

## Experiencing experts: Notes on expert interviews in historical research

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This entry discusses the interviewing of specialists on an historical topic. Such interviews are historiographically useful, supplying important data that cannot be gathered otherwise and opening up challenging new historical interpretations. They are also problematic. Living and breathing sources (as opposed to deceased and papery ones) may actively disagree with the historian's interpretation or refuse to follow the interview methodology. This is particularly evident in interviewing experts who are specialists in their own topics but who misremember or pursue their own agendas, possibly contradicting other available sources. The advantages and pitfalls of oral history apply to experts just as much as to any interviewees in historical research.<sup>[1]</sup>

What is particular about experts is their weight as sources. Their lived experiences are braided with their specialist expertise. This piece is inspired by my experiences of expert interviews in different projects. Most of my interviewees were academically trained professionals but some were self-taught specialists who had significant roles and who became experts through action. Some scholars use the term 'key informant' but I prefer the term 'expert', which in my view lessens the expectations of the 'key' value of the interviewee and emphasises only the interviewee's knowledge and experience. I will focus on three aspects: defining expertise and choosing experts; interaction with them; and using the interviews in research.<sup>[2]</sup> I finish by discussing how expert viewpoints can be treated as experiences and how this can help in placing interview data in a wider context.

Finding interviewees to represent the historical topic under study is a crucial task that requires careful consideration and expertise on the part of the researcher. The goal is to reconstruct expert knowledge.<sup>[3]</sup> The researcher's choices influence the way the past will be presented, especially as experts are often not interchangeable. Getting to know research and sources on the topic helps in charting potential interviewees but is hardly a sufficient means to find them. Some are not visible: not all expert roles leave behind documents; what experts have done may matter more than what they have said or written. For this reason, choosing interviewees may require asking other interviewees for suggestions, which some describe as snowball sampling. Some potential interviewees may also be unwilling to see themselves as experts, which requires contextualisation on the part of the researcher. The scholarly literature on defining expertise helps in clarifying the choices: whether the expert is seen as an intellectual, as an authority, or as someone who has learned by doing, for example.<sup>[4]</sup> The

scarcity of experts in certain fields can be a challenge. Some are too busy or unwilling to take part in a study. Supplementing interview data with other sources is therefore essential, as are the stylistic choices that help the reader to understand what is missing and what kind of methodological choices complement the gaps.

The interview protocol should be carefully planned but the interaction is fraught with the unpredictable. Some interviewees are easier to talk to whereas some require special communication skills. Some interviews call for ad hoc choices: interviewees do not necessarily follow the interview plan despite the interviewer's attempts to steer the discussion. While answering all questions in their own way, some refuse to answer them in the right order, or their train of thought differs significantly from the planned course of the interview. In such cases, my solution has been to let the interviewees speak freely while trying to make sure that all themes are covered by the end of the interview.

Experts speak differently to different people. To conduct a good interview, it is important to know enough about the subject to narrow the gap between the knowledge of the expert and the interviewer. The interviewer's status can be characterised as that of a quasi-expert.<sup>[5]</sup> Although preparedness is important, there is a risk that the interviewer, wishing to impress the interviewee, unintentionally leads the discussion and inhibits the emergence of unexpected topics. In my experience, quietness and silent moments often lead to deeper thinking and even unexpected results. An interview is not the right place to impress the interviewee but showing preparedness in a subtle way is important.

It is likely that the researcher has committed to follow ethical guidelines that underline the ethical portrayal of the interviewees.<sup>[6]</sup> Interviewees can also reveal vulnerabilities that should not be revealed in research and, in general, the researcher should consider many and at times contradictory ethical issues that cannot be solved by reading guidebooks.<sup>[7]</sup> Portraying living people in historical research is more complicated from an ethical perspective than using solely written sources concerning the dead. Anonymisation, which is common in oral history, is often impossible when using expert interviews, since expertise is recognisable. In some cases, the identification of the interviewees is not necessary, while in others, the value of the interview is tied to their identity. It is essential to consider the question of anonymisation well ahead of the interview and to make sure that the interviewee is aware of the choice, which should also be clearly stated in the research protocol document and then signed by the expert. Where interviews have not been anonymised, experts will face the researcher's interpretations without the chance to hide their identity. This is recognised as one of the greatest fears of oral history scholars in general: letting interviewees down or harming them.<sup>[8]</sup> The use of interviews becomes problematic if the researcher uses interview data without contextualising it carefully, to prove, for example, their own ideological point without statistical support.<sup>[9]</sup>

It is essential to pay attention to stylistic choices in writing about experts' experiences. The portrayal of expertise requires rigorous contextualisation of the knowledge discussed in the interview, be it scientific or another kind of expert data. While there is less room for interpretation in this part of the analysis, there are other opportunities: by combining the interviewees' personal, emotional and sensory experiences and incorporating them in historical narratives, the researcher can simultaneously remain analytical and fuel the reader's imagination, using interview data in a respectful way. Framing expert reminiscences as experiences of past events makes it possible to leave room for further interpretation, as experiences are not equivalent to truth or to the researcher's own thinking.

Stylistic choices, guiding the reader through layers of knowledge, deepens the analysis. Changing the tone of writing when discussing different issues helps address temporality issues, when, for example, the interviewee explains the past from a presentist point of view.

The researcher shows expertise in choosing interviewees, framing the study, guiding the analysis, letting the reader see the valuable interview material and leaving some room for the reader's interpretations. Framing expert points of view as experiences does not lessen their value but adds interpretative layers to the study.

## Notes

[1] For example, Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (Routledge, London: Routledge, 2015); Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Routledge, 2010). In Finnish, see Ulla Savolainen and Riikka Taavetti (eds), *Muistitietotutkimuksen paikka* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2022); Outi Fingerroos et. al., *Muistitietotutkimus: Metodologia kysymyksiä* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2006); Anne Heimo, Tuula Juvonen and Heidi Kurvinen, *Opas muistitieto-aastattelun tekemiseen* (Helsinki: Työväen historian ja perinteen tutkimuksen seura, 2021).

[2] On literature specialising in expert interviews, see e.g. Alexander Bogner, Beate Littig and Wolfgang Menz (eds), *Interviewing Experts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Stefanie Döringer, ‘“The problem-centred expert interview”: Combining qualitative interviewing approaches for investigating implicit expert knowledge’, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 24 (2021): 265–278.

[3] Michaela Pfadenhauer, ‘At eye level: An expert interview’, in Bogner, Littig and Menz, *Interviewing Experts*, 81–97.

[4] Pfadenhauer, ‘At eye level’, 87–90.

[5] Pfadenhauer, ‘At eye level’.

[6] On ethics in oral history, see Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrycki, ‘Who’s Afraid of Oral History? Fifty Years of Debates and Anxiety about Ethics’, *The Oral History Review*, 43 (2016): 338–366.

[7] See e.g., Vaida Obelenè, ‘Expert versus researcher: Ethical considerations’, in Bogner, Littig and Menz, *Interviewing Experts*, 184–200.

[8] Sheftel and Zembrycki, ‘Who’s Afraid of Oral History’.

[9] For a critique on using ‘key informants’ without careful contextualisation, see Johan Edman, ‘The war on good research: Debating research ethics and methods on the basis of Jay Levy’s *The war on people who use drugs: The harms of Sweden’s aim for a drug-free society* (Routledge, 2017)’, *Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* 36, (2019): 387–396.

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