Hugo Slim and Paul Thompson, with Olivia Bennett and Nigel Cross

WAYS OF LISTENING

The book from which this chapter is drawn was published as part of the Panos Institute’s Oral Testimony Programme, which explores and illustrates the potential of oral testimony in the development process, and gathers, publishes and amplifies the views and experiences of individuals and communities in the South on specific development themes. Mindful of the culturally (and historically) specific prevalence of the one-to-one interview in the North, this chapter explores a variety of other approaches, from group interviews to the use of visual techniques. Hugo Slim was Senior Overseas Research Officer for Save the Children Fund, and is now Co-Director, Centre for Development and Emergency Planning (CENDEP) at Oxford Brookes University. Paul Thompson is Research Professor at the University of Essex. Olivia Bennett was Director, Oral Testimony Programme, Panos Institute, London until 2004. Nigel Cross was Research Director of the Sahel Oral History Project. Reprinted with permission from Hugo Slim and Paul Thompson, with Olivia Bennett and Nigel Cross (eds), Listening For Change: Oral History and Development, London: Panos, 1993, pp. 61–94.

[...]

WHILE THE INTERVIEW is now a common form of enquiry and communication in the West – where a job interview is a prerequisite for most employment, the media feature endless interviews, both informative and entertaining, and few people escape having to take part in polls and questionnaires – this is by no means a universal experience. As British anthropologist Charles Briggs has observed, in some societies the interview is not an established type of speech event, and there can often be an incompatibility between standard interview techniques and indigenous systems of communication. This incompatibility can create problems for people who, as interviewees, are forced to express themselves in an unfamiliar speech format. In particular, the interview form has a tendency to put unnatural pressure on people to find ready answers, to be concise and to summarise
a variety of complex experiences and intricate knowledge.\textsuperscript{2} It may also mean that researchers and interviewers unwittingly violate local communication norms relating to turn-taking, the order of topics for discussion or various rituals attached to storytelling. In some societies, individual interviews are considered dangerously intimate encounters. In others, the recounting of group history can be a sacred ritual and certain people must be consulted before others. Sometimes a number of clearly prescribed topics should be used to start proceedings, while other topics may be taboo, or should not be introduced until a particular level of intimacy and trust has been achieved.

In many societies, community or clan history is the vested interest of particular people or a designated caste, such as the *griots* of West Africa. They will often adapt their account to a particular audience, tailoring it to focus on the ancestors of their listeners. Alongside the right to tell, there is often a reward: payment in cash or kind for the teller. Storytelling may also have a seasonal dimension. In Ladakh, for example, winter is the time for telling stories. It is considered an inappropriate activity during the busy summer months when the agricultural workload is at its peak, as a local saying makes clear: ‘As long as the earth is green, no tale should be told.’\textsuperscript{13} It would be an ill-prepared and disappointed oral testimony project that set out to collect traditional stories in Ladakh during the summer!

There may also be special rituals of rendition which require certain elders to act as witnesses and checks on the history or stories being recounted. The proper setting for the recounting of a community history may be a feast with a minimum number present. Such conditions affect the collection of oral history and can sometimes even make it impossible, as Lomo Zachary, a Sudanese researcher, found when he tried to gather information about the origins and relations of various Ugandan clans living as refugees in South Sudan:

I approached several clan historians but all were asking me for a ‘Calabash’ – meaning some liquor . . . After requesting some liquor most told me that they were unable to narrate me any stories because there were no esteemed witnesses or observers. Usually when such clan histories are told to clansmen or a group of interested young clansmen there is someone also well versed in the clan history who makes corrections when necessary. Sometimes they have long debates on a controversial item in the history. For example, the storyteller might skip or include a false family line of a particular clansman. Here the observer or witness has to interpose immediately with concrete proofs . . . So all gave me a similar response: ‘My son, I am indeed grateful for your wise request for knowing where we originated from, how we have come to be separated and how we handle our affairs. I could have given you an elaborate history of our people but as you know, we are all scattered at this time. We have lost all our animals. There are no more tribal palavers where our people could be gathered . . . It could be during such sittings that our wise children could now put down all our cultures and traditions. Please accept my sincere apologies.’\textsuperscript{14}

It is critically important to be aware of these different conceptual and cultural dimensions to interviewing and to historical information. A vital part of any
preparation for an oral testimony project should involve learning about the norms
of what Briggs describes as people’s ‘communicative repertoire’: its particular
forms, its special events, its speech categories and its taboos. The most fundamental
rule is to be sensitive to customary modes of speech and communication and allow
people to speak on their own terms.

