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THE ETHICAL IMPERATIVE IN THE ORAL HISTORY METHOD:
SELECT OBSERVATIONS ON HISTORICAL RESEARCH ON
MIGRATION AND BORDER SPACES

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ABSTRACT

The field of ethics is one of the key considerations in all spheres of scientific research, and oral history is no exception. Despite its seemingly easy method of acquiring knowledge about the past, oral history is one of the most sensitive and demanding methods of historical research, and ethical considerations should therefore be given central importance. The article is empirically based on observation of public practices and field experience in collecting testimonies with post-war emigrants to Canada and with individuals from the Soča (Isonzo) river basin, a border area with a high level of emigration. It serves as a contribution to raising awareness regarding the ethical aspects of oral history, which are on average rather poorly reflected.

Keywords: oral history, ethics, fieldwork, legal frameworks, public use of testimonies

L'IMPERATIVO ETICO NEL METODO DELLA STORIA ORALE:
OSSERVAZIONI SELEZIONATE SULLA RICERCA STORICA SULLE
MIGRAZIONI E SUGLI SPAZI DI CONFINE

SINTESI

Il campo dell'etica è una delle considerazioni chiave in tutti gli ambiti della ricerca scientifica, e la storia orale non fa eccezione. Nonostante il metodo apparentemente facile per acquisire conoscenze sul passato, la storia orale è uno dei metodi più delicati e impegnativi della ricerca storica, e le considerazioni etiche dovrebbero quindi avere un'importanza centrale. L'articolo si basa sull'osservazione empirica delle pratiche pubbliche e sull'esperienza sul campo della raccolta di testimonianze con gli emigrati del dopoguerra in Canada e con gli individui del bacino del fiume Isonzo, un'area di confine ad alto tasso di emigrazione. L'articolo offre un contributo alla sensibilizzazione sugli aspetti etici della storia orale, su cui non spesso si riflette.

Parole chiave: storia orale, etica, lavoro sul campo, quadri giuridici, uso pubblico delle testimonianze

If you pretty up how people spoke and change the things they said, that's dishonest. It's taking away their lives, their experiences, and their selves.
(Skloot, 2010, xiii)

INTRODUCTION¹

If all the spheres of scientific research were to have one uniting cornerstone, then it would have to be the field of ethics. Scientific knowledge is never completely objective or neutrally evaluated. As such, it is important to attach ample weight to relevant considerations, recognizing that every scientific field also contains “zones” which are entirely arbitrary and beholden to the subjective judgement of the scientist (Feyerabend, 1984). This undoubtedly touches upon the domain of the field of ethics. In the highly exact fields of applied natural sciences such as chemistry, physics, nuclear physics, and in technological sciences such as (bio)medicine, computer science and software engineering, there is a serious need for critical ethical judgement in the conception, conduct and dissemination of research, and in particular in the implementation of findings at different levels of society and social activities (Briggle & Mitcham, 2012).

In this respect, oral history is no different from its distant cousins on the natural and technical side; on the contrary, entering into the more or less intimate fields of the lives of individuals who, reveal their memories, attitudes and understandings of themselves and the world around them over a span of time and do so on the record, requires deep ethical reflection not only on what is to be done with their statements and how they are presented to the public, but also on how we as practitioners treat our interlocutors both during and after the conversation. Despite the apparently facile method of gaining knowledge about the past through conversation, it is my belief that oral history represents one of the most sensitive and challenging methods of historical research, and one in which ethical considerations should be of central importance. Based on my bitter experiences from my initial engagements with oral history, I have learned that a lack of awareness of ethical considerations can damage the reputation of the interlocutor, of oral history as a discipline, and ultimately, that of its practitioner. Despite the fact that, to paraphrase Portelli's famous words, “oral history [no longer haunts] the halls of the academy” (Portelli, 1991, 46), attempts to discredit this exciting method still abound. These attempts are often justified also due to unaddressed questions from the vast field of ethics, especially when cognitive value takes precedence before the sources that largely co-determine it – in the field of oral history, these are usually real, living persons.

1 The article was elaborated within the EIRENE project (full title: Post-war transitions in gendered perspective: the case of the North-Eastern Adriatic Region), founded by the European Research Council under Horizon 2020 financed Advanced Grant funding scheme [ERC Grant Agreement n. 742683].

