

A life worth remembering. Thoughts on Oral History and community's collective memory

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Figure 1: A young couple meets at a local fountain as the girl goes to get water for the family © Unknown author [Mucharreira family archive]

The present essay is based on an ethnographic research started in 2018 and still ongoing, focused on the collective memory, life stories and ultimately, Intangible Cultural Heritage, of the rural community of Mafra, Portugal, during the first half of the 20th century.

Taking that main research as a basis, this essay does not focus its attention in that specific community. In fact, it seeks to illustrate how Oral History works as the main research methodology when dealing with the study of smaller communities that share cultural and behavioural patterns, using the rural community as an example of that role.

All in all, this article intends to recognize the importance of Oral History when trying to preserve the memory of a community that shares cultural elements, behaviours, beliefs and practices and how it impacts everyday life, both in the past and present of that community.

Keywords: Oral History, life stories, ethnographic research, cultural-sharing communities.

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To study a community: an introduction

Ethnography, Oral History, Life Stories and Intangible Cultural Heritage are four fields of knowledge that, despite being different, tend to find common ground amongst them. When studying a group of people it is important to focus in these four areas, to fully understand them and for the researcher to apprehend them as a cultural group (Creswell, 2007).

To do so, the researcher needs to focus on what is shared by a certain community and evaluate how it is recognized and validated by the members of that specific group of people. It is also interesting to see how, many times, those behavioural patterns are perceived by those outside the community, while being critical of what you see. This means that, as a researcher, you need to be able to observe and learn about what makes a certain community what it is while being able to also apprehend how these cultural patterns are interpreted by others. That is why ethnographic researches can be dangerous: you need to report facts, interpret what you hear and see in those from a certain community but also from those outside of it so you can trace the most unbiased portrait of what you're studying while maintaining a critical approach.

However, we cannot forget that when talking about Ethnography, Oral History and life stories there is always a tool which the researcher needs to use: the *people*. Usually, these groups of people are considered to be marginalized or, at least, not in the mainstream and that's why the study of their *ways* is relevant and constitutes a fruitful frame of work.

On the other hand, it is also important to recognize the difference between life stories and life history, as two parts of the same universe. In some ways, the first one covers the ensemble of smaller moments, practices, beliefs, ways of working, even language or other forms of speaking and living the day-to-day life. These *life stories* are what connects the members of the community and makes them a cultural sharing group.

Therefore, it can be said that the gathering and analysis of these life stories can be seen as a mean of reinforcing and safeguarding the identity of a group. In other words, when we talk about life stories in an ethnographic research we need to pay attention to its duality: in a way, these stories describe the *unique* aspects of life, in all its layers, that a group of people perceives as their own; but those narratives are also what differs them from the others outside the community. In fact, we can argue that these life stories take part in both uniting from the inside, and dividing from the outside. And that is precisely why the collecting and crossing of different life stories within the same community is one of the fundamental methodologies in a research with ethnographic outlines.

With this in mind, what *is* Life History and how is it connected to these specific narratives? For this work's purpose, Life History is interpreted as the cluster of all the smaller, more specific events that are life stories. Also, Life History can be understood as something that belongs to an individual whereas life stories

are shared between multiple members of the community. Even though life stories can have unique nuances from person to person, they tell something common to all, or almost all members of the community. Life History is the full-length narrative of one person's life, that comprehends all experiences and its role in one's conduct within society.

In other words, we can argue that the link between life stories and life history play a leading role in the establishment of so many layers of social life in both private and public spheres. For example, an individual can have multiple roles in the same community, in the same micro-society, either being in a domestic environment or in a more enlarged social relationships such as of power, of dominance, patterns of behaviour and systems of work and subsistence.

All in all, the social interactions, traditions and other practices, either professional, familiar, artistic or other forms of leisure can only be preserved by the safeguarding of each community's history: its people's history. So much that these narratives are what describes and composes the Oral History project of a specific ethnographic landscape.

Oral History: a way to connect past and present

As a subject, Oral History does not end in itself: it does not try to erase the importance of factorial history, but on the other hand it seeks to enrich it. In fact, Oral History is the field of knowledge that brings to light past and present everyday narratives as well as its leading figures, its actors and performers. In other words, Oral History can be seen as process of exchanges between its active individuals. They give and take, teach and learn, influence and are influenced by each other while sharing not only cultural aspects but also the cultural space where they live.

Oral History is, *per se*, undeniably connected to everything related to social life and social relationships and that is why it is one of the most effective tools when conducting a research focused on smaller communities. As a matter of fact, Oral History cannot exist without the people's testimonies, their life stories and life histories. Its recording and analysis are more and more fundamental especially due to the imminent disappearance of the community's older fraction. Those older members can actually work as two different dimensions of the same history: both as an active memory and as a reproductive memory. What does this mean?

