

FORUM: FOCUSING ON ORAL HISTORY AND ETHICS

FOCUSING ON ORAL HISTORY AND ETHICS
INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM IN HELSINKI 3.–4.12.2008

· ULLA SAVOLAINEN ·

The *Finnish Oral History Network* FOHN is a communication network and collaboration link for Finnish scholars in history, and cultural research dealing with oral history. Rather than establishing a scientific society, FOHN aspires to organize both international and national meetings and seminars and to be in contact with related international oral historians, research networks and organizations. The goal for FOHN is to increase visibility and to work as an open and free-form community for everybody interested in oral history materials and questions concerning the methodologies of oral history.

FOHN was established in 2002, but the idea of founding such a society had already been raised in previous meetings of Finnish oral history researchers. The official foundation began at a meeting of doctoral students at the University of Joensuu in 2002. During the same year in Helsinki, FOHN organized a seminar titled “Oral History—The Challenges of Methodology” for postgraduate students with well known oral history scholar Alessandro Portelli from the University of Rome as keynote speaker. The next event took place in Turku in the School of Cultural Research in spring 2004: a doctoral school symposium called “Methodological Choices in Oral History”. Keynote speakers of the symposium were Vieda Skultans from the UK and Alessandro Portelli once again (Fingerroos, Laakkonen and Salmi-Niklander 2006). These seminars were followed by the international symposium “Memory and Narration. Oral History Research in Northern European Context” in November 2006, in which the keynote speakers were Ronald Grele from the USA and Joanna Bornat from the UK. The theme issue of *Suomen Antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society* 2007 (4) is based on the papers of this symposium.

The latest international “Oral History and Ethics” symposium organised by FOHN took place in Helsinki 3.–4.12.2008. Like the previous events, this symposium was coordinated with the Finnish Literature Society, the Graduate School of Cultural Interpretations and the Institute for Cultural Research at the University of Helsinki. Practical arrangements for the symposium were mainly carried out by Dr Ulla-Maija Peltonen, who is employed at the Finnish Literature Society as a director of Literature Archives and Dr Kirsti Salmi-Niklander from the University of Helsinki. This time the keynote speakers of the seminar were Robert Perks from the British Library and Arja Kuula from the University of Tampere. In addition to the keynote lectures, the symposium comprised four parallel sessions, each containing three or four papers, focusing widely on questions of ethics in the field of oral history research. Themes of the parallel sessions were silenced memories in an intergenerational context, confidentiality and building trust, the predictability of ethical

questions, and space, place and ethics. Altogether twenty-one oral historians from around Europe, including the chairs of the individual sessions, registered in this two-day seminar. Additionally, non-registered listeners were welcome to engage in the conversations.

The first day started with opening words presented by Dr Ulla-Maija Peltonen and followed on with a presentation by Dr Robert Perks (Curator of Oral History at the British Library Sound Archive and Director of National Life Stories), which addressed questions of confidentiality, anonymity, control, consent and co-construction. These themes were discussed both from the general viewpoint of oral history research and also in relation to collecting, restoring and archiving the data. Furthermore, Perks sketched the historical course of the relationship between oral history study and ethical questions, basing his presentation on the extensive and versatile collections of the oral history data in the British Library, which he divided in three categories: fieldwork interviews, donations and partnership projects. Although there is richness in the large variety of the materials, it creates ethical problems because it is not easy to create valid instructions or principles applicable to such diverse categories. A further problem relates to the development of communication technologies. The British Library materials are extensively digitalized and therefore accessible to a large number of people, and whilst the relatively unrestricted availability of the data is a positive factor, controlling its usage is ethically complicated. Perks also posited the relationship between the concepts of the ethics and copyright laws, emphasizing that although there is an obvious link connecting them, nonetheless they are essentially different. Copyright law governs the legal ownership of the recorded data, but ethics refers more to the relationships in which the oral history is produced, and to its appropriate utilization. Another difference between the concepts is that copyright laws vary around the world but the ethics remain largely the same.

Perks delved into the current status of oral history and ethics by analyzing both generally accepted ethical principles and the areas of debate. For example, it is widely held that an informant has to understand the interview process and rights pertaining to it. Likewise, control over both the recording situation, and reuse of the recordings is obligatory. Further key principles include protection of the privacy and anonymity of the informant, professional competence and integrity of the oral history professionals and finally, reliability of data storage. The usage of consent forms has a crucial role in avoiding ethical problems dealing with copyright clearance and employment of data. Despite general acceptance of these key principles, however, debates involving ethical questions in oral history continue. For instance, the practice of anonymisation varies extensively across the disciplines; similarly, archiving data and the possible re-use of data for different purposes than the original research causes controversy. Cultural differences also affect the risk assessment of oral historians, because the questions of what is acceptable and how vary culturally. Despite these obvious contradictions, Perks emphasized that some sort of consensus prevails in ethical practices in research though in the final discussion, both audience and speaker agreed that questions of ethics are far more complex and multidimensional than those involving copyright law.