Ethical issues in oral history are addressed here in three intersecting levels: the interpersonal relationship between interviewer and interviewee during the production of testimonies and afterwards (1), the preservation and accessibility of oral sources (2), and the epistemological approach to the use of oral history material for public purposes (3). These aspects were formulated on the basis of my observation of public practices and my own field experience or inexperience in collecting testimonies with post-war emigrants to Canada and with individuals from the Soča (Isonzo) river basin, a border area with a high level of emigration. I find such reflections necessary as a contribution to raising awareness regarding the ethical aspects of oral history, where awareness is generally at a very low level. At present, there are no suitable textbooks or guides in line with current European or national legislation regarding the field, which would update thoughtful directives thoroughly (Raleigh Yow, 1994, 84–115; Ritchie, 2003, 145–186; Ramšak, 2003, 126–152).² Interesting insights allowing also for development of thought at the intersection of oral history and ethics were coined by two inciting American researchers in the field, Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki (2010, 2016). With the growing use of oral history methods in historiographical research, the possibility of (mostly unintentional) abuses and consequent conflicts between researchers and oral witnesses increases, which is manifested, among other things, in increasingly demanding protocols regarding ethical and legal issues related to the financing of research projects.

ETHICAL ASPECTS OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY

The level defined here as the interpersonal relationship between interviewer and interviewee merits ethical reflection which must take both parties into account. In a sense, it is also a reflection on the relationship between research interests and ethical postulates. The main criterion is that in the oral history approach, the ends do not justify the means. For example, when approaching a potential interviewee, it is necessary to agree on the storytelling frameworks before the actual interview takes place; at this point, the interviewee should be informed about the purposes and procedures of the research and the terms of participation (Ayers, 2001, 171–192). In any case, I view oral history as a balancing act between respecting the wishes of the interviewees and autonomous historiographical creation, which, among other things, demonstrates the dichotomy between information and interpretation (Thompson, 2009, 23).

The starting point of these reflections took shape in the period between 2007 and 2009, when I was collecting testimonies in order to obtain empirical material for my doctoral dissertation on the emigration of Slovenians to Canada. I conducted 14 interviews with individuals who were living witnesses of the “border migration” phenomenon following the politically and economically difficult period following World War II (Strle, 2009, 113–129). The case study of a woman named Stanka, who moved to Canada in 1952 from the area of Kambreško, located right by the Yugoslav-Italian

2 The legal-ethical aspects are most accurately represented in American oral history textbooks, themselves sources of a large variety of practical tips.

border, was part of this research (Strle, 2016, 27–46). In order to gain insight into the circumstances and personal interpretations of the reasons behind the emigration, I conducted several interviews with various interlocutors, all of whom were advanced in age. These also included Stanka's acquaintances, who had their own memories of the post-World War II period, and some of whom had also left their home in the Soča river basin. The interviews revealed various ways how changing political realities and migration processes qualitatively determined the life experiences of individuals and shaped their memories on a personal and family level.

The interlocutors in question often voiced the opinion that their view of the past should be included in my historiographical narrative as the only true explanation. Some of them were highly offended when I disagreed with them, giving rise to no small amount of discomfort. Often, I was also met with a refusal to participate, or a desire to establish a clear thematic limit to the narrative of one's own life, a boundary I certainly felt necessary to respect. A considerable degree of reticence towards passing political comments on the past and towards revealing sensitive family episodes soon made itself apparent. Regarding both the border zone and in the dynamic between the country of origin and the diaspora, this left the impression that such relationship contours between the interviewees and myself were also shaped by the existence of memories that were often at odds or even excluded each other. Since I only spoke with Slovenians and not with members of other ethnic communities located in the multicultural environments discussed here, these memory divides were primarily drawn along the ideological, class and educational structures of the narrators; gender specificities also emerged. While observing the border zone, one must bear in mind that the Soča river basin was part of several successive political formations throughout the 20th century, each favouring its own interpretation of the past and present, as well as its own normative and value systems: the Habsburg Monarchy, the Kingdom of Italy, the Third Reich, the Allied Military Administration, Yugoslavia, and Slovenia.

