

## Constructing Immigrants' Work Worlds from Oral Testimonies

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Inferences from oral histories are often hampered by three difficulties. The first one has to do with assessing whether subjective verbal accounts of individuals are reliable and valid. The second problem involves typologizing what appear to be idiosyncratic stories. The third obstacle is to generalize relationships from what are basically case studies. In this paper, I address these three problems using primarily the work experiences of the Chinese and Greeks in Saskatchewan. The materials are based on two studies that used oral history as a method. The first one, completed in 1980, collected the work histories of fifty-five elderly Chinese-Canadians in Saskatchewan who had been living in Canada for over thirty years.<sup>1</sup> The second study, conducted in 1985, involved interviewing sixteen Greek and Chinese entrepreneurs who have been operating restaurants in Canada for some time. The purpose of these studies was to investigate the structure of the work world for ethnic minorities.

### Nature of Oral History Data

The absence of a standardized procedure for collecting data means that the reliability and validity of oral histories are difficult to assess. The qualitative nature of oral accounts, as opposed to statistical tabulations of quantitative data, also places an additional burden on researchers to synthesize their findings in such a way as to convince themselves and others of their validity. Because of these problems, oral histories sometimes give the false impression of being haphazard and unscientific.

The data obtained from an oral history are mainly composed of an individual's selections from past experiences based on what they perceive as worth retaining and reporting. Such selections are inevitable. The interviewer, however, may make use of a respondent's selective memory to improve the quality of data. This can be done by directing selective questions to assist the respondent's recollections of a particular theme. For example, in my first study, I decided that I would only inquire about the respondents' job histories, fo-

cus on the types of jobs and the periods of time to which the respondents referred. These parameters enabled interviews to be pursued in a systematic way.

Another difficulty in using oral history is how to resolve inconsistencies in the same report of a respondent, especially with regard to the temporal sequence of events. Often times I found respondents mixed up in the sequence of jobs they had, especially in those cases which involved a high mobility from one job to another. I decided not to use the biographies as bases to construct the historical sequence of events, but rather to use them as descriptions of work patterns in various periods. Despite fading memories, a respondent can be very clear about the general pattern of employment in the broad time frame provided by an interviewer. The following is an example:

I came to Moose Jaw in 1913. . . . First I washed dishes, making \$35 a month. I worked for 14 to 16 hours a day. . . . Then after that I went to work for a Japanese owner of a restaurant. That was 1914. After a while, I went to Simpson, at harvest time, up north, it was the CPR line. I worked on a farm. I got up at 6 o'clock in the morning, milked the cow, and came back to the house to cook breakfast for my boss. He was not a very friendly person . . . so I quit. I came back to Moose Jaw to work for my brother. Then in 1918, I went back to China to get married.

I thought the respondent was not likely to have made a mistake in the two important dates of his life, 1913 and 1918, as the first one refers to the year of his arrival in Canada, and the second to the year of his marriage. Once the reliability of these dates is established, one can logically assume that the work experiences took place between 1913 and 1918.

When a respondent describes their past experiences, they frequently express their emotions, aspirations, and assessments of past events, in addition to relating the events themselves. It is unavoidable that emotions affect the details a respondent reports and the way they report them. The subjectivity of respon-

dents, however, does not necessarily reduce the validity and reliability of oral history; rather, it is a part of oral history that enriches it.

The "truthfulness" of a story may be loosely defined to be whether or not the story accurately reports what actually happened or, more generally, whether the story corresponds to an empirical reality. The assessment of an account of what actually happened is only meaningful if the sequence of events can be independently established. Most often, one has to rely on secondary sources of information such as news reports and official records for verification. However, these sources are equally susceptible to unreliability. The so-called objective news stories as reported in the mass media are not nearly as objective as they appear, as Gans' study indicates.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, official records are compiled by officials, and they may reflect more the institution's interest than what has objectively taken place.

What do "facts" in oral history convey? There are at least five possible ways in which the "truthfulness" of a story or part of a story may be interpreted: (1) what the respondent describes is fabricated, (2) what the respondent describes is what the respondent would like to believe to have happened, (3) what the respondent describes is what the respondent perceives has happened; (4) what the respondent describes is also described in other recorded sources, and (5) what the respondent describes is exactly what happened. The fact is that each level of interpretation corresponds to a different reality, each of which is equally valid if the levels of reality are taken into account. For example, in his excellent ethnographic account of street-corner Blacks in the USA, Liebow<sup>3</sup> describes the respondents' exaggerations of their sexual relationships with women. Liebow accepts these accounts as a reality of the street-corner men who, suffering from status deprivation, sought psychological recognition and reward from each other's fantasies. What is of interest is that the participants themselves accepted the fantasies as a part of life.

