

Life Stories and Oral History A Proposed Methodology

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Introduction

The text that follows proposes a method that is useful for *both* the collection of immigrant life stories and oral history projects on immigrants. It focuses more specifically on Italian immigrants in Canada.

It is divided into four sections:

Section 1 offers a brief description of some of the advantages of seeking the point of view of the people who have experienced the phenomenon we want to look at — immigration to Canada, in this case.

Sections 2 and 3 provide definitions of what is meant by “oral history” and “life story”, and highlight the advantages and limitations of these two approaches.

Section 4 sets out a three-stage methodology that can be used *both* for producing life stories and for conducting oral history investigations, while making the most of the advantages of the two approaches.

In the appendix, readers will also find a grid of suggested themes for oral history investigations dealing with Italian immigrants who arrived in Canada after the Second World War.

1. Why Ask People Questions?

When researchers in the social sciences examine a sociocultural and historical phenomenon such as immigration, they usually have myriad sources of information at their disposal: official statistics, media publications, public or private archives, etc.

In addition to these diverse sources, there is the possibility of interviewing the people involved in the phenomenon being studied, if they are still alive.

Questioning immigrants about their own migration experience can have a number of advantages.

Their memory can sometimes produce descriptions *rich in detail* that is often lacking in the other sources of information. That wealth of information can, for example, tell us about the factors that influenced the immigrants' actions: unexpected encounters or events; personal deliberation or strategies related to objectives, aspirations, desires or emotions; compromises or adaptations they agreed to; beliefs, traditions, values, ethical or religious principles, social standards or rules of behaviour, and specific knowledge that guided choices; and so on. Immigrants thus emerge as true protagonists whose actions depend on the opportunities they are given and the constraints they face, rather than as passive victims of social and economic forces that made them migrate.

Questioning immigrants can also give us information on people who belong to *certain social categories* whose voices are less present in, or even absent from, statistical or archival sources: subaltern or minority groups, the poor, the unemployed, women, children, etc.

In addition, by interviewing a number of people, researchers can have access to *various points of view*. By gathering different perspectives that are sometimes contradictory, or even irreconcilable, researchers can look at the phenomenon of immigration from several angles and, in doing so, enrich their understanding of it.

Finally, as the above shows, if there is one thing that interviewing immigrants renders possible, it is the fact that it gives us insight into what *the people involved think* of their experiences, their past and themselves.

2. Oral History: The Influence of the Researchers and Their Research Interests

When researchers undertake an *oral history* project, they usually set themselves the goal of exploring a phenomenon and some of its aspects by probing the memory of the people involved in that phenomenon. To do so, researchers generally use a grid of predetermined questions that they have developed based on what they want to understand and describe. The grid included in the appendix provides an example of such questions. It covers a number of themes related to Italian immigration to Canada after the Second World War, and the cultural, social and economic contexts in which that immigration took place.

Even though the use of a grid of questions and themes in an oral history project can offer the advantages mentioned above (Section 1), it has a major disadvantage: since the themes included in the grid are developed by the researchers based on their research interests, the interview will necessarily revolve around those questions, and it will be difficult, or even impossible, to know: 1) if the interviewees would have dealt with those themes of their own free will, showing that they considered them important; and 2) if themes that were not included in the grid would have been introduced by the interviewees if they had been asked to speak freely about their lives.

When we listen to, or read, accounts collected through interviews where a grid was used, it is hard to tell if the subjects that were dealt with and the time the interviewees devoted to each one would have been the same had the researchers not asked questions. For example, would the interviewees have spent the same amount of time talking about their life in Italy and their life in Canada if the researchers had not asked questions about those periods in their lives? Would they have spoken the same way about their native village, the war, the decision to emigrate, work, family, community life, etc., had the researchers not asked questions on those subjects?

Moreover, suppose a researcher asked a female immigrant, “As a woman and mother, what did emigration to Canada mean to you?” It might make us wonder if the interviewee would have used the identity categories of “woman” and “mother” to describe her immigration experience had the researcher not asked her to view herself in those roles. The same can be said about other identity categories that researchers might introduce through their questions: “Italian”, “Italian Canadian”, “Calabrian”, “citizen”, “*paesano*”, “rich”, “poor”, “worker”, “businessman”, etc.

In short, although it is very useful for exploring certain aspects of a phenomenon such as immigration, an oral history project based on a grid of themes and predetermined questions *limits access to the points of view of the interviewees* because many themes, questions and identity categories originate with the researcher, rather than with the people being interviewed.

3. Life Stories: Exploration and Discoveries

Strictly speaking, the collection of *life stories* does not require the use of a grid of predetermined questions. Rather, life stories are accounts produced by interviewees when researchers ask them to talk about their lives: “Tell me the story of your life.” Interviewees are then free to construct their life stories as they see fit, depending on what they feel it is important to describe and explain in order to show what they were and what they have become.

