



Writing family history

Interviewing for source material

Narrator:

Family Stories and Oral History. Joanna Bornat, expert in Oral History, gives some evidence on conducting oral history interviews.

Joanna Bornat:

Carefully worked out sets of questions are helpful but they can also be a bit of a hindrance because they can obstruct the natural flow of the conversation. They might make you try to stop someone who gets into an area that you hadn't thought of.

I think one problem about carefully prepared questions is that often the interviewee then wants to see them first, and then you often end up with a rather wooden sort of exchange when and often also people tend to write things down, and then of course you don't get anything that's quite so spontaneous. And I think also people who do oral history for family history are looking for something which is perhaps akin to the photograph album, they want something which will give them the sound of that person, so something which sounds like that person when they're their most natural.

I think what what you do need is some kind of a checklist. Not so much a checklist as actually beforehand going over with that person what it is you want to talk about. Explain to them, you know, what the idea is, I mean if it's a member of the family who you haven't seen for some time – it might be, you know, a distant cousin or great aunt or somebody. You might want to put them in the picture a bit. Tell them what the project's about and presumably reassure them that they're part of it and they will get a copy of whatever is produced. And obviously yourself, if you're, you know, you're going through the events of someone's life then you will have I suppose prepared it, maybe have a small piece of paper by you just to make sure that you do go through all those events, the ones that you'd planned to talk about.

If you're interviewing a family member, then you may have an opportunity to go back again, so that if someone suddenly starts talking about some industry they worked in or some area of the country that you're not totally familiar with or some part of the world, then it might be useful to go and, and read that up just to get some feel for that area, place, industry ...

Interviewer:

Do your research.

Joanna Bornat:

Do a bit of research, yes, but then you can go back and go over it with that person. And if you're if you're able to transcribe the whole interview then again, you know, going over it together might provoke more questions. The idea of a closely worked out questionnaire, I would, I'd steer away from that if possible. Because what you've probably got, as a sort of structure, is that person's life and the things they did at different stages, you know, family, where you were born, parents, going right through the life, and that's, that's enough of a recognisable structure for most people to work with.

Interviewer:

And you'd do that chronologically, I presume, would you? If you were trying to find out about someone's history?

Joanna Bornat:

If the focus is the family and the family history you might want to, in some ways put people at their ease, let them talk about the things which interest them about the family, and then maybe go back into those perhaps earlier connections that you want to make, inserting your own agenda in a way. But I think encouraging someone to feel that they're talking from their

own experience and with authority, and around a topic which they feel comfortable with is the best way to start.

Interviewer:

And how do you think the questions should actually be posed so that you get the best out of the person you're interviewing?

Joanna Bornat:

I think this is perhaps strange for something which is to do with family history, but I would avoid asking people questions about dates. If you can draw them out later on in some kind of discursive sort of way, you know, 'Was it around 1932 that, you know, you met Uncle Dick?' or something like that, then fine, but I've been in situations where I've asked people a question like 'What year were you married?' and suddenly someone can't remember! And they're terribly disconcerted, and often quite upset about this. And so I would avoid those questions although I know these are the most cherished bits of information for family historians, but they will be available and they will come out in due course. So, I would think questions which invite descriptive answers about what was it like living in or, or maybe even starting 'What was your earliest memory?' might help, but even then that could be challenging to someone who thought they knew what their earliest memory was and now find that they can't quite remember it.

But I think, getting people to talk about familiar and, and those periods in their life which they're likely to remember most accurately and that's going to be the period up to the time they're about eighteen to twenty, because that's the way memory's formed. After that we don't record our memories in quite the same way. But then there are questions you can ask about getting married or about, you know, changing jobs or new locations, perhaps getting someone to describe what a new house felt like, to move into a new house or new flat if someone hadn't previously had their own front door, what is it like to have your own front door. What kinds of furniture people remember buying and these lead out often into quite fascinating pieces of information. I remember talking to a woman about how she furnished her first council flat in 1948 sort of period, and she talked in detail - and very lovingly - about the three piece suite and the, all the various pieces of furniture they got for it. And in doing so you could hear her talking about other members of her family because she said her brother-in-law did this and her, you know, her brother did that, so then you could piece together ...

Interviewer:

The triggers ...

Joanna Bornat:

Yes, yes, and who was actually seeing who at the time and who the, where the sort of family networks were.

Interviewer:

So a good way to start would often be 'Describe such and such, use the word 'describe' rather than 'what' and 'who'...

