

THE ART OF INTERVIEWING

Denis, Philippe & Ntsimane, Radikobo (eds) (2008) **Oral history in a wounded country: Interactive interviewing in South Africa**. Pietermaritzburg: Universtiy of KwaZulu-Natal Press. ISBN 978-1-86914-147-9. Pages vii + 196.

Desmond Painter
Department of Psychology
University of Stellenbosch
Stellenbosch

Students of psychology should take note of this book; lecturers of methodology modules in the discipline should too. Published in 2008 already, this edited volume seems to have disappeared under the radar somewhat – at least in psychology. It is as if our exposure to research methodology texts is still mediated through disciplinary formations (or should I say fortifications?!). This is a pity, because even though not written by and for psychologists, many of the issues discussed in this book are pertinent to psychologists – to researchers, community practitioners and psychotherapists alike. It certainly belongs on the methods and methodology reading lists we provide our students with.

Interviewing has become ubiquitous in psychological research. In fact, it is probably safe to call it the default mode of “data collection” in the great majority of qualitative research projects undertaken by students and professional academics and researchers in the discipline today. How frequently do we pause, however, to consider the epistemological, political and ethical dimensions (and implications) of interviewing? Or to consider the historical emergence of interviewing as an intellectual *practice* (not just a research technique) within the development of social sciences and their self-understanding in relation to things like culture, politics and subjectivity? My answer would be: “not frequently enough”. It is too easy to simply classify interviewing as just another data collection technique (as the qualitative correlate of the structured questionnaire, for example) and so to position it as external to the epistemological, political and ethical concerns we deal with. The consequence of this is that students are introduced to interviewing as simply another technical skill to be mastered, not as a theoretically significant dimension of their research practice.

That such reductionism should characterise psychology is not surprising. This discipline has always had strained relationships with subjectivity, language, and the moral-political dimensions of knowledge production. Most mainstream (especially American) textbooks still eschew qualitative research, erect their ideal of scientific practice in *opposition* to the subjective and the linguistic / discursive, and sidestep the moral-political aspects of knowledge production by “outsourcing” it to the institutional ethics review. Positivist psychology seeks to *deal with* subjectivity, language and ethics (as

threats to a study), rather than to *engage it* productively. Although interviewing (and qualitative research as such) can be incorporated into positivist conceptions of psychology, it remains something of a Trojan horse in this regard: it opens psychology to epistemological debates and transformations that undermine its citadel of pseudoscientific mystification. The interview, as an encounter between two or more agents, dramatizes many of the principles of alternative psychologies: the co-construction of meaning, the dialogical nature of cognitive processes, the performative and rhetorical quality of words and statements, and the discursive mediation of psychological phenomena.

This book, as mentioned earlier, was not written by and for psychologists. It considers the art of interviewing in the context of the development and practice of oral history, as this discipline has taken root in South Africa over the last few decades. In other words, rather than a decontextualized method, interviewing is introduced here in relation to a *particular* history of social scientific practice. As such it offers an illuminating context within which many of the neglected dimensions of interviewing that are mentioned above can be explored. The book starts with an introduction to and overview of oral history in South Africa (by Philippe Denis), focusing on the intellectual debates that characterised its emergence and the major signposts in its development. On the surface this intellectual history may seem somewhat irrelevant to psychologists, but there are lessons to be learned from this neighbouring discipline: the inseparability of epistemological, methodological and political concerns, the irreducible historicity of human agency, and the political nature of knowledge.

Chapter 1 (by Julia Wells) discusses the role of oral history in the context of nation-building. Wells is keenly aware of the contradictory nature of everyday life in the post-apartheid society, and of the multiple realities that people negotiate and bring to research interviews. She explores this in a careful, sensitive manner, but the notion of nation-building itself is embraced a little too uncritically – as if the social scientist is in a position to engage nation-building as an ideal that is unmediated by new (often nationalistic) state ideologies and economic interests. Furthermore, she seems to romanticise the indigenous somewhat, positioning the oral historian in the role of midwife of cultural redemption that follows from the (also seemingly unmediated) sharing of our stories:

“Imagine that the indigenous knowledge of Africa is known, shared, used and treasured by everyone on the planet. Imagine that all the hidden histories have been celebrated as public treasures and all the unsung heroes and heroines have been honoured. Imagine that all the stories of all the journeys from despair to prosperity have been told – then the oral historians can rest.” (p. 42).

This threatens to reduce the political role of oral history to a celebration of the indigenous and the voice of the authentic other: contemporary capitalism would be more than happy to embrace such a notion of radicalism in the social sciences. What one misses here is a concept of ideology that would enable critique of how notions of heritage and popular history may also become part of statist (and nationalist) identity projects or commodified in commercial enterprises. How, in other words, does oral history insulate itself against being ideologically co-opted by the nationalist agendas of a new state and by contemporary capitalism?

Chapter 2 (Benedict Carton and Louise Vis) provides a clear, detailed account of doing oral history – including the use of interviewing. There is no reason why this chapter should appeal only to historians; many psychologists, especially community psychologists, will benefit greatly from it. Chapter 3 (Philippe Denis) discusses the ethics of doing oral history. This is a clearly written and useful chapter, especially as it adds local favour to the familiar “universal” principles of ethical research conduct by also discussing topics like the ownership of stories and the challenge of culturally specific expectations and codes of conduct. At times the author seems inclined to the codification of ethical dilemmas pervasive in research methods textbooks, but at least he acknowledges that different phases of the research process present us with different ethical issues. Ethical matters are thus part of the research process, not something from which research can be inoculated.

Chapter 4 (Cynthia Kros and Nicole Ulrich), on teaching history in schools, will be of less interest to psychologists. Chapter 5 (Radikobo Ntsimane), however, addresses the important topic of how culture and gender shape the interviewing process. This is a detailed and thoughtful account, and should definitely be read by psychology students. Importantly, the issues of language barriers and translation are also addressed in this chapter. In South Africa research projects are always likely to pose multilingual challenges, and to confront the researcher with the pragmatics and epistemological implications of translation. International textbooks are rarely sensitive enough to these issues, so this chapter makes an excellent contribution.

Chapter 6 (Mxolisi Mchunu) takes the ethical and political consideration of oral history and interviewing in South Africa further by asking whether rural communities are open sources of knowledge. The notion of the “indigenous perspective” is theorised here within the context of South African research examples, and the end product is a chapter that especially students in community psychology will find useful. The final chapter (by Sean Field) addresses a topic that many young researchers struggle with: emotional responses in interviewing. Field makes it clear that the evocation of feeling is part and parcel of the interviewing process. The “unpredictability of human subjectivity” (p. 156) is acknowledged here, and the discussion of how researchers may deal with this unpredictability, and with various expressions of (sometimes difficult) feelings, is comprehensive and helpful.

The book ends with a number of appendices, including the code of ethics for oral history practitioners in South Africa. As I indicated at the outset, this is a useful, practical book about interviewing in South Africa, and it deals sensitively with many issues that will be just as relevant to psychologists as they are to oral historians. It provides an example of how interviewing should ideally be taught: not as an abstract, universal method, but as a practice embedded within particular contexts and modes of scholarly inquiry.