

Oral history and the COVID-19 epidemic.

Guidelines of the Polish Oral History Association

Text adopted by the General Meeting of PTHM on 3 December 2020

The guidelines below are intended to assist those recording interviews and carrying out oral history projects during the COVID-19 pandemic. We do not offer simple and unambiguous answers, but we want to facilitate decision-making, and assessment of the opportunities and risks associated with recording interviews in the current situation. Oral history is one of few activities that are connected with direct, personal contact with the elderly, especially those exposed to the severe course of the disease. For this reason, the necessity to limit people-to-people contacts, maintain social distance and even temporarily isolate is a practical problem that oral history has to deal with in a pandemic.

1. Record or not?

Anyone recording interviews or producing oral history projects is responsible for making the following decisions:

- Is recording an interview with a given person or persons necessary for the implementation of the project (due to the grant giver's requirements, project schedule, will of the interlocutors, etc.)?
- Is there a serious risk that the interview cannot be completed after the pandemic has ended (due to e.g. age, health, location of the interlocutor) and that it should therefore be recorded as soon as possible?
- Is it possible – if recording of the interview cannot be postponed – to record the conversation remotely (via an internet service) without significantly affecting the substantive and technical quality of the conversation?
- If we record a live interview, are we able to implement security measures that reduce the risk of possible infection?

The answers to these questions should show us potential next steps. The final decision should always take into account the current epidemic situation, applicable legal regulations, the will of the interlocutors, the health condition (of the interlocutors and the recording person) and other life circumstances in which both parties find themselves.

2. Recording of a remote interview (via the Internet):

Recording remote interviews can be a good solution for people who have stable access to the Internet and appropriate computer equipment. In Poland, however, most seniors (people aged 60+) do not use the Internet, which can be a serious barrier to making recordings.

In the case of online recordings of people from a group that does not use the Internet on a daily basis, the help of household members may be necessary. It is important to provide those being recorded with a comfortable and intimate atmosphere for the recording, during which, on the one hand, he / she can obtain technical assistance at any time, and on the other hand, he / she will be alone with the person conducting the recording person. The optimal situation would be the presence of a trusted assistant from among the household members, who would organise technical support and who would remain at the interlocutor's disposal in another room.

In the case of an online meeting, the ability to establish and maintain contact with the person being recorded is essential: special vigilance and sensitivity to non-verbal signals and active listening. The recorder should take care to minimize the risk of technical disturbances from his / her own side: choosing a stable, secure internet connection and a previously tested (also best known to the recorder) platform with the possibility of recording the conversation. As with live recording, permission to start recording is required. Before proceeding, it should be determined whether the recording is to be sound only or also video. It is worth taking care of quality and choosing the recording format. It is recommended to use a built-in camera (to be able to maintain eye contact and follow non-verbal signals), headphones and a separate microphone where possible by the recorder and the interlocutor. It is worth discussing the quality and format of the recording with the institution that will carry out the archiving. The subject of consent for the recording should also be agreed with the interlocutor: in the event of no access to an electronic signature or a printer and scanner, a verbal agreement can be recorded or sent by email, with the intention of completing the documentation after the pandemic is over.

For oral history practitioners, remote encounters mean entering an unknown area, an experiment that may end with the end of the pandemic. However, as the British OHA notes,

online recording may soon become the "new norm"¹. Therefore, an intensive exchange of experiences in order to develop systematic guidelines seems necessary.

3. Recording interviews face-to-face

The decision to record the interview in traditional form means that there is the need for such a step; for example, the fact that it is not possible to postpone a scheduled meeting or connect remotely. Face-to-face conversation requires from the researcher special responsibility for the other person, manifested in behaviour, especially in gestures and in compliance with sanitary guidelines. It is worth remembering that it is primarily seniors (people aged 60+) who are most exposed to an acute course of infection, as well as the largest percentage of those who die from Covid-19.

When undertaking the interview, (if possible) the researcher should ascertain his / her health condition and the risk of contact with an infected person. It is also worth asking the interlocutor about this (he / she may be in a group of vulnerable people, people with low immunity, etc.). It is unacceptable to start the recording even with potentially harmless symptoms, e.g. catarrh.

Before the meeting with the interlocutor, it is a good idea to clearly present the conditions of the interview recording, including the limitations resulting from the state of the pandemic. During the initial interview, the details of the meeting should be agreed, including those relating to the maintenance of safety rules, which should be accepted by both parties. If the interlocutor does not appreciate the threat resulting from a personal meeting, the researcher may decide to accept the interlocutor's terms or to withdraw from the recording. Records regarding the circumstances of the interview and possible health risks may be included in the written consent to use the interview.