The influence of the researchers, their questions and the themes they choose is particularly strong in an oral history project where a grid of predetermined questions is used, but the exact opposite is observed when collecting life stories produced by interviewees who are free to talk about their lives as they see fit.

In such a project, researchers no longer control the direction the interview will take and have no idea what the interviewees’ accounts will allow them to discover. The researchers’ work becomes purely exploratory, and researchers have no way of knowing if specific aspects of the phenomenon that may interest them will be dealt with in the life story produced. On the other hand, researchers can expect to discover all sorts of aspects they had not considered, and which will enrich their description and understanding of the phenomenon.

4. Life Story and Oral History: Proposed Methodology

Is it possible to develop an interview method that allows researchers to make the most of the advantages of *both* the life story (exploration and discoveries) and oral history (a more thorough examination of certain questions, aspects or themes that interest researchers)? That is the question.

In what follows, I propose a method that I have been using since the 1990s. This method is implemented in *three stages* once the project has been presented to the interviewee. It begins with the collection of the life story, where the researcher’s influence is least apparent, and ends with the oral history interview, where the researcher’s influence is more evident.

4.1 Presentation of the Project

In this initial phase, the researchers give the interviewees information on the project. This can be done in person, at the first meeting with the interviewees (if it is important to establish a relationship of trust) or by phone (for example, if the interviewees already know the researchers).

Obviously, the presentation can vary depending on the nature of the project. Having said that, to minimize the researchers' influence on what the interviewees will say later, the description of the project should be as broad as possible. For example: "My research is aimed at collecting the life stories of people who, like you, immigrated to Canada."

The researchers may also give additional information, concerning their intentions or the reason behind the project, for example, using words such as: "Your life story is important because the information you give us cannot be found anywhere else. Your memories of your migration experience are unique and worthy preserving."

At this point, it is important for researchers to avoid mentioning the questions they have in mind and being more specific about the aspects that interest them, so as not to influence the interviewees.

Ideally, this initial contact with the interviewees should take place a few days before the first meeting where they will record what they have to say. And it is also advisable to clearly explain to the people who will be interviewed that they will be asked to tell their life story, in order to give them a chance to think about their past, probe their memory and, more importantly, think about how they are going to present their story.

Once the project has been presented, the interview will be conducted in three stages.

4.2 Stage 1: The Life Story Itself

At the first working meeting, the life story is recorded.

Researchers should make just one request when they begin recording, something along these lines: "Going back as far as you wish in your childhood and moving forward to today, please tell me the story of your life." Here is another possibility: "Going back as far as you wish in your childhood and moving forward to today, please tell me the story of your life and how immigration has played a part in it." This second possibility accentuates the researchers' influence in that it repeats their interest in the phenomenon of immigration, which was already mentioned when the project was presented. However that may be, at this stage, the interviewees are, to a great extent, free to construct their life story as they see fit.

Furthermore, to limit the researchers' influence, if they have to ask questions to advance the story, they should encourage the interviewees to continue talking without orienting them thematically. To do so, they should limit themselves to questions such as "And what happened afterwards?"

From my personal experience, this first stage usually produces life stories whose length may vary from thirty minutes to several hours, the longest ones (over two hours) requiring several meetings and recording sessions.

The resulting life stories can thus be considered representative of how the interviewees wanted to portray themselves (what they were and what they have become), since they chose to deal with subjects, aspects and identities that they found appropriate in relation to the image they wanted to convey of themselves.

4.3 Stage 2: Supplementary Questions

In the second stage, the life story is completed.

This stage consists of one or more meetings during which the researchers, having listened carefully to the life story produced in the first stage, ask supplementary questions (usually “where?”, “when?”, “how?”, “why?” and other questions of that nature) to clarify certain points. For example, if interviewees said that they did something but did not explain why, when or how, researchers may ask the following supplementary questions: “Why did you decide to do this?” “Where did that take place?” “When did it happen?” “How did you go about it?”

By asking such questions, researchers obviously influence what the interviewees will say to a greater extent. But since that occurs after the life story has been freely produced in the first stage, it does not modify its thematic structure. It can therefore be said that the life story, which is completed by the interviewees’ answers to the researchers’ supplementary questions, remains largely representative of how the interviewees view their past and themselves.

The first two stages, therefore, consist of the collection of a complete life story.

4.4 Stage 3: Oral History

It is only at this point (after having collected life stories freely constructed by the interviewees) that the oral history work should begin, aimed at a more thorough exploration of specific aspects of the phenomenon under study using a grid of themes and questions developed by the researchers and reflecting their specific research interests.

As I mentioned in Section 2, the influence of the researchers, their themes and their questions is significant at this stage. But since this is the last stage, that influence will not have any effect on the life story already produced.