The first day of the symposium continued with a lecture by Dr Ulla-Maija Peltonen, whose topic was the silenced narratives of war and relating ethical reflections. Key themes of the presentation were research ethics, genuine ethicality, ethics of care, the nature of knowledge and the connection between experience and emotion. The lecture was based on her research dealing with the Finnish civil war of 1918, with female political prisoners

1939–1944 and with Ingrian survivors of Stalin's work camps 1930–1950. Peltonen remarked that knowledge can be divided into official and 'other' categories. Official knowledge is constructive, obvious and in the form of an overview, while other knowledge is detailed, experienced and longitudinal. Other knowledge can also be silenced, weak or uncertain and it can work as a counterpoint for generally shared knowledge or even resist it. She emphasized that recognition of the versatile nature of knowledge influences the researcher and her/his research. It provides both opportunities and responsibilities in selectivity, which raises ethical questions.

Overall, Peltonen accentuated that the research ethics of the oral historian should be based on more complex ethical processes than those provided by legislation. That is, genuine ethicality is greater than the sum of simple mechanical rules and therefore also hard to define exhaustively or generally. Hence, genuine ethicality and ethical choices require of the researcher creativity, imagination, empathy and reflexivity both towards the informants and also the research community. Additionally, the researcher must be aware of the ethics of care, which includes interaction between all participants and the special features of the study in question. Finally, Peltonen defined general ethicality as a desire, goal and knowledge to do the right thing.

The keynote speaker of the second day of the *Oral History and Ethics* symposium was Dr Arja Kuula, Development Manager of the Finnish Social Science Data Archive in the University of Tampere. The subject of her lecture was qualitative research and ethics of data archiving and she started her presentation by remarking that archiving qualitative material is not self-evident in the social sciences. On the contrary, it has rather been considered unnecessary or even unethical to preserve research data for possible purposes other than the original. Social scientists argue that the unethicity of archiving derive for example from the contextual nature of oral history data, an argument that is justified by the urge to protect informants and their rights. Kuula, however, offered counter perspectives to this position, suggesting that a desire not to archive sometimes has more to do with protection of the researcher than the informant. To illustrate, Kuula said that because of the competitiveness of the research community, researchers do not want to share their materials with competing scholars. Furthermore, archiving the data exposes the research, and thereby the researcher, to evaluation and critique. Via these observations, she suggested that it is also important not to exaggerate the risks involving in archiving qualitative data; informants are intelligent individuals, Kuula emphasized, who often do not need the (over)protection of a researcher. On the contrary, they should have more influence and authority over storing the data. She further noted that, in general, informants do not see researchers as a threat; if anything, often they are actually more concerned that either the results of the study or the collected data will not be sufficiently exploited.

The final discussion produced a general picture of the symposium with the chairpersons from the parallel sessions summarizing presentations and recapping themes common to the papers. Questions of anonymity emerged as essential in all of them, with the wide range of anonymisation practices and general attitudes toward anonymisation held by different disciplines evoking conversation. The impact of researchers likewise received considerable attention. The substantive point was that the researcher as a person will necessarily influence the ethical choices of the study, something which should be noted in evaluation of research. In conclusion, Dr Outi Fingerroos from the University of Jyväskylä

summarized the main topics of the symposium. In her address she emphasized that ethics and ethical choices in oral history study are strongly contextual. They are part of the communication processes and dialogue between both researcher and informant and individual scholar and research community. Besides, they depend on how a particular study is located in the field of science. In other words, neither ethics in oral history nor related discussion are immune to social, political or ideological influences. Ethics may not be easily defined but connected issues may be found everywhere, and therefore they should be constantly under discussion and evaluation.

REFERENCES

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“I’M WRITING ABOUT YOU. PLEASE ACCEPT MY APOLOGIES”

• EKATERINA MELNIKOVA •

Regardless of the extent to which social scientists expect the results of their work to bring about any public effect, their dissemination is obligatory. All ethical issues related to fieldwork are to a greater or lesser extent conditioned by the fact of potential publication. Though publication itself is not declared to be the major reason for ethical debates, it performs this role simply because none of the infringements of rights which may be caused by researchers to those being researched would ever be evident without publication. Since nobody, in fact, can control the conduct of the scholar ‘in the field’, ethical guides in oral history research are primarily aimed at negotiating the consequences of the publications, at the least because such consequences may be traced. Here I would like to discuss how the awareness of the aftermath of publication affects the behavior of the scholar in the field and the very route of the field research.

My initial experience in field work is based on folklore expeditions aimed at collecting various tales and descriptions of old traditional practices regardless of their actual survival till the present. This is a more or less traditional practice in Russia, which follows the direction of Soviet and pre-revolutionary folklore scholarship. I worked mostly in rural areas of Russia, in the region of the Russian Northwest (not further than 500 km from St.