

AN ORAL HISTORY OF PSYCHOLOGY IN CANADA

During the past five years, as Archivist of the Canadian Psychological Association, I have been involved in the task of collecting tape-recordings for an Oral History of Psychology in Canada. This project was initiated in 1970 when I applied for, and received, a grant from the Canada Council which enabled me to obtain the necessary recording equipment and to travel across Canada from St. John's, Newfoundland to Victoria, British Columbia, for the purpose of tape-recording the reminiscences of veteran psychologists. Canada Council grants have also provided funds for the transcription of these recordings. The collection now consists of over 200 hours of recorded interviews with nearly 100 psychologists. During the next year, I hope to add another 40 cases, and another 100 hours of taped reminiscences, to the present collection.

A year ago, I attended the first national Conference of the Canadian Oral History Association at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, B.C. During that Conference, I attended a mini-workshop on interviewing methods and was startled to discover that, from my experience, I disagreed with nearly everything that was said about the "right" way to go about collecting oral history materials. For instance, the first participant said very emphatically that the interviewer should forget altogether about the interviewee, who doesn't really matter, but should keep his eye on the prospective audience. In my experience, the interviewer must concentrate, wholly and solely, on the interviewee and forget all about the prospective audience. Then, the young lady who chaired the workshop suggested that, on the first occasion, the interview should never last longer than 20 minutes. The interviewer should then go away, listen to the tape, prepare her questions, and continue later. My interviews have lasted from two to five hours. On the rare occasions when the interview had to be interrupted and continued later, I had found that it was very difficult to re-establish the reminiscient autobiographical mood so essential for my purpose. As the workshop proceeded, with everyone laying down the law about the "right" way to interview, I realized that there is no one "right" way to collect oral history materials. It all depends on your purpose. And since the people in the workshop had many different purposes, their methods were also very different. For example, the gentleman who had spoken first was a journalist intent on writing articles that would be published, or books that would become "best-sellers". No wonder he had to keep his eye on the prospective audience. Since I had no such ambition, my methods would be different. The young lady in the Chair worked for CBC radio and television preparing short items for broadcast. These had to be not only short but sharp and to the point. Diffuse, rambling reminiscences would be of little use to her - so she had learned to chop up the interview and direct it in short bursts.

Accordingly, I do not believe there is only one "right" way to interview for oral history materials. It is important to have a clearly defined objective. That will determine the most appropriate methodology. The only methodology about which I can talk with confidence is a methodology that seems appropriate for my particular objective. (Parenthetically, I should remark that it seems to me that there is now an awful lot of taping going on that has no defined objective at all. This I deplore, since it results in so much wasted time and effort.) My objective is to collect, before it is too late, the live, off-hand, spontaneous reminiscences of veteran members of my profession for the use of

serious scholars of the history of this particular discipline. I do not plan to write a book that will sell, or produce a radio program that will be interesting. Furthermore, my purpose is not so much to collect "facts" about the history of psychology (since these can be determined more reliably from documents) as it is to collect the impressions of those who played important roles in the early development of the science and profession in Canada. Perhaps it should not be called "Oral History", but rather "Oral Reminiscences".

Some of the comments of the interviewees after the interview are of interest in this connection. Mary Northway has been taped nine times by different interviewers for different purposes. She writes:

"When one recalls experiences of many years, the product is a creative reconstruction resulting from the way in which one has modified experience of events and re-created these with the passage of time and intervening influences. This is a legitimate approach to history provided one accepts that....(one) is not seeking objective factual data. (These can of course be obtained from other sources.)"

She also rated her various interviews, and reports that the less the interviewer knew of the times or the person being talked about, the more she enjoyed the interview - the more she was able to "let herself go" and tell a good story without fear of contradiction. The question of whether the interviewer's knowledge of the subject under review is an advantage or a disadvantage is debatable. In most of the work I do, it seems to be an advantage to have been a psychologist. To have known many of the people talked about helps to keep the conversation going smoothly. For example, Dr. John MacEachren, in Edmonton at age 94, after reminiscing about his experiences in Wundt's laboratory in Leipzig in the 1890's, and later at the University of Alberta, said to his housekeeper afterwards:

"That young man (sic) knew so many of the people I have known, it was a pleasure talking to him."

Endel Tulving, now Chairman of the Department of Psychology at the University of Toronto, (whose special field of research is memory) writing from Yale a year and a half after the interview, said about his transcript:

"What a blabbermouth I am!... It is my impression that when I talk about bygone days I still think about events occurring then in the way I thought then, too.... Thus, reading certain parts of the interview, I knew that this is what I had said, but I kept wondering why I had said it that way, rather than the way I really think about them now. Are you sure I did not give that interview under hypnosis?.... Perhaps I should look into this matter of the apparent permanence of earlier interpretations of experienced events in the face of subsequent changes in the apperceptive mass."

