



Methods for Change

# Oral Histories and Futures

Dr Sarah Marie Hall,  
Dr Amy Barron,  
*The University of Manchester*

*Corresponding author*  
*Dr Sarah Marie Hall*  
*sarah.m.hall@manchester.ac.uk*

# Oral Histories and Futures

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*Oral Histories and Futures involve the recording of people's experiences and opinions about their pasts, present and futures. They adopt a detailed and comprehensive approach to thinking about an individual's life, as situated within a particular economic, social and political context.*

Typically used to research, document and preserve the unique life trajectories of marginalised groups, they move beyond collecting and recollecting life-courses to consider the present and the prospective. Oral Histories and Futures are about accessing imaginaries – thoughts, hopes, dreams, desires, possibilities – and understanding how the person we are today is shaped by the person we might want to become at some other point in the future. Participants are encouraged to talk about what they wanted to happen that has not, as much as where they might like their lives to go, thereby providing narratives that are multidirectional and multitemporal. While interviewing is the primary means of gathering data, Oral Histories and Futures can also incorporate a participatory component. This might involve asking participants to map their biographies on a timeline or asking them to write a note to their future self, and to reflect on these activities as part of the interview.



## How do Oral Histories and Futures create or contribute to change?

With Oral Histories and Futures, change does not have to be extravagant, grandiose or overtly transformational. Rather, change can be minor, subtle and something that is induced collectively. Through listening to the stories of individuals and understanding them as situated within particular contexts, Oral Histories and Futures can capture experiences of change surrounding culture, choice and preferences over time. Change can also come from unearthing and sharing often overlooked and marginalised experiences. Simply taking the time to listen to someone's life story can change how the participant and the researcher feel about themselves and their place in the world. If an interview has the potential to change someone then the researcher also has a responsibility to make sure they signpost to available support or counselling, and to recognise that the change might not always be positive or expected.

## What ideas or concepts influence this method?

Oral Histories and Futures build on the Oral History tradition by using interviewing techniques to record, document and preserve marginalised experiences. The innovation comes with the incorporation of the 'Futures' or prospective component. Building in a futures-oriented element is based on the premise that the narratives participants offer about their past and future imaginaries are always crafted in relation to what participants imagine for themselves in the future. This future might be immediate or further afield. In Oral Histories and Futures, participants are also encouraged to discuss how present experiences are shaped by their past. To miss out these imaginaries of the past and future would therefore provide an incomplete account of everyday life. Driven by a curiosity to gain rich insight into people's lives from personal perspectives and in the round, Oral Histories and Futures also take inspiration from participatory approaches by incorporating an interactive element. The participatory component is optional (see below) but insightful for how it encourages reflection, engagement and deeper consideration on the part of the interviewee.



## Why might I want to use Oral Histories and Futures?

- The storying of biographies, as the key purpose of Oral Histories and Futures, can encourage participants to understand all elements in their lives together in novel ways, by enveloping in reflections on past, present and future selves. As such, the method facilitates a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the lives of individuals and how they relate to particular contexts.
- Oral Histories and Futures can be used to bring marginalised voices and experience to the fore. Marginalised does not only apply to a particular social group (such as women or older people, for example). This method could also be used to shed light on an industry, a place, or an event, or to document a particular cultural, economic or political moment, such as a music genre or sub-culture, protests or elections, or economic crises.
- Oral Histories and Futures are also flexible methods that can be enrolled with other techniques, such as participatory life mapping or photo elicitation.
- Oral Histories and Futures provide rich material and often vast amounts of data – interviews are usually 60-90 minutes, and when accompanied by a task this produces a transcript and additional materials. By providing a space for participants to openly reflect, this method produces a mix of detailed day-to-day accounts and experiences as well as thick description of the life of a participant in the round.
- This method respects participants' narratives and can provide an open reflexive space for interviewees. Participants often feel better having spoken about something with an uncritical stranger and tend to leave understanding that their story matters. The space of the interview is also often used to work through ideas which the researcher is simultaneously considering.



*A hand reaching for a recorder, produced by Tom Young.*



## Step by step guide to using Oral Histories and Futures:

- 1. Who and what to research?** Before you start collecting data, make sure you know what marginalised experiences you are trying to capture and what will be done with that data. If the data will be used for an archive or in a public capacity, you will need to make sure that you draft recording agreements beforehand.
- 2. Recruit participants.** You can recruit participants in different ways including through gatekeepers, word of mouth, advertising on social media or through specific platforms to target people in an area or community. Once research has started, you could also ask participants if they know of anyone who is experiencing similar things who might be interested in being involved.