First of all, these testimonies brought to light by older members of the community can be interpreted as an active memory because they have the purpose of bringing past realities to the present time and ultimately, cross them together towards the solidifying of one group's identity. Regarding this concept of "active memory" we can argue that the record and safeguarding of these testimonies that tell past life experiences, always keeping in mind the details that each member of that community sees as

characteristics of a certain time, certain social position or of specific social relationships, is what allows the proliferation of that knowledge, of that know-how, of those traditions, to the newer generations. So much so that Oral History can be in fact used as this mean through which various kinds of intangible manifestations can survive to the present time, whether it be story-telling (professional or not professional), songs, oral poetry, superstitions, beliefs, ways to work, to talk, to be part of the community.

As a matter of fact, these testimonies work as an active memory because they are the basis from which these webs of meanings, symbolisms and practices are established, motivating the preservation and safeguarding of that memory that, ultimately, reveals itself as being a collective memory.

In the same way, Oral History can also work as reproductive memory because many times those meanings and practices, when shared with younger generations, have the ability to adapt to the present reality. Nowadays, we live in a faster, more technological world but it is also true that these kinds of manifestations, practices and traditions have taken a more visible place within the academic world, probably because people feel the need to know more about where they come from and how people used to live before globalization. That is an interesting aspect of current reality: even though everyone can appreciate the rapid sharing of information, the ability to be anywhere in the world at any time and the equality brought by technology, Oral History ends up being the tool through which people feel different from everyone else while being included and embraced by a certain community, in a certain territory and time.

When working as a reproductive memory, Oral History is directly linked to Intangible Heritage. Since brought to the present day, these narratives push cultural aspects to light and make them relevant enough to still be part of everyday life. It can be music and theatre, festivities and its peculiarities, food and recipes, craftwork or even languages and accents. All of these cultural dimensions, considered to be relevant and belonging to a specific community in a specific social landscape, need to be dynamic, fluid and especially alive, because they come from life experiences, lived by real people. Since Oral History is composed by a gathering of various life stories and deeply connected to the social dimension of life, it has the ability to confine in itself some specific cultural elements that *other* histories tend to be left out. Actually, if we think about religious anthropology and its nuances such as magic, superstitions, witchcraft, mythology or even the life-death binomial, those are all intangible cultural elements that can only find support in testimonies shared by people who lived by it or have memories of it being passed to them. And then again, constitutes and enriches that collective, community memory that needs to be preserved.

Oral History as a work methodology: what are the risks?

Nevertheless, we can argue that all of those practices and beliefs are still associated with objects and other corporeal supports. But the truth is that those objects lose meaning if not linked to the memories

that complete them. Those objects are still, with no further meaning, static and confined to its aesthetic dimension. Whereas when linked and associated with these memories and narratives, those objects gain new meanings, new interpretations and symbolisms, beyond their practical purposes. Actually, the ethnographic research must seek to document an object with its oral dimension, connected to a shared memory, often related to professions, leisure activities (such as festivities, music, songs, craftwork), the supernatural realm (superstitious practices, magic), or even domestic life (on how to cook, how to take care of the house and children, or how the roles of man and wife work within the household). These life stories and narratives that work together as Oral History end up associating the objects with its masters, actors and other characters, establishing not only the social relationships but also between individuals and objects and individuals with the landscape itself (Gonçalves, 2019).

In other words, some members of a community can tell us how they used a certain object to work, how their mother or father taught them to use it, how it helped establish relationships of power and dominance or how it is related to some practices, sayings or even prayers. In fact, Oral History help tell part of the history of not only a specific area but also of the people who lived in it, at a certain point in time.

But like everything related to people and people's life experiences, there are some dangers when gathering, recording and safeguarding these narratives. When conducting an ethnographic research, the researcher usually calls upon the older members of a community (that can be ethnic, local, rural, professional...) to work with those narratives almost as raw material from which it is possible to draw conclusions. By doing so, the researcher needs to take into account the constraints likely to encounter when dealing with these kinds of narratives. Whether it be because of old age and lack of memory or by influence of present day struggles or behavioural and cultural changes, these testimonies cannot always report every single detail that characterizes their life experiences. So it is important that the researcher act carefully when interpreting these narratives that need to be crossed between the various interviewers, so that information can be as trustworthy as possible. Using Oral History as the main research methodology aims to describe and analyse a cultural-sharing group from a more complex and, most of all, more personal point of view.

When dealing with personal experiences and narratives, we cannot forget that we are also dealing with emotions and sometimes even trauma. So it is important not only to respect the community, its members and memories (whether being individual or collective) but also to recognize the sharing of these narratives as an emotional catharsis. Actually, we can argue that the collecting of these testimonies works as a process that starts on the individual sphere and ends on the collective sphere.

