

Interviewing as a commemorative practice.

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Interviewing as a Commemorative Practice

Rita Phillips, an academic psychologist, looks at past and future in the practice of interviewing war survivors, contrasting the traditional interview as a form of data-gathering with the virtual 'conversations' aimed at educating those too young to have experienced the wars in question.

Interviewing those who have experienced war has been common practice since the past was first recorded. Well-known examples of interview-informed accounts of armed conflict across three millennia include Thucydides' fifth-century BCE *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Jules Michelet's *History of the French Revolution* (1847) and John William Gordon's *South Carolina and the American Revolution: A Battlefield History* (2003). The oral accounts collected by these authors became data for historiographical observations rather than narratives of individual commemoration. This was the case even when attempts were finally made systematically to investigate veterans' experiences by using interviews. When the Committee on the Treatment of British Prisoners of War conducted interviews of British prisoners who had escaped or had been repatriated before the end of the First World War, the factual information extracted was cited in governmental reports about the treatment of detainees in enemy hands. The veterans' personal stories did not reach the public sphere.¹

It was not until the 1960s that the subjective memories of those who had experienced armed conflict became a point of interest in interviewing. In the following years, several institutions, including the Imperial War Museum, London, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum,

1 War Office Prisoner of War Interview Reports 1914–1918 (WO 161). Retrieved from 'Prisoner of War interview reports 1914–1918', <<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/prisoner-of-war-interview-reports-1914-1918/>>, accessed 1 March 2019.

accessed combatants' and non-combatants' memories of conflict via interviews in order to preserve their memories for generations to come.² The public's belated interest in personal experiences of war may be explained by a natural post-conflict trajectory.³ Once a shared narrative has been defined, it provides the members of a society with a framework that allows the categorisation of experiences and witness-accounts related to conflict and so facilitates a sense of emotional distancing towards these experiences and accounts. This emotional distance makes it easier for individuals' traumatic stories to be borne.

In this context, the BBC's series *The Great War* (1964) is noteworthy. This 26-part series represents one of the first attempts to make British First World War veterans' and civilians' experiences accessible to a wider audience. It was broadcast forty-six years after the war had ended and the role of Britain and its soldiers had been well defined. Thousands of First World War veterans and civilians responded to the BBC's adverts for participants, a level of response which allowed the Corporation to conduct a total of over 280 interviews, most of them remaining unused for the series. Following the deaths of those who took part, the BBC launched an adapted version of the series. *I Was There: The Great War Interviews* (2014) focused even more on the human experience of the War. The example would suggest that too much cannot be dealt with too soon: public interest in and acceptance of stories of traumatic personal experiences during conflict occurs relatively late in the post-war trajectory.

Other scholars dispute this explanation, however, and explain the belated interest in human experiences during war in terms of the increasing accessibility of tape-recorders in the 1960s and 1970s. This developing

2 See for example, the Imperial War Museum Sound Archive (<<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/sound>>) and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Oral History Archive (<<http://www.ushmm.org/collections/the-museums-collections/about/oral-history>>), both accessed 1 March 2019.

3 See Angela K. Smith and Sandra Barkhof, eds, *War Experience and Memory in Global Cultures Since 1914* (London: Routledge, 2018); Barbara Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering* (Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill, 2003); and Daniel Bar-Tal, *Intergroup Conflicts and Their Resolution: A Social Psychological Perspective* (New York: Psychology Press, 2011).

technology made interviewing an accessible technique that required only little training. Any person who had a basic understanding of interviewing or followed a questionnaire designed by a person with adequate knowledge of the subject-matter could produce rich data. This may explain the emergence of several semi-professional 'grassroots' initiatives in the 1970s and 1980s to interview those personally involved in both the First and Second World Wars. The most obvious examples of this trend are the international projects that collected testimonies of Holocaust survivors, projects frequently established and managed by those who had experienced the Holocaust themselves or by their descendants. For example, in Australia, descendants of Holocaust survivors collected around 1,300 interviews that are now part of Melbourne's Jewish Holocaust Centre's archive.⁴ Similarly, the Holocaust Centre Toronto in Canada holds over 1,200 survivor testimonies collected by professionals and volunteers from 1988 onwards to document individual tragedies and the Canadian story in relation to the Holocaust.⁵