Joanna Bornat:

Oh definitely, describe, and also I think questions like 'How did you feel about...?' are quite open questions to ask people. And then you might get a, you know, 'How did you feel about going to school?' or 'How did you feel about, you know, your first job?'. Questions I sometimes ask people about, to do with work about, you know, 'When you got your first job what did you do with your wage?' - that is a 'what' question I suppose but, 'How did you spend your first, your first wage?' often opens up all sorts of interesting discussions of, or information about family relationships. 'Did you give your wage to your mother?', 'Did you, or did you keep, did you give her part of the wage, or, you know, did you tip it up to the whole family?' Gives you an insight into what young workers' positions were, were like at the time and how much freedom people had to control their own finances.

Interviewer:

What sort of triggers might people use, might the interviewer use to get memories flowing?
Joanna Bornat:

Well, photographs are obviously a really good prompt to any kind of discussion and if you, if you've got family photographs obviously that's the point to start. And quite often it's, it's useful if you can say 'Actually I don't know who the people are in this photograph can you tell me?', I mean hopefully they will be able to. Obviously objects as well, people have all sorts of ornaments and pictures round the room and they can be useful prompts, you know, ask, you know, 'Who gave you that? Might even walk round the room with the microphone and get people to talk about all the different objects and where they came from, I mean that might prompt ..

Interviewer:

And it would bring the whole experience to life, wouldn't it?

Joanna Bornat:

It might do yes, yes.

Interviewer:

So those are some of the triggers, Joanna, what about when you feel and you sense that the interview just isn't getting anywhere? There's not much flow and there's rather short, monosyllabic answers coming back. Obviously you try to help the person relax, you try to make eye contact with them?

Joanna Bornat:

Yes, you could, I suppose there are all sorts of strategies, aren't there? I mean, one might be just to switch off for a bit and have a cup of tea and, and try and start again. Not be anxious about the, the taping as some kind of a once and for all thing that you've just set up. After all you can stop the tape and start it and, you know, mark it off in some way by saying. 'I'm stopping it now' and so that you know that was a pause. On the other hand you then, that might be the time to get out the photographs again or just look at them, try and relax somebody in some way. And just, I suppose, thinking back through your mental checklist of topics you wanted to talk about, just think about was there anything that seemed to spark a bit of interest?

There is also of course the issue of resistance on the other side, I mean, you may actually be coming up against a barrier where someone really doesn't want to talk about something which you passionately want to know about. You know, 'What happened to your mother's first husband?', for example, who's never mentioned. And nobody else wants to talk about that person. Well, I think you just have to respect that. I think you can't expect someone or make someone talk about something they don't want to talk about, particularly within a family setting when, you know, there can be all sorts of repercussions which are quite personal. It could be that later that person might change their mind and come back to it, but I think there has to be an element of respect there. I'm not keen on putting people in a position when they're somehow made to talk about things which they don't really want to talk about.

Interviewer:

There can be good silences.

Joanna Bornat:

Yeah, there can be good silences. I think and, and if, if you actually get to the point where really you can feel as if there is nothing more to be said and you can't think of any more questions to ask around that topic, then that's obviously the moment to pause or stop. But then there are other silences when people are just collecting their thoughts, or maybe you've asked a question which they really don't immediately know the answer to, because no one's asked them to talk about their life in that way before. They might just not answer for what might feel like minutes, but it won't be minutes, it'll just be a few seconds or so, and just let it go, let that silence happen. Don't try and gabble into it and jump in with another question because if they're thinking about an answer then that answer will come.

Interviewer:

Are there any ethical or moral issues associated with interviewing for oral history that interviewers should be aware of?

Joanna Bornat:

There are quite a number, and oral historians are increasingly aware of ethical issues. One thing that people do get quite concerned about is the issue of ownership of the interview. And legally the person who gives the interview owns that interview and they have to assign copyright to the person who wants to publish or use it.

But there are other basic, I think, ethical issues around making sure that people are genuinely giving consent. So that means they genuinely know why the interview is happening, and, and what's going to happen to it, and feel quite happy and comfortable about all aspects of it. Of course, one thing people can't know is how they'll feel once the interview's started and when it's finished, which is why it's jolly good and certainly an ethical precept to go back to them and to talk to them about it afterwards, or at least if they're some distance away send them a copy of the tape or transcript or something so that they don't feel that they're left almost wondering what it was they said.