Methods of collection

There are a number of different kinds of interview. The most wide-ranging form
is the individual life story. This allows a person to narrate the story of his or her
whole life in all its dimensions: personal, spiritual, social and economic. Another
kind is the single-issue interview which seeks to gain testimony about a particular
aspect or period of a person’s life. The object might be to hear about someone’s
working life, perhaps with an emphasis on indigenous knowledge, or to listen to
their experiences during an event or episode such as a famine or a time of conflict
or displacement. In addition to individual interviews, oral testimony can also be
collected in focus group discussions, community interviews or by diary inter-
viewing. When choosing the method(s) to be employed, it is important to bear in
mind the objectives of the project and the kind of testimony required.

Life story interviews

These are normally private, one-to-one encounters between interviewee and
narrator. Sessions should be held at a time convenient to the interviewee and in a
suitable location, preferably somewhere which offers seclusion, comfort and famil-
liarity. There is often no better place than the narrator’s home.

In some societies, a one-to-one interview may not be acceptable, particularly
for women, and one or more observers will need to be present. This can serve the
additional function of testing and cross-checking information as observers interrupt
to challenge or correct the interviewee. However, it can also mean that informa-
tion is distorted. In some situations observers can act as censors and indeed may be
there specifically to intimidate: husbands observing wives; parents observing chil-
dren; or officials observing a community living in fear or repression. While it is
important to conform to the communicative repertoire of the people being inter-
viewed, it pays to be aware that there may be more dubious aspects to observation
and extra participation. Gender can also be an inhibiting factor and as a general rule
interviewer and narrator should be the same sex.

An average life story interview may need two or three sessions and can take
 anything from one to eight hours. Breaking up the interview into separate sessions
gives people time to remember and explore the past and makes recollection more
of a process than an occasion. It takes the pressure off a single session, when the
narrator might feel obliged to cram everything in. Things triggered in one session
can be reflected upon by the narrator in peace and then brought to the next. The
interviewer can similarly benefit from the pause between sessions.

It is important to remember that a life story interview can often have a profound
effect on the interviewee, who may never have told anyone their memories before
and certainly is unlikely to have recalled their whole life in the course of a few
hours. For most people, recounting their life story is a positive, if emotional, experience from which they can gain much satisfaction and a renewed sense of perspective, but the listener should always ensure that the narrator is comfortable at the end of the interview and is surrounded by the support they need, whether from family or friends.

**Family-tree interviewing**

In the course of a life story interview, the narrator will describe many members of his or her family from contemporary or previous generations. These people will obviously be mentioned largely in terms of their impact on the narrator. However, it is possible to focus on these other family members in more depth by asking the narrator to supply second-hand accounts of their relatives’ lives. This technique is perhaps best described as family-tree interviewing. [..]

It obviously takes up much more time, but it does give an interesting ripple effect to any study. It is perhaps most useful when one is looking for trends, rather than the specific detail of direct personal experience. An alternative, which is still more time-consuming but also a more direct measure of change, is to interview two generations from the same family.

**Single-issue testimony**

Single-issue interviews may be carried out on a one-to-one or group basis, and focus on a specific aspect of the narrator’s life. As such they can be shorter than a life story, but more detailed. Single-issue interviews can yield valuable insights for many development and relief activities. They are the main method of learning about a particular event, such as drought, or for an investigation into a particular area of knowledge or experience. For example, they might involve interviewing farmers about land use and water conservation methods, or a traditional healer about botany and plant use. They require the interviewer to have more detailed background or technical knowledge of the subject matter than is necessary for a more wide-ranging life story.

**Diary interviewing**

Diary interviewing is a method which is increasingly being used by social scientists. It involves selecting a sample of people who contribute regular diary entries as part of a continuing and long-term study of social trends. Such a study might ask people to report on specific issues or it might seek more general life story material. The participants make a commitment to keep a written or oral, tape-recorded diary. Entries might be made on a daily, weekly, monthly or annual basis, and are then sent in and analysed centrally, over time.