From the remarks made by many of my subjects after the interview, I have no doubt whatever that the experience and skill of the interviewer are factors

of major importance. For example, Bob MacLeod, writing from Cornell a month after our interview there, said:

"I have had a good many recorded interviews, but never an interview conducted with so little tension. I was aware of the skills you used but never bothered by them."

Two years later (after reading the transcript):

"I am impressed all over again by your skill as an interviewer. You made it a pleasant and relaxing experience, yet you always kept the conversation beautifully under control."

For my purpose, it was important that the interview should take place in the interviewee's own office or home in order to provide familiar and comfortable surroundings. This not only facilitated a relaxed conversation but also probably served as an aid to memory. The willingness of people to participate in a project of this kind is impressive. If my interviewees had been asked to write their own autobiography, most of them would have found that they were simply too busy to do so. Writing an autobiography can be hard work and take a great deal of time. On the other hand, when asked simply to chat for a while about themselves and their careers with a colleague, they seemed genuinely glad to do so.

Each interview started with an explanation of the purpose: to collect tape recordings for the Oral History of Psychology in Canada. Then it was explained that the interview would be transcribed; that they would be sent two copies of the transcript so that they could review what they had said; that they could keep one copy for their own files; that they would be asked to return the other with any corrections or additions they wished to make; and that they would be asked to sign an authorization form, with or without restrictions, allowing both tape and transcript to be placed in the Archives and made available to scholars engaged in historical research. One of the first things this Archivist learned to do was always to test the tape-recorder at the beginning of each interview. He did this by recording the name of the person being interviewed and the location and date of the interview. After rewind, this portion was then played back to make sure that the machine was working properly. This was learned the hard way. In one of my very first interviews, I found that I had lost the first hour of the interview because the microphone had inadvertently been turned to "Off". This mistake was never allowed to happen again. However, on two subsequent occasions, this opening test of the equipment has revealed a failure to record properly which, without correction, would have resulted in the loss of the interview.

This interviewer does not use a structured interview or a standard set of questions. He does not probe or cross-question. His purpose is to create a warm, friendly, accepting atmosphere. He does, however, set himself to establish at the outset a strong autobiographical mood by asking first about place of birth (not year!); parents; siblings; earliest memories of family life; and the educational, political and religious atmosphere of the home. Beyond this, he merely encourages a chronological account and tries to be as spontaneous and relaxed as he wanted the interviewee to be. Most subjects start such an

interview by disclaiming anything much in the way of memories. Many start by saying: "This won't take long because I don't remember very much." But they end up with what amounts to almost "Total recall". After two or three or sometimes as much as five hours of reminiscing, they have to be stopped by the interviewer running out of tape or having to leave for another appointment.

Several things have been learned from these interviews. One is that the interviewer needs to get as much as he can on the first occasion because an interruption often results in subsequent resistance. Another is that the equipment used for recording provide a sound signal when it reaches the end of the tape. Both the interviewer and the interviewee become so absorbed in what they are talking about that they quickly forget all about the tape recorder and, unless reminded by sound signal, much of the interview can be lost. A further finding is that, for both the interviewer and the interviewee, this experience is nearly always very enjoyable. It is not often that someone sits down and, with genuine warmth and interest, listens to us reminisce about our life history and career experiences. Unlike the clinical interview, there is no problem to be solved - no ulterior motive. This is simply "for the record". There is no compulsion to talk about anything you don't want to talk about. So you feel free to talk about anything, big or small, that has happened to you. And this can be fun both to do and to listen to. On the other hand, the experience can be surprisingly tiring. Many subjects, after several hours spent in recalling their life history, report that they feel both exhilaration and fatigue. As for the interviewer, he too can get tired. When he started, this interviewer tried to schedule four interviews per day. He quickly found that this was too much, partly because most subjects needed at least two hours, and partly because his own alertness and effectiveness as interviewer decreased perceptibly as the day wore on. For this interviewer, two interviews per day proved to be optimal. Although tape cassettes are more convenient to use than spool tape for this type of work, the tape used in cassettes is necessarily very thin. Thus, there is the danger that a tape cassette, if allowed to stay unplayed for a considerable period of time, may "print through" in such a way as to produce a garbled and unintelligible recording. In order to ensure preservation of the recording over a long period of time it is necessary to have it re-recorded on high quality spool tape.

It was never the intention of the Archivist to collect this Oral History material exclusively for his own use. And yet the task of making the tapes readily accessible to anyone with a serious interest in them seemed to present very serious financial and distribution difficulties. As it turned out, the problems of both preservation and accessibility were very easily and quickly solved thanks to the excellent staff, facilities and services of the Public Archives of Canada (PAC) in Ottawa. PAC has re-recorded all of the cassette material onto a high-quality spool master tape. This has been indexed in such a way that any given interview can be readily located. Anyone who wishes a tape recording of a particular interview, if authorized by the CPA Archivist, may obtain it free of charge simply by sending sufficient blank tape cassettes to PAC. PAC has also copied and filed all of the released transcripts and these also, within reasonable limits, may be obtained at prevailing Xerox rates from PAC if authorized to do so by the CPA Archivist.