It is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure the safest possible conditions at the interview site. This mainly applies to situations in which the recordings take place in a place arranged by the recorder. The room should be relatively spacious, with the possibility of air circulation and opening of windows (ventilation). When arranging the chairs, keep an appropriate distance, in accordance with the guidelines. Whenever possible, the interview

¹ Oral History Society, Advice on oral history interviewing during the Covid-19 pandemic, <https://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/covid-19>

should be conducted in an open space. In warm periods of the year, this may be, for example, a garden, park or other public space that meets the conditions for recording (ensuring relative silence, peace and no external disturbances). In situations where the interview is conducted at the interviewee's home, the interviewee should be offered solutions that meet the criteria of safe distance. Additionally, it is worth avoiding touching various objects, eating meals, and interviewers should use disinfectant liquids or gels if necessary.

The interview should be conducted in a mask or other face covering (we recommend transparent visors that allow you to track facial expressions during the conversation). Personal face protection should be worn so that it covers the mouth and nose. The use of masks is to protect both sides, so it is worthwhile for all interlocutors to use them. Difficulties resulting from the use of the visor / mask (quieter speech, invisibility of facial expressions, etc.) should not result in avoiding their use. If the recording involves other people, e.g. household members, it is worth encouraging them to use personal protective equipment.

In case of any undesirable events related to the health condition of each of the conversation partners, the recording should be immediately stopped.

4. Interpersonal contacts

After the interview, it is worth maintaining contact with the interlocutor, making sure about his / her health or asking about his / her needs. In cases of serious epidemic restrictions, the initiative of the researcher may prove to be invaluable support, especially in the case of elderly and lonely people. Loneliness caused by the lack of meetings with member of a peer group or family during a pandemic and social isolation may be particularly troubling.

Another issue is the performance of basic activities, e.g. shopping, especially by single people. These days it is worth considering whether any of our interlocutors – previous ones we still have contact with, or those we were supposed to meet, but the pandemic prevented us from doing so – needs help. Even when we cannot get personally involved, we are often able to provide advice or contacts to appropriate institutions or charity groups that organize help for seniors. A simple conversation on the phone and asking about a person's well-being can also be an expression of concern.

5. Educational activities

During a pandemic, educational activities related to oral history must also be modified. It may be problematic to implement educational projects during which oral history workshops for beginners are planned. A person who already has oral history interview experience and established habits can suspend them for a while and conduct on-line interviews while fully aware that this is an emergency situation. He / she can treat this as a kind of experiment, expanding the field of oral-historical experience. For beginners, and especially young people, there is a risk that starting an oral history encounter by recording conversations online, even if properly trained, may disrupt the process of acquiring the right skills. It is the face-to-face encounter with another person and physical participation in an interview situation that is the basis of the oral history methodology. If this is not felt and understood at the beginning of the journey of the oral historian, a distorted notion of this process may be adopted. Bad habits acquired in the first stage of education are very difficult to eradicate.

The problem is the actual conduct of oral history training for beginners, as it requires a series of practical exercises, both in terms of the interview situation itself and the use of technical equipment. Even the best-laid theory given on-line cannot replace this.

In the case of classes with students, the plan of which can no longer be changed, it is worth considering the main topic for the implementation of the interviews necessary to pass the course. This topic should allow for conducting interviews with people with whom the student has constant contact anyway, e.g. members of their immediate family living in the same household, with friends with whom he / she meets on a daily basis, or with work colleagues (if he / she is working while studying). You can also propose that students work on interviews that have already been conducted by someone else, although this type of work would seem to be only a substitute and will not replace participation in a real interview situation. However, it is important to protect the health of not only potential interlocutors but also the students themselves, some of whom may also be at risk due to comorbidities or weakened immunity.

6. Non-governmental organizations

Non-governmental organizations are often limited by requirements resulting from a signed grant agreement, which requires the implementation of specific planned activities. However, it is worth considering whether these actions are really necessary at this point. If it is not possible to postpone the project implementation date to a period after the pandemic expires (some funders are limited by the budget year and cannot move funds to the next year), maybe it will be possible to negotiate a change in the project format with the grant giver? Instead of oral history, other forms of collecting personal historical materials can be used: written reminiscences, photographs, family documents or simply short journalistic interviews conducted on-line, of course without calling it oral history.

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