Alternatively, diary interviewing can involve a less rigorous procedure whereby the participant is interviewed at key moments over a period of time. In a study of indigenous agricultural practices, for example, these might include particular times during the cropping calendar such as land preparation, sowing, weeding, harvesting and threshing. In a more general life story study, such moments might include religious festivals, rites of passage or different stages of educational or working life.
The objective of diary interviewing is therefore to collect a running progress of a person’s experience over time and not just retrospectively.

**Group interviews**

Oral testimony can also be collected through group work. Indeed, in many societies, group interviews may be more in keeping with the customary ways of communicating. If the concept of a one-to-one interview seems unusual or unnatural, the format of group discussions or public meetings may be more familiar and oral testimony collection can be adapted accordingly.

Groups can bring out the best and the worst in people. Sometimes, by taking the focus off individuals, they make them less inhibited, but the opposite can occur just as easily. A group may subtly pressurise people towards a socially acceptable testimony or a mythical representation of the past or of a current issue which everyone feels is ‘safe’ to share and which may be in some sense idealised. Communal histories gathered in this way can involve a powerful process of myth construction or fabulation which misrepresents the real complexity of the community. At worst, this can develop into a persistent false consciousness which can only tolerate the good things, and remembers ‘how united we all were’, or which exaggerates the totality of suffering and recalls ‘how bad everything was’. The voices of the less confident, the poorer and the powerless, are less likely to be heard, and so the variety of experience and the clashes and conflicts within a community may well remain hidden.

But groups can also be especially productive, as members ‘spark’ off one another. Memories are triggered, facts can be verified or checked, views can be challenged and the burning issues of the past can be discussed and argued about again in the light of the present. Group work can also increase rapport between project workers/interviewers and the community, encouraging people to come forward for one-to-one sessions if appropriate. Two kinds of group work are appropriate to oral testimony collection: small focus group discussions and larger community interviews.

**Focus group discussions** developed as an important part of market research, but are now used widely on an inter-disciplinary basis as a means of assessing attitudes and opinions. In this context, they are a particularly useful forum for discussing both the past and the major issues of the day. Focus groups are particularly appropriate for collecting testimony from people who may be very reserved on a one-to-one basis, but draw confidence from being in a familiar group. Children are a good example of this.

The idea is to bring a group together – preferably between five and twelve people – to discuss a particular issue or a number of issues. They should be a homogeneous group made up of participants of the same sex and largely equal in social status, knowledge and experience so that confidence is generally high and no-one feels threatened. The discussion should last for one to two hours, with the participants sitting comfortably and facing each other in a circle. Several consecutive sessions can be held if necessary.

Social scientist Krishna Kumar notes that the main emphasis on a focus group is the interaction between the participants themselves, and not that between participants and interviewer. Focus groups are therefore guided by a ‘moderator’ rather
than an interviewer, whose role is to steer the discussion and ask some probing questions by adopting a posture of ‘sophisticated naïveté’. This encourages the group to talk in depth with confidence, but also to be ready to spell things out for the outsider. The moderator’s role also involves countering the two main constraints on a focus group: dominance of the proceedings by so-called ‘monopolisers’; and a sense of group pressure which can build up from a majority viewpoint and which then discourages a minority of participants from expressing their views.

Community interviews involve larger groups and may resemble public meetings more than group discussions. Their emphasis is different, too. The main interaction of a community interview is between the interviewer and the community. The ideal size is around thirty people, but no more, and two interviewers will be needed for such an event. Their role is a directly questioning one, but they must still take responsibility for balancing participation in the meeting with guiding the interview. Having two interviewers can be confusing and their respective roles should be well defined in advance of the interview, to ensure that they do not speak at the same time or interrupt each other’s train of enquiry.

