

Twentieth Century Britain Oral History Workshop Project Report

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Abstract: The research we carried out was oral history based, interviewing the public in relation to their experiences of the twentieth century. Topics such as race, politics and youth were discussed, and some interviewees also provided photographs.

The research findings were qualitative rather than quantitative, broadening our understanding and awareness and providing a good overview of the period in a diverse and thought provoking way, bringing questions into focus that we had not previously thought of.

The exhibition was based around Oral History and people that we had interviewed previously in relation to our course, Britain in the Twentieth Century. For the course we were divided into three groups; Politics and Protest, Youth and Youth Culture and finally Race and Nation. Depending on the groups we were in, a suitable interviewee was found that would be able to provide us with information that would aid the aim of our course. Interviewees were found by contacting certain organisations and political parties. Many people however, interviewed people in the local community or relatives that had lived through the war or certain periods that could give their view points on certain issues such as the CND movement. Each individual would have an aim for the outcome of the interview for example wanting to find out what it was like when they were a child, how it differed from present day society. Questions would then be written ready to ask the interviewee however, in most instances, the conversation would flow and questions would be thought of as the conversation progressed.

Introduction: The main aim of the project was to gain an understanding of the twentieth century within the categories of race, politics and youth from the people's perspective, rather than the textbook. Basically, to gain a more 'real' account.

Although such things had been done before, we felt it necessary to raise the questions that we had, not just read about the questions academics had previously had, as history is a constantly changing academia. Through conducting oral history ourselves we felt that we were gaining more valuable source of evidence for us all, as many of us felt that there were questions left unanswered from the text books. It was also an opportunity to allow people who had not previously been given the opportunity to speak out and to see their contribution appreciated in the form of an exhibition. This also allowed others to view our findings. The exhibition was held in the Modern Records Centre and members of the public as well as our interviewees were invited to the launch night (about 100 people). The exhibition lasted for one week and also encouraged many undergraduate students into the Modern Records Centre- often a rarity.

We encountered no problems in achieving or carrying out these aims.

Methodology: The method we used to carry out our research was oral history. We felt that it meant that more could be gained in the questions raised, and being able to hear the responses would prove especially useful, a personal experience fixing things far more determinedly in the mind. Furthermore, in face to face much more information is provided than other forms of media.

Results: Were qualitative not quantitative and therefore no graphs, tables of figures can be provided.

From the interviews, we were all able to gain invaluable information of people's actual experiences which makes it easier to relate to the actual events they described rather than just reading it from a text book. It enabled us to see how people's views have changed and how the far the present day society differed from that of the mid nineteenth century and earlier. This information was primarily disseminated through the construction of an exhibition which was on every day life and enabled people's own experiences to be at the forefront of history. The exhibition was a celebration of the use of oral history, the theme of which was life in Britain in the second half of the Twentieth Century, with a particular focus on Coventry. The exhibition was organised jointly by many students involved with the Britain in the Twentieth Century course and we were all in charge of certain aspects to organise. The exhibition was held in the Modern Records Centre at the university. There was a special launch night to which our interviewees, University staff, University students and members of communities outside of the university were invited to. There was a guest speaker and speeches were also made by our tutor and students who had participated in organising the event. The aim of the exhibition was to portray the every day life of ordinary people and to promote the use of oral history as an invaluable resource. The exhibition consisted of many images that the interviewees had kindly lent and these were assisted by sections of text from the interview itself which had stood out. Newspaper articles and documents were used to give a historical background to

the subject the interviews focused on. It was overall an extremely rewarding and successful event which was very encouraging for us as students.

Students Experiences:

Vicky

I found carrying out an oral history interview a very interesting and useful way of learning about history. It really allows the interviewer, as a historian, to gain a real insight of what it was like to live in a different era. It is also a vital way of gaining knowledge on a personal level, which cannot happen from simply studying a text.

Jennifer

This module has provided us with the opportunity to explore more deeply into areas of greater personal interest, often a rarity for first years undergraduates to be able to do. The diverse ways of approaching and studying history such as creative historical writing using research and oral history interviews has often made history more real and relevant, as well as providing an exciting and for many of us, new way of approaching and thinking about the subject.

Laura

My experiences within this module and through the exhibition has really made history to come alive for me.

Peter

How people construct an idea of their identity seems a vital factor in understanding any historical big picture. The module explores how this process may work, providing hands-on (minds-on) experience of the problem of understanding the relation between personal historical realities and the

supposed facts. For me, it seems to show that because personal identities are created imaginatively, and sometimes with fictional ingredients, history must be a creative re-interpretative process.

Aimee

Studying the module Britain in the Twentieth Century has given me a fascinating insight into the lives of ordinary people. The module offers

something different, and perhaps more real, than the norms of "text book" History.

Taking part in the exhibition has given us the opportunity to bring real History to you.

Kara

Studying Oral History has opened up a new world of information to me. It is an interesting way of gaining insights into accounts from ordinary people and it allows you to relate to historical accounts better. Performing an oral history interview really allowed me to connect with the interviewee and is an interesting and exciting form of research. I have really enjoyed this module and the opportunities it has given me to study history with a different approach.

Conclusion and Outcome:

The exhibition was very successful and encouraged our own research, organisation and leadership skills. We were able to also engage the public and other students with the Modern Records Centre, which is often widely underused.