I am of the opinion that the multiple changes in power have shaken the political and cultural identity of the Soča river basin inhabitants, meaning I was often met with suspicion upon inquiring about past events in the field. The distrust that came with sharing one's story to me, a young researcher from Slovenia who was still earning her stripes was even more evident among the expatriates, a distrust most probably born of their traumatic experience of war and refugee life. Psychological distress among (post-) war refugees is common, a consequence of trauma, stigma and exposure to poverty. They often face the pain of suddenly leaving their homes, the disintegration of family structures, the alienation of property and land, the loss of social security, jobs or professions, the decline in personal value and self-esteem, and lastly, being ostracized by those of their relatives who had remained at home (Zalokar, 1990, 343–371). Thus, it is my belief that these experiences awakened a fundamental distrust among many Slovene Canadians and have triggered an air of hypersensitivity towards the use of their testimonies in research. As Genorio's study and my own impressions from the field show, the distrust was caused by previous researchers from their land of origin, whom the emigrants – former refugees – viewed as spies (Genorio, 1989, 175–177).

Real, potential or imaginary abuse of witness testimony may make its way to court. In my particular case, it was her daughters threatening me with a lawsuit when the story of Stanka, mentioned above, was published. Both daughters live in Canada, a country with advanced procedures regarding data protection and legal practices I was not familiar with as an inexperienced oral historian from Slovenia, which at the time did not have clear relevant legislation on the topic. The problem arose because I posted the story on the website without permission, after I had already made her story public in a much more detailed personal context. My entry into the non-consensual practice of managing the life story of another permanently chilled my relationship with my distant Canadian relatives, despite the fact that I immediately removed the story from the web. This harrowing experience made me reflect on the need to check for the protagonists' consent every time a story with a name and last name is made public. The message that takes shape between these lines is that their story is not our own, even if we participate in its creation and make it public under our own name.

SAFETY MECHANISMS: WHEN ETHICAL PRINCIPLES MEET LAW

The increasingly detailed development of legal regulation in the field of participatory research, which includes oral history, points to the extreme sensitivity of managing personal stories. In the early stages of my research, I bypassed these aspects of the research process altogether. This consequently prevented the publication of my largely testimony-based doctoral dissertation, as I did not want to risk discomfort among my interlocutors and disputes with them. It is also because of the possibility of legal proceedings in the field of personal data protection that the funding of oral history projects also increasingly stipulates research integrity in ethical-legal terms. To avoid potential conflicts, the EU has been introducing a general standard for the protection of personal data since the 1990s, strongly impacting the oral history method in the process.

In turn, the legal regulation of ethical practices in oral history creates tension in relation to research interests, as it is often the most sensitive personal data that represents the most interesting areas of historiographical research. What shape does this take in practice? There is a general tendency to anonymize those parts of oral history interviews that contain demographic data (name, age, place of birth and residence, occupation), political, philosophical and religious self-definitions, information on trade union membership, intimate life, medical records and so forth. This is precisely the kind of information that makes oral history so compelling, as it provides detailed information on the subject who is making the statement, unlike other sources that are also based on oral testimony such as newspapers, court files, meeting logs and the like. Of course, anonymizing (or pseudonymizing) data does not prevent cognitive insights for those researchers who are in contact with the witnesses, but it does reduce these possibilities for others who may wish to use the anonymized oral sources at a later stage. Ultimately, such protective practices also limit the verifiability and contextualization of data.

Informed consent is turning into common practice for the oral history process; it provides a degree of legal protection for all involved in oral history research. It contains information about the project and its purpose, defines the ways in which the interviewees are to participate, and contains basic ethical and legal guidelines which all those involved agree to. After the transcript has been produced, the interviewee is increasingly often presented with an interview authorization consent form, giving the interviewee the opportunity to strike out parts of the narrative that arise as a result of a temporarily overenhanced sense of trust or recklessness (for example, the disclosure of intimacy or inappropriate accounts of others). Archival institutions also transcribe forms for the preservation of oral history material, yet these may differ substantially.³ In recent years, ethics committees have been set up in many research institutions across Slovenia with the authority to reject research carried out at the institution if it does not meet ethical considerations. This is not only a safeguard, but also a valuable reflection on the oral history research process.