The advantage of a community interview is the opportunity it provides for gathering a wide cross-section of people together at one time. This is particularly useful at the outset of a project, for example, when background information is being collected or future interviewees are being sought and selected. It is also useful midway or at the end of the process of collecting interviews, when certain details or views need to be tested or checked. It can provide the occasion for a number of ‘straw polls’ and hand counts in order to learn how many people share experiences or hold similar views. Finally, both group and community meetings are especially useful for the ‘return’ of oral testimony. They can act as a review mechanism and can encourage decision-making based on the testimonies collected. [. . .]

Props and mnemonics

Questions are not the only way to inspire a narrator and jog the memory. Physical objects, such as old tools, photographs and traditional costumes or artefacts, can provide the focus for a more detailed testimony or group discussion. A farmer will often be more eloquent when holding an implement and describing its function. A refugee may find much more to say when looking at a picture of home. However, any prop should be carefully chosen, otherwise they will tend to distract the narrator and divert the interview instead of giving it depth.

One prop which is central to the communicative repertoire of Native Americans is the talking-stick. This is a ritual stick which lies in the centre of any group of people who are there to talk or listen, whether it be at a political meeting or a storytelling session. In order to speak a person must go into the centre of the circle and pick up the stick. The speaker must then hold it while they talk and replace it when they stop. The stick places certain responsibilities upon speaker and listeners alike. It requires the latter to listen actively and patiently, but also tends to curb excessive talkativeness on the part of garrulous speakers and gives courage to the shy. Similar indigenous speech rituals should be employed wherever they exist.

Revisiting a place and conducting an interview in situ or during a ‘walkabout’ can also free the mind and allow someone to recall the past more easily. Such
walkabouts might include: visiting a sparsely wooded watershed which used to be a forest, in order to discuss environmental history and change; returning to a mine or factory which used to be a place of work, to discuss child labour; or examining an abandoned and broken pump, to discuss irrigation techniques and land use.  

Role play can also be useful as a mnemonic or memory aid, particularly in groups, but also in one-to-one interviews (if you had been the elder what would you have done?). Role play not only releases memory through the re-enacting of situations or events (a certain dance, a typical working day, a particularly important meeting), but also allows people to be less inhibited as they narrate events under the cover of a different persona. Hearing old stories is another good way to jog the memory, and a song or tune from the past can be particularly evocative, taking the mind right back to the time the interviewer is investigating.

Visual techniques

While props and mnemonics help to jog people’s memories, some visual techniques may assist them to express the past more clearly. Many oral testimony projects rely on straightforward interviewing alone, but additional visual methods can be helpful when testimony is being gathered among groups unfamiliar with the interview form. Creating a diagram or making a model can take the place of a potentially awkward persona interaction between interviewer and narrator; or may complement, assist or encourage people’s verbal performance. Such material can then be displayed alongside the testimony in any report, exhibition or book resulting from a project.

Robert Chambers has described a range of techniques which can be used by rural people and development workers to give expression to various aspects of the past or recent past. These include time lines and biographies (including ethnobiographies); historical maps and models; historical transects; and trend diagrams and estimates.  Older people in the community usually play a key role in providing and shaping the relevant historical information in these techniques.

A time line is a list of key events, changes and ‘landmarks’ in the past, written up in chronological order on a large sheet of paper. It is often a useful way of putting an individual’s or a community’s history into perspective by identifying the broad framework of events which shaped their past. It can therefore be a good way into a life story interview or focus group discussion and may also provide the basis for the interview map. Figure 1 shows a time line produced by a village in Tamil Nadu, India, stretching from 1932 to 1990.  

A visual biography is a similar kind of chart which traces the ‘life’ of a particular phenomenon, whether it be a famine, a certain crop or diet, or the development of a kind of technology. These biographies are particularly useful for single-issue histories and can form the framework for the interview.