In my first study, I found instances in which I suspected the respondents were incorrect, since what they said conflicted with official records. On pursuing the matter further, I found that the official records were deficient in accounting for cases which did not follow bureaucratic routines. For example, according to the Chinese Immigration Act of 1923, no Chinese was allowed to immigrate to Canada between 1923 and 1947. However, in my study there were cases of Chinese who entered Canada illegally in this period. These cases alerted me to look into how some Chinese circumvented the law when it was virtually impossible to immigrate legally. Not all Chinese came illegally during this period. A person in my sample came to Canada in 1928 but was granted landed immigrant

status twenty-five years later. Officially he would be registered as a landed immigrant in 1953, despite his stay in the country since 1928. This is what he said:

Every year, at the end of the year, I would go up to the immigration department and ask them, "Have I got an extension for another year?" and they would say, "OK, away you go." . . . After I had been in Canada for 25 years, they phoned me one day and said, "You're landed in Canada today."

From the point of view of a researcher, the key question is not so much to find out whether the respondent is stating the facts as they took place, but to sort out the different levels of perception and interpretation which are present in oral history. As Gans explained his role in his study of Italian-Americans in Boston, he was describing "the way of life of lower level people as they might describe it themselves if they were sociologists."

### Typologizing the Work World

The difficulty in using oral history data, or qualitative data in general, is to devise a systematic way of summarizing the materials, and to infer a typology to account for all the cases. This type of analysis involves developing a theme around which interview materials can be organized. The strategy is to develop a general framework so that all the cases can be accounted for, including exceptions. If a researcher finds that a pattern applies to most respondents, it would be necessary to explain why it does not apply to other cases. The explanation may call for the creation of a more complex typology.

In my study of elderly Chinese, I was concerned primarily with developing a theoretical type that would describe all cases. The job histories were indeed similar. All respondents immigrated in their early twenties and had little working experience prior to immigration. They had limited education and spoke little English. Partly because of limited language and educational skills, but mostly because of institutional racism, they were confined to marginal employment characterized by menial jobs that were low-paying, insecure and unstable. Their work experiences also indicated a high degree of mobility from one menial job to another.

The pattern of marginal employment, however, was insufficient to account for all working experiences, since many immigrants were engaged at one time or another in self-employment in an ethnic business. The typical business was a small café that was owned and operated by a few Chinese immigrants. The development of ethnic businesses among Chinese-Canadians was partly in response to restrictive

employment in the job market. The immigrants pooled limited capital and labour power to create opportunities of self-employment.

It is necessary to expand the typology to include ethnic business so as to account for the work histories of the respondents. Aside from explaining the organization and operation of ethnic business, I was also interested in explaining why the Chinese immigrants were able to start a business when their marginal employment rendered it difficult for them to accumulate sufficient capital for investment. The business venture was made possible through a partnership system which engaged the labour and capital of loosely defined relatives. The kinship network that was often instrumental in assisting the immigrant to come to Canada remained useful to him as a basis for forming partnerships. The absence of immediate family members in Canada also compelled many to rely on more distant relatives for help. The following description summarizes how the partnership system worked:

The partners got a few relatives together and just chip in some money each. You don't need a lawyer, and you don't have to sign anything. If there is no business and you have to leave, then you sell it and split the money.... Everyday... fixed meals, cooked the meat, and made a few pies, and made some soup. ... There's no boss. ... Just worked for ourselves.

The formulation of the two theoretical types, marginal employment and ethnic business, accounts for all the cases. All respondents shared the experience of marginal employment, and the majority of them had the experience of holding at least one partnership in a restaurant sometime in their career. The restrictive labour market for the Chinese, and their partnership system, explain how the ethnic business emerged. The broadly defined kinship network provided additional resources for supporting a partnership.

### Generalizing Relationships from Case Studies

Although oral history appears at times to be idiosyncratic and parochial, it is possible to abstract from personal accounts to more general social relationships. One of my objectives in studying Chinese and Greek restaurant owners is to see if a general pattern about ethnic business can be developed. Although the Chinese and Greeks are two different ethnic groups, there is a striking similarity in the way they became restaurant owners, and in the way they managed their operations.

