kept?
- How many copies will you make and in which format? Will you send a copy to the interviewee? Will partner and community organizations keep copies?
- How will you ensure the preservation of the archives on a long term basis?



Processing: Transcribing

First, identify your needs:

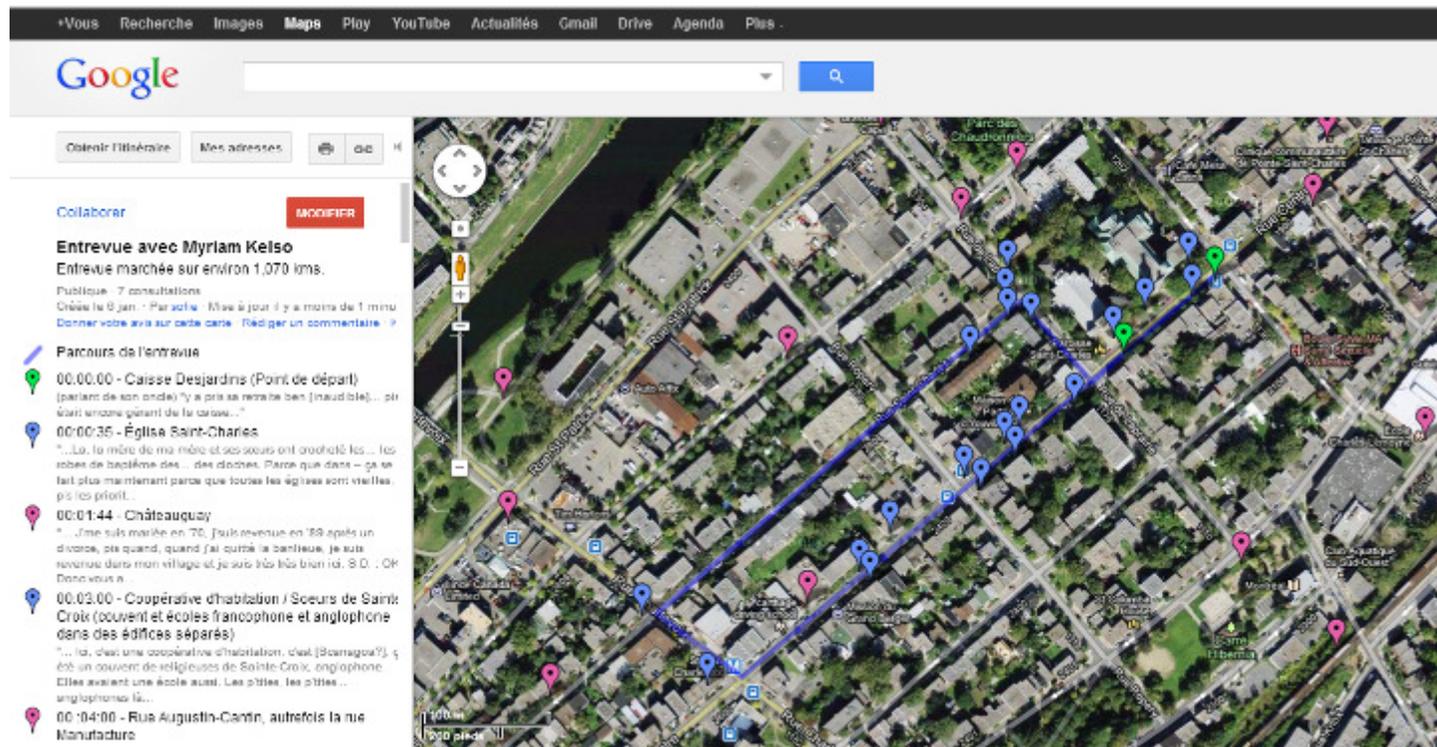
- Do you need full transcriptions of the interviews? What kind of transcription (verbatim, summary, etc.)
Chronologies? Translations?
- Do you want to enter your interviews in a database? What are the requirements to do so?

Develop transcription / chronology writing / translation protocols

→ *See samples of protocols on the webinar's page.*

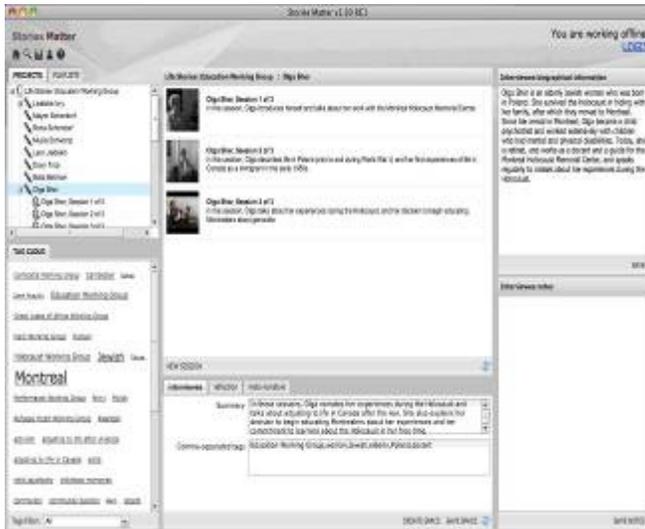
Processing: Transcribing Walking Interviews

COHDS has developed a specific protocol for transcribing walking or driving interviews. It uses GPS location, Google Maps, and verbatim transcription.



→ **See video and full protocol (in French) on the webinar's page.**

Processing: Database Building



Chose a database building software

COHDS has developed **Stories Matter**, a free and open source software made by and for oral historians. **Stories Matter** allows us to clip, index and export audio and video recordings – and so it represents a real alternative to transcription.

<http://storytelling.concordia.ca/storiesmatter/>

Develop your database building protocol

Important Reference:

MOORE, Kim, 2013, History MA, “Subjective Listening: Methodological and Interpretative Challenges and Opportunities in Constructing an Online Oral History Database.”

http://storytelling.concordia.ca/storiesmatter/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Subjective-Listening_Print-Copy.pdf

→ **See our website for a list of database and indexing tools:**

<http://storytelling.concordia.ca/toolbox/digital-toolbox/indexing-and-databases>

and a sample database building protocol on the webinar’s page.

Disseminating the interviews

There are various ways of disseminating interviews depending on your objectives:

- Academic publications
- Online databases (full interviews)
- Online digital stories (short edited clips)
- Films (documentary, webdocumentary, animated)
- Exhibitions, virtual exhibitions
- Educational tools
- Audio walks
- Performance (theatre, verbatim theatre, playback theatre, dance, etc.)

<http://storytelling.concordia.ca/research-creation>

<http://ds.lifestoriesmontreal.ca/>

[We Are Here exhibition](#)

<http://histoiresdeviemontreal.ca/fr/curriculum>

postindustrialmontreal.ca/canal



Resources

Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling (COHDS)

<http://storytelling.concordia.ca/>

COHDS – Digital Toolbox

<http://storytelling.concordia.ca/toolbox/digital-toolbox>

COHDS – Publications

<http://storytelling.concordia.ca/research-creation/academic-publications>

Credits

This webinar was designed in November 2013 by Eve-Lyne Cayouette Ashby, Associate Director of the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling (COHDS).

It gathers content produced by different researchers, staff members and projects based at COHDS such as the *Montreal Life Stories* CURA (lifestoriesmontreal.ca), and the *From Balconville to Condoville?* project (postindustrialmontreal.ca/project/balconville-condoville) as well as renowned authors and oral historians.

Our protocols and materials can be used and adapted for any non-for-profit, educational, and academic purposes but the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling must be credited.

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