Maps can be drawn on paper or on the ground with sticks, chalks, pens or paints. Those worked on the ground can be photographed or transcribed on to paper before they are destroyed. Maps of the past are particularly useful in illustrating ecological histories and showing previous land-use patterns, plant and animal coverage. Figure 2 shows the landscape change over the past twenty-five years in Abela Sipa Peasant Association in Ethiopia.
1932  -  TANK UNDERTAKEN BY GOVT
1935–1946 - ESTABLISHMENT OF VERANDA SCHOOL BY GOVT
1947  -  INDEPENDENCE
1948  -  16 WERE DIED DUE TO CHOLERA, FAMINE
1954  -  ROAD, RHATCHED SCHOOL
1956–1964 - CYCLONE, FLOODS
1966  -  NEW SCHOOL BUILDING
1968  -  AGAIN CHOLERA, 4 WERE DIED
1970  -  ELECTRICITY FACILITY, BRIDGE
     100 FAMILIES MIGRATED BECAUSE OF SEVERE DROUGHT
1977  -  ESTABLISHMENT OF NOON-MEAL CENTER
1978  -  COMMUNITY WELL, 2 BORE WELL FOR DRINKING PURPOSE
1983  -  TIN P
1984  -  ELECTION BOYCOTT. ONE MORE BORE WELL. DRINKING WATER OVERHEAD TANK. STREET TAPS BY GOVT
1984–1985 - NON FORMAL EDUCATION BY GOVT
1987  -  SPEECH
1989  -  GROUP HOUSES FOR 20 HARIJANS
1990  -  HEAVY CROP DAMAGE BECAUSE OF FLOOD

Figure 1  Time line: Tamil Nadu, India, 1932–1990

At present – 1991

Clues
- Eroded land
- Forest
- Grazing area
- Checkdam
- Flood

Before 1966

Name of some trees
- Acacia
- Cordia
- Bedena
- Sobulvo

Figure 2  Landscape change: Abela Sipa Peasant Association, Ethiopia
Three-dimensional historical models using local materials have aided discussion on erosion and other environmental and agricultural concerns. In another example described by Chambers, villagers from Segunahalli in Karnataka, India, made two models on the ground. One showed their watershed as they remembered it fifty years earlier with trees growing on the rocky hills, and the other as they saw it now, with no trees and serious erosion. The striking difference between the two models began an important debate about what should be done, in which the models were used to present and explore the various options. Thus historical analysis can be the trigger to development debate and it can also be used to generate so-called ‘dream’ models and maps, expressions of people’s hopes for the future which can then form the basis of development action. Historical transects are another kind of diagram which represent changing conditions through time. Again they have traditionally been used in agro-ecosystem analysis and are usually compiled by walking through an area with some of the older inhabitants and recording their recollections of various conditions at key moments identified by the time line. Figure 3 is a transect through time illustrating land-use trends in a village in East Java.

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Figure 3 Land-use trends in a village in East Java
Three main kinds of chart have been used by rural people to estimate or measure change and historical trends: counters, pie charts and straightforward trend lines. Stones, seeds or pieces of stick can be used as counters representing absolute or relative values. People can pile up these counters along a simple time line to express absolute values for things like harvest yields, price changes or population changes. They can also place counters in a matrix diagram to express relative values or scores which indicate certain differences over time. For example, one matrix might allow a narrator to express her preferences for certain crops and income-generating activities during five key years in the past.

Pie charts drawn on paper or the ground are another useful way by which people can express relative values and how these changed over time. Figure 4 shows two pie charts made by three elderly farmers which illustrate changing cropping and land-use patterns in a village near Dehra Dun, Uttar Pradesh, India, between 1950 and 1990.

Trend lines are simple graphs in which people use a curved line to illustrate historic trends. A normal histogram or bar-chart can be used for the same purpose. Figure 5 shows a trend line drawn in the dust by an old farmer in Mahbubnagar district, Andhra Pradesh, India. The lines illustrate the increasing and decreasing trends relating to farmyard manure, pests, soil fertility, fertiliser and yields over forty years. Participatory diagrams are another way in which people can describe a past event and the processes it generated (flow diagrams) or the effect it had on their lives (impact diagrams).

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**Figure 4** Cropping and land-use patterns in a village near Dehra Dun, Uttar Pradesh, India, 1950–1990.
Figure 5  Trend line for Mahbubnagar district, Andhra Pradesh, India, 1947–1989

Notes

5 Briggs, Learning How to Ask.
10 The details about the Native American talking-stick are taken from a talk given by the American storyteller, Richard Cupidi, at Intermediate Technology’s 1992 Annual Public Meeting, London.


15 Chambers, ‘Shaping the Past’.


17 A. Venu Prasad, in Chambers, ‘Shaping the Past’.

18 Chambers, ‘Shaping the Past’.