The grid presented in the appendix provides an example of a list of suggested questions for an oral history interview on Italian immigration to Canada after the Second World War.

Conclusion

Since it begins with the collection of life stories that are freely constructed (Stages 1 and 2, described in 4.2 and 4.3), before moving on to a more precise exploration of certain aspects through oral history (Stage 3, described in 4.4.), the methodology I propose makes it possible to maximize the information gathered by combining: 1) the heuristic richness specific to life stories that are freely constructed by the interviewees; and 2) a more thorough exploration of certain aspects of the phenomenon being studied, through oral history.

Appendix
Example of a grid of questions and themes for an oral history interview on Italian immigration to Canada after the Second World War

N.B.: This grid is an adaptation of the one presented in R. Harney, *Oral Testimony and Ethnic Studies* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1976).

1. THE PLACE OF ORIGIN

- Place of birth
- Size of the native village or town
- Description of the natural environment of the place of origin
- Size of the family and description of its home
- Description of the family's properties (land, etc.)
- Description of the organization of tasks within the family
- Description of the occupations of the inhabitants of the place of origin
- Description of daily life
- Description of the landowners, local officials, merchants, members of the clergy, etc.
- Description of the social and religious activities
- Description of the relations with the government of Italy (taxes, conscription, etc.)

2. THE DECISION TO EMIGRATE

- People who emigrated to neighbouring regions or to another country before the narrator
- Identity and occupations of those people
- Description of the patterns of emigration in the place of origin (seasonal, temporary, permanent, destinations)
- Description of emigration experiences before coming to Canada
- Reasons for coming to Canada
- Age and position in the family at the time of departure
- Year of departure
- Role played by other people in the decision to leave
- Relatives or friends already in Canada
- Reasons for choosing the destination
- General perception of the chosen destination
- Distinction between Canada and the United States at the time
- Description of the emotional or physical tension provoked by the departure
- Type of emigration envisaged
- Trips to Italy, reasons

3. LIFE IN CANADA

3.1 Work

- Means employed to find work

- Means of spreading information on the work available
- Description of changes in employment, reasons for those changes
- Description of positions held
- Schedule, regularity of work, salary
- Relation between the work found and the qualifications or experience acquired in Italy
- Means of transportation used
- Description of the jobs available to immigrants and friends
- Discrimination experienced at work
- Language used at work, language problems
- National and regional origins of co-workers, supervisors and bosses
- Relations with Italian, Canadian, francophone and anglophone co-workers
- Relations with supervisors and bosses
- Spouse's employment, description of changes, reasons for the employment choices

3.2 Housing

- Means used to find housing
- Description of the housing
- Description of the changes in housing, reasons
- Description of problems experienced related to housing
- Rents
- Reasons for buying a house
- Description of the neighbourhoods they lived in
- Reasons for choosing those neighbourhoods
- Presence of relatives or friends in those neighbourhoods
- Other nationalities present in those neighbourhoods

3.3 The Family

- Description of the narrator's wedding and other weddings
- Organization of tasks related to money and the administration of the home
- Organization of tasks related to the children
- Responsibilities assigned to the children
- Expectations related to the children's education and employment
- Expectations related to the children marrying
- Description of the tensions or conflicts between parents and children
- Description of family traditions and celebrations
- Food preparation, customs maintained, changes
- Church attendance, language, reasons
- Parish they belong to, reasons
- Language spoken at home
- Language in which the children did their studies, reasons
- Relations with family members who remained in Italy

3.4 The Local, Provincial, Regional and National Communities

- Relations with relatives and friends in Montreal, their evolution over time, changes
- Description of leisure activities, celebrations
- Means of consumption, grocery stores, outdoor markets, shops
- Description of the boarding houses, bars and cafés they go to
- Means used to send money and gifts to Italy
- Mechanisms used to maintain and reproduce traditions from their place of origin: weddings, gatherings, funerals, celebrations, etc.
- Description of the role of the churches, parishes and the clergy in general
- Description of the various types of leadership at the provincial, regional and national levels
- Knowledge of the leaders of the provincial, regional and national groups
- Description of the institutions, associations, clubs, etc.
- Means by which the Calabrian and Italian languages are kept alive
- Importance attached to the community's publications (books, newspapers), as well as to radio and television programs
- Distinction of the Calabrian group in relation to other Italian regional groups
- Participation in unions
- Transition from Italian politics to Canadian politics
- Importance attached to Canadian policies, effects of those policies on immigrants
- Discrimination experienced in the neighbourhood and elsewhere
- Description of the relations with the host society
- Description and evaluation of their personal evolution, materially, emotionally, socially, etc.
- Sense of national and regional belonging, self-definition as an "immigrant", etc.