In regard to these safety mechanisms, my later experiences with interlocutors were twofold: for some people, this legal-ethical procedure acts as a safeguard to make sure that everything goes as it should, while for others, all the paperwork they have to read and sign makes them uncomfortable. Discomfort that probably also diminishes their sense of trust to a certain extent and, consequently, also their narrative. I am convinced that every researcher in the field of oral history ought to think carefully about the ethicality of his or her research agenda, the possibility of abuse and the potential safeguards before conducting interviews. If the interviewee has said more on the record than they would have liked, this can be resolved in the process of authorizing the interview. The key approach I see, however, is the quality of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, where it is fundamental that the interviewer presents both the purpose of the interview and the ethical procedures in an appropriate manner, while at all times maintaining correctness in relation to the arrangements and respectfulness towards the interviewee. If interesting information that can significantly mould the historiographical narrative remains trapped in the censored sections, the researcher has the option of presenting it discreetly in the light of his or her research notes, which (in ethnological field practice) constitute an important part of the interpretive process or quoting it in a way that does not identify the person making the statement (Sheftel & Zembrzycki, 2013).

3 Anonymous reviewer suggested to elaborate some consideration on the aspect of preservation and access to oral sources. In my opinion, however, it is a very important topic to be considered, although it transcends the competences of individual researcher. Oral history sources in Slovenia are dispersed along various practitioners of public history (museums, archives) or remain in the semi-accessible depots of various research institutions as part of various project materials. Standardization of archival practices is necessary to be addressed indeed, yet it surpasses the thematic orientation of the article, which draws conclusions stemming from reflections on my own methodological – and therefore also ethical – failures.

PUBLIC USE OF ORAL SOURCES

Last but not least, the use of oral history material for public purposes definitely merits discussion. Both in the media and in historical texts, one often runs up against frequent (mis)use of testimonies to underline certain historiographical points of view, with the interviewees assuming the role of historians (Wieviorka, 2006; Verginella, 2012, 107–120; Klavara, 2012, 121–136). Such instances are often nothing but political instrumentalizations, where the socio-political battles of the present are played out in the struggles for the dominance of the memory of past events. Taking Europe as a case in point, this trend is particularly characteristic of the former Eastern Bloc and Yugoslavia, where an alternative historiographical narrative has been established since the late 1980s in order to rehabilitate the losing side of World War II and to demonize the socialist powers (Luthar, 2017; Verginella, 2019, 189–204). Somewhat less egregious examples may also be observed elsewhere in Europe, which in fact merely reflects the internal heterogeneity of each social collective in the ways in which they interpret past and present events (Ricoeur, 2004). It is here that the point of observation shifts to the Slovenian space, which is the most familiar and linguistically accessible to me, even if the cognitive settings in many respects go beyond the Slovenian national space.

One of the most notorious examples from the world of Slovenian media comes in the shape of a periodic biographical program broadcast on national television called “Pričevalci” (*Witnesses*), where individuals recounted their life story. The program was promoted as a “civilizational debt” to those who were “killed, persecuted, oppressed or silenced” during or after World War II.⁴ It was accompanied by extensive promotion in the media and attracted no small amount of public attention.⁵ The narratives of these witnesses reflect personal and family memories that did not receive their own space in Slovenia until the collapse of Yugoslavia due to the criticism of the resistance movement and Tito’s regime. The choice of narrative reinforces the impression among viewers that their memories provide the only true historical memory of the war and the post-war era, and that official history is full of fabrications and lies.

It is rather telling that the first thirteen episodes of this program presented the life trajectories of people belonging to emigrant communities from the ranks of post-war refugees and their descendants. These communities were linked internationally in the struggle against communism and formed a fairly unified historical narrative. They highlighted the violence of the resistance movement, the unjust refugee experience, and the

4 Berlec, 2016: Intervju: dr. Mitja Štular, *Demokracija*, 15. 12. 2016, 44.

5 The intense reactions among Slovenian society reflect the ideological controversies in the society at large and consequent controversial understanding of history, which particularly addressed the most problematic issues of the past: partisan mid-war violence over civilians, extrajudicial post-war killings, exodus, internments, “show trials”, post-war social lynching etc. The analysed newspaper articles were gathered by method of clipping, which included classical and digitalized newspapers of Slovenian provenance. Clipping has not analysed Slovenian print in diasporic communities, which have also provided testifiers as well as audience. In qualitative terms, the series *Pričevalci* stimulated 122 newspaper articles during July 2014 till November 2018.

crimes of the post-war communist authorities. The editorial policy of the program used the continuous sequence of programs to reinforce a memory that would accentuate the incrimination of the post-war Yugoslav regime and its predecessors, the partisans. Such a narrative was also in agreement with the official policies of the countries to which the post-war refugees immigrated – these were mainly Western Bloc countries and South America, which had developed a clear anti-communist rhetoric during the Cold War (Iacovetta, 2006).