Following the growing public interest in oral history-based exhibitions, testimonies of First and Second World War witnesses have gained in importance. Many curators believe that making accessible interviews with those who have experienced conflict effectively delivers a greater and more committed cross-generational and cross-community audience engagement. Therefore, audio or visual installations are common features in exhibitions worldwide that focus on the two World Wars. In 2017 the Shoah Foundation – an organisation dedicated to making and archiving interviews with genocide survivors and witnesses – released in collaboration with the University of Southern California's Institute for Creative Technologies a new form of oral history exhibit.⁶ Their *New Dimensions in Testimony* project developed interactive 3-D exhibits in which the audience can have simulated, educational conversations with 'virtual' Holocaust survivors. So far, fifteen survivors have been interviewed, each of them

4 Jewish Holocaust Centre, <<http://www.jhc.org.au/museum/collections/survivor-testimonies.html>>, accessed 1 March 2019.

5 'Testimony: The Canadian Collection – Preserving the Legacy', <<https://www.holocaustcentre.com/library/testimony>>, accessed 1 March 2019.

6 'Dimensions in Testimony', <<https://sfi.usc.edu/dit>>, accessed 1 March 2019.

answering more than 2,000 questions about life before, during and after the Shoah. These interviews were recorded with seven cameras arranged in a ring to capture a three-dimensional effect. The natural language and playback technology enable the audience to engage with the testimonies conversationally, effectively interviewing the survivor. The software recognises similarities between word patterns in questions and answers and triggers relevant, spoken responses accordingly. The *New Dimensions in Testimony* project's success has been considerable, reaching audiences in museums worldwide, presenting the interactive biographies as part of their temporary exhibitions (for example at the Holocaust Museum Houston)⁷ or as part of their permanent collections (for example at the Illinois Holocaust Museum).⁸ The project's aim to provide a means to enable young people to speak with survivors of genocide and to reflect on their experiences has been achieved.

New Dimensions in Testimony's popularity indicates future directions of commemoration. With decreasing numbers of World War witnesses alive, the project has developed the technology needed to continue the dialogue between those who experienced these armed conflict and later generations. This is essential as several academic studies have found that knowledge about the wars, particularly about the Second World War, promotes tolerance and inclusion and serves as a form of inoculation against future atrocities.⁹

Although conducting and displaying interviews with those who have experienced conflict has come a long way since Thucydides, future

7 <<https://sfi.usc.edu/news/2019/01/23956-holocaust-museum-houston-opens-award-winning-%E2%80%98dimensions-testimony%E2%80%99-exhibit>>, accessed 1 March 2019.

8 'Holocaust Museum Houston Opens Award-Winning "Dimensions in Testimony" Exhibit Featuring Holocaust Survivor William J. Morgan', <<https://sfi.usc.edu/video/new-dimensions-testimony-illinois-holocaust-museum-and-education-center>>, accessed 1 March 2019.

9 P. Cowan and H. Maitles, 'Does addressing prejudice and discrimination through Holocaust education produce better citizens?', *Educational Review* 59.2 (2007), 115–30; L. B. Jennings, 'Challenges and possibilities of Holocaust education and critical citizenship: an ethnographic study of a fifth-grade bilingual class revisited', *Prospects* 40.1 (2010), 35–56.

challenges may particularly concern appropriate formats in which testimonies are presented. Though *New Dimensions in Testimony* represents a successful first attempt, more work needs to be done in order to make interactive exhibits accessible to people in different cultures and societies. For this reason, the use of interviews in relation to commemoration may need further development, particularly in cross-cultural settings. However, from today's perspective, the public's interest in witness accounts and testimonies about the human experience of war remains high, fulfilling the promise once given to fallen soldiers: lest we forget.