All the subjects interviewed came as first-generation immigrants. Many came in the 1950s. They were poor and had little or no background in the restaurant business prior to coming to Canada. Most of them

spoke little English. All came by way of sponsorship through relatives. Like the many Chinese who came earlier in the century, many of these postwar immigrants ended up working for relatives in a restaurant business. All the respondents started out with menial jobs such as washing dishes in the kitchen, or busing and waiting on tables. Through a frugal lifestyle and hard work, they managed to save enough money to start a small business. The following is an example from a Greek-Canadian:

It so happened that we had some relatives... living in Canada... My father got hold of them and said, "Hey, what are the chances of my boy going to Canada?" ... And this guy said yes. ... So I came to Saskatoon, May of '51... I started out as a busboy ... and eventually I learned how to be a waiter and then a cook and about 3 years later I managed to work with a couple other boys and we opened up our own place.

The story is quite similar to the experiences of the Chinese who immigrated earlier. But the success of this postwar cohort of immigrants in the restaurant business was probably facilitated by two factors. First, by the time these immigrants came to Canada in the fifties, the restaurant business was an established line of work among the Chinese and Greeks. Consequently, it was quite natural for many of them to end up working for a relative in a restaurant. In this respect, the ethnic enclave provided initial employment opportunities in the ethnic business for some new immigrants. Second, their subsequent mobility from restaurant workers to owners is partly attributed to the opportunity opened to them in the 1950s and 1960s when ethnic restaurants began to flourish as the postwar economic boom changed the lifestyle and eating habits of people. Ethnic food provided a novel alternative to North American cooking. The absence of keen competition at that time also made it easier for these postwar immigrants to establish themselves, as compared to their predecessors. Consequently, the profit margin was higher, and it was not too long before they expanded into larger operations. All the restaurant owners in the study emphasized the keen competition today, as compared to the high profit margin in earlier decades. As one Chinese-Canadian put it:

Profit was 22% at that time and now you couldn't even make 10% profit... The labour cost is 31% [now] but ... in 1957 and 1958 the labour cost was only 9 or 10%. ... I think Chinese lose their business now because they can't make profit in restaurant. I prefer to put money in the bank and have interest. Why put your money [in the restaurant] and take the risk and hard work and no profit?

On the surface, it would appear that the Greeks and Chinese demonstrate important differences in the way they run their restaurants. Many Greeks considered the Chinese restaurant to be small-scale and family-operated, whereas the Greek restaurants have expanded to a point where family labour input is insignificant. A number of respondents made similar comparisons between the Chinese and Greek restaurants. For example, one Greek respondent said,

Some of the Chinese restaurants are very low in labour because they use their families. . . . None of our family is employed here . . . a lot of Chinese places that I've been in there's kids running all over and they just kind of grow up with it.

The evidence from the interviews clearly indicates that the Greek restaurants are less likely to use family labour, but the Chinese restaurants remain largely family-run enterprises. However, this difference has little to do with cultural values. The Chinese restaurants tend to be smaller in size and, like other small businesses, family labour is an important asset in maintaining a profit margin. The Greek restaurants are larger in operation and, consequently, the owners rely more on modern methods of management and less on kinship ties. Indeed, in the few exceptional cases of large Chinese restaurants, the owners had the same view about not using family members in their operations.

Once the size of the restaurant is taken into account, it becomes clear that Chinese and Greek restaurant owners are similar in many respects. For example, all the owners of large restaurants started out with small operations in the 1950s and expanded to larger operations later. Although the restaurant business is less profitable now than before, many owners of larger restaurants made a huge profit in the earlier years and owned business properties that had appreciated in value. In contrast, the small restaurant owners rely heavily on unpaid family labour. Since there appear to be more Chinese newcomers entering the restaurant business than Greeks, a false impression is created that Chinese owners are more likely than Greeks to use family labour in their business operations.

## Conclusions

This paper addresses three issues of oral history. The first one deals with the meaning of reliability and validity of oral testimonies. I suggest that the meaning of "truthfulness" in oral history has to be broadened to include different levels of respondents' realities, including those which may not have an empirical correspondence but nevertheless are meaningful in their world.

The second problem has to do with how to typologize from descriptive and often voluminous materials. The method suggested here involves developing a typology to classify all the cases, and to explain the conditions under which each type emerged. The oral history of the Chinese is used as an example to illustrate how findings may be summarized.

The last problem concerns how to abstract from what appears to be unrelated case histories to more general social relationships. The case of Greek and Chinese restaurant owners is used to show how similarities and differences can be compared to arrive at a more general understanding of ethnic business.

## References

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