It is also worth pointing out the controversial role of the interviewer in this conceptually problematic TV series, who asked tendentious questions and suggested answers to the interviewees. The case presented here mirrors the meaningful correlations between remembrance, silence and oblivion that usually determine political power relations in the public sphere. Parallels may again be drawn with Eastern Europe in its period of transition, which had a large and well-situated diaspora in the countries on the west of the Iron Curtain. Those who had been excluded from the public sphere for almost half a century began to enter the political arena in the Eastern European countries post-1989; among other things, the political and economic space was opened up for members of the post-war diaspora communities. The silencing of regime opponents after 1945, especially those marked by collaboration and/or post-war defection, was definitely part of the post-war political reckoning, which, by the standards of today's socio-legal norms, may be seen as inadmissible. The voices of the formerly silenced are doubtlessly legitimate, but they usually represent another intolerable simplification of the past and a conscious tendency to impoverish memory for the purpose of consolidating the »one true« historical memory, which is, to say the least, ethically objectionable. It is high time for historians to start perceiving the controversies of past in integrative way, accepting *multivocality* of its perceptions and interpretations as historical fact.

Even when dealing with oral history without clear political aspirations, knowledge of the basic epistemological principles of the oral history method is necessary. This method does not function without reflection on the specific properties of orality and narrativity, on the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, on the role of memory, on intersubjectivity, and on the distinction between fact and the meanings attributed to fact (Portelli, 1991, 45–58; Rožac Darovec, 2006, 447–467; Passerini, 2008, 2015–257). Such insight is essential, otherwise one may quickly fall into the snare of blindly reproducing ideological premises and creating a biased and politicized history. A sound theoretical-methodological basis reduces the chances of oral history inadvertently slipping into poor historiographical practice, which I see not only as a scientific-research imperative but also an ethical one.

CONCLUSION

This modest contribution aims to illustrate some of the dilemmas and controversies arising from the vast ethical field that tend to crop up in oral historiographical research on past events, as shaped by my own field experience. It was based under impression that there is a lack of consideration on working with

people among users of oral history. As such, I feel it is necessary to recognize the importance of such reflection. I find it is this very lack that undermines both the reputation of the method itself and generates discomfort in both its practitioners and the interviewees. It is precisely this kind of reflection that is all the more necessary in the face of the increasing use of oral history testimony, which has an inadequate reputation for being a facile method, yet in truth, is anything but. The reputation of oral history notwithstanding, the issue at hand also illustrates on a broader scale how scientific research simply cannot function consistently without ethical considerations.

ETIČNI IMPERATIV V METODI USTNE ZGODOVINE: IZBRANA OPAŽANJA
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POVZETEK

Etična vprašanja v ustni zgodovini obravnavajo vsaj tri ravni: epistemološki pristop za uporabo gradiva ustne zgodovine v javne namene (1), medosebni odnos med spraševalcem in intervjuvancem pri ustvarjanju pričevanj in kasneje (2), ohranjanje in dostopnost ustnih virov (3). V zvezi s prvim se v medijih in zgodovinskih besedilih pogosto pojavljajo (napačne) uporabe pričevanj za poudarjanje določenih historiografskih stališč in pripisovanje vloge zgodovinarjev pričevalcem. To je pogosto posledica politične instrumentalizacije in/ali nepoznavanja epistemoloških načel metode ustne zgodovine. Ta načela ne delujejo brez razmisleka o ustnosti in pripovednosti, o razmerju med subjektivnostjo in objektivnostjo, o vlogi spomina in intersubjektivnosti ter o razlikovanju med dejstvi in pomeni, ki se pripisujejo dejstvom. Druga in tretja raven sta javnosti manj znani, čeprav vse podrobnejši razvoj pravne ureditve na področju participativnega raziskovanja kaže tudi na možnost zlorab. Hkrati je pravna obravnava takšnih metod v EU odraz splošne standardizacije varstva osebnih podatkov, med katerimi najbolj občutljivi osebni podatki (demografski podatki, politična, filozofska in verska samoopredelitev, članstvo v sindikatu, intimno življenje, zdravstvena dokumentacija itd.) predstavljajo najbolj zanimiva področja zgodovinopisnih raziskav.

Ključne besede: ustna zgodovina, etika, terensko delo, pravni okviri, javna raba pričevanj

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