For instance, when a member of a small cultural sharing group shares their life stories and experiences, those memories start off by being individual. The experiences told in those stories belong to that person specifically and will probably have unique details that connect that object, that place, that time to that

person alone. Those narratives, as mundane as they can be, start off the process of sharing always as something individual. However, after being shared and crossed with other stories alike, from within the same community, these narratives become collective. How so? Because, when seen as a tool used to build a community's identity and as the Oral History's *corpus* of that specific community and place, these narratives become memory: the collective, shared memory.

All in all, we can say the process of sharing these personal (but shared) life stories starts with the individual emotional management that leads to one of the main goals when conducting an investigation that uses Oral History as its basis: the collective emotional catharsis, boosted by the sharing of these narratives (Saraiva, 2009).

The rural community and the ethnographic landscape: life stories and its backgrounds

Rural communities are a great example on how oral history can change an outsider's perspective when trying to conduct an ethnographic research. Rural communities have a lot of its own characteristics that distinguish these kinds of groups from larger communities and even other minorities. If we go back to the 20th century, many rural Portuguese communities were completely isolated from the big cities, even the ones that now seem close. So much that these rural communities faced great struggles when trying to communicate and being influenced by urban spaces and groups, making the smaller, local communities to be closed in itself to a certain point. In fact, being isolated from a more global and diverse universe, boosts the setting of certain practices and ways of living that help building a sense of identity. Furthermore, the distance or even isolation from other realities and communities show how much the smaller groups need to find its own *essence*, almost as a mean of survival.

When speaking about and studying rural communities, their life stories are often connected to the landscape where they live and work. Even though the present essay does not seek to do a broad analysis of what landscape *is*, it is relevant to mention that rural communities' narratives are often associated with the rural space, as part of their identity. So much so that some authors even explore the concept of *ethnographic landscapes* as not only part of one's life stories but also as the background where they take place. For example, Evans (*et. al*, 2001) says that:

"All of these terms encompass "ethnographic landscapes" – areas of geographic space that have been given special and specific cultural or social meaning by people associated with them." (2001: 54).

"If we want to discover the meaning of landscapes for people, it is best to think of them not as collections of material objects placed in geographical space, but as social and cultural constructions of the people who use them. In this sense, landscapes are "symbolic environment" []. Cultural groups socially construct landscapes as reflections of themselves." (2001: 53).

According to this idea, it is safe to say that ethnographic landscapes are also creations brought to light by Oral History. Taking into consideration this deep connection between a cultural sharing group, specifically a rural community, we can argue that the rural space is especially rich when it comes to meanings and symbolisms.

Life stories, collective memory and Oral History: to sum things up

In conclusion, Oral History is, above all, a subject which main purpose is to help preserve life stories: those stories that bring wisdom, knowledge, experiences and practices that, at a certain point in time, exposed what was like to be part of a specific community. It also is the mean from which it is possible for future generations to look at and learn from someone else's life experiences, who usually lived lives filled with struggles and hardships.

In fact, various communities found in Oral History a way to tell their stories in their own terms and words, from women's rights history, to black activists or like explored in this article, smaller groups like rural communities. All of them have something in common: they share very specific aspects of life and stories that have, more or less, the same outlines and the same struggles and dynamics. They also share behavioural patterns, views of the world and nature and other webs of meanings and symbolisms expressed in various aspects of life – in private, in public, in relationships of power... -, that every member of the community sees and perceives as being parts of their identity.

With that being said, the unbreakable connection between life stories and Oral History becomes especially relevant when associated with collections of objects, as said before using the rural communities as an example. There are a lot of ethnographic collections that work towards the preservation of those objects that represent certain activities, certain ways of production and even professions that are now extinct, but what are those objects without the voices of the people who used them? They become just a collection of objects, with a certain sense coherence, that probably belong and represent a specific geographic space and maybe social class. Without Oral History, those objects are one-dimensional because they lack the "human" dimension that complete the collection. It is thanks to Oral History as a way to preserve life stories and experiences, that it is possible to somehow stop the disappearance of ancient, traditional and popular cultural practices.

In fact, by preserving the collective memory of a group of people, Oral History also plays a huge part in fixating certain cultural practices that, when relevant enough and expressive enough in present time can also become part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of that specific community or geographical space. It actually enriches the local heritage by bringing a new meaning to the local material supports. As a matter of fact, by recognizing the intangible layer of their local heritage, those practices and manifestations can

also promote new forms of orality, new narratives and other projects that aim to preserve and build (or sometimes rebuild) the history, identity and cultural life of a certain community.

Furthermore, Oral History role in studying communities is especially relevant because it provides a collection of information that can be interpreted through various fields of knowledge, such as History, Sociology, Anthropology and others, opening up space to numerous conclusions and also new questions. Not only that but Oral History can also have a huge contribution in exhibitions that focus on cultural sharing groups and ultimately, on groups whose stories are worth remembering. These narratives can be a unique source of information because they provide a realer, more personal picture of a past reality that can be useful to better understand the present.

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