*Make sure participants are aware that an Oral History and Future is different to an interview in that they will be talking about details of their personal biographies, and to only answer questions that they are comfortable with.*

- 3. Arrive equipped with a very simple sheet of questions and prompts.** These questions should be a mixture of broad questions and generic prompts. You should start with questions that give the participant the chance to talk freely. Perhaps ask why they wanted to take part in the project. If the participant opens up at the start, this might provide a hint into something in their life that you can pick up on later.

*Remember that Oral Histories and Futures are a conversational tool. You should try to keep as quiet as possible, rather than aim for a dialogue, giving the participant the time and space to talk and offering an interested, empathetic ear. As you move through the questions, work at a pace that matches theirs, so the participant does not feel rushed.*

- 5. Introduce a participatory task.** The participatory element can happen in any part of the interview, but experience shows it works well when embedded later into the interview. If you are incorporating a participatory element, be sure to let the participants know beforehand. You could, for example, ask participants to reflect on what one piece of advice they would give to their future self and ask them to write it on a postcard.
- 5. How to end?** When you feel you have addressed all questions let the participant know in a gentle way to avoid an abrupt end to the interview. Ask the participant if there is anything that you have not asked that they think you should know, or whether there is anything about their situation that you might be interested in.
- 6. Checking in.** At the end of the interview, check that the participant feels okay and that they are still happy with what they have agreed to. If you are worried about somebody's wellbeing or the impact the interview has had on them, ensure they have somebody with them, in person or on the phone. You can also ask them to contact you later in the day, or you can contact them the next morning to check they are okay. Remember to signpost them to support or advice channels where necessary.



## An example of where Oral Histories and Futures have been used in social science research

### Lived experiences of reproduction in austerity

Researcher: Dr Sarah Marie Hall, The University of Manchester

This project is based on decisions around 'reproduction' – namely, having children or more children – within the context of austerity. The project took place with participants in the North East of England as this area has been hit particularly hard by austerity cuts and also has some of the lowest birth rates in the UK. Oral Histories and Futures were developed in this project to look at the experiences of people between the ages of 18 and 45 to talk about and understand why they have not had children, or as many children as they may have wanted, because of concerns about income, living arrangements, childcare costs and other factors.

In previous ethnographies of everyday life in austerity I had integrated biographical life mapping into discussions with participants, and the Oral Histories and Futures methodology evolved from here. The Oral Histories and Futures interviews ask about personal biographies, expectations of having their own children, present circumstances and future imaginaries. They also involve participants giving advice to their future selves, in the form of writing (or imagining writing) on a postcard. By experimenting with Oral History and Futures methods, the project has transformative potential for interdisciplinary

understandings and real-world applications concerning socio-spatial economic inequalities.

Many policy and charity organisations working on issues related to the focus of this project (poverty, welfare, family life, gendered inequalities etc.) recognise that policymaking processes need room for experimentation. There is also a wide appreciation that research which feeds into policy should go beyond shallow or anecdotal accounts. Policies which have an impact on people's lived experiences need to be informed by data that comes from people's lived experiences. The depth of Oral Histories and Future can provide such richness and detail, by investigating how people situate their lives and experiences in broader contexts.



## Where else could Oral Histories and Futures be used?

In capturing biographies in their fullest sense (memories, present experiences, imagined futures), Oral Histories and Futures can be applied to the study of people, things, institutions and places, and how they have changed over time. Oral Histories and Futures could be useful in research interested in the particular histories of a community, place or event, and they could also be used to explore different generational experiences or sub-cultures.

They can be useful beyond academia, and apply well to policy, third sector and industry; e.g. to explore the histories and futures of institutions, the formation or dissolution of community organisations, consumption and brand identities, or policy processes and adaptations. Some examples of organisations that could find this method particularly valuable include social housing providers, activist groups, and organisations that provide welfare support, who may be interested in exploring Oral Histories and Futures with service users, group members or other stakeholders.

The method can also be repeated over time, such as in projects with a longitudinal focus. Oral Histories and Futures can be incorporated into a broader research design, and match well with archival methods, ethnographic research and discourse analysis. They can also be integrated with secondary analysis and quantitative data, such as local and national demographic and economic statistics. The inclusion of Oral Histories and Futures can help to ensure that real world experiences are incorporated into policy-making in these various arenas.

### Top tips

1. Be patient. Don't push participants to respond if there is a silence or a pause.
2. Be flexible. Respond to the needs of the participant and adapt the method in a way that suits you.
3. Be comfortable with silences. A gentle prompt can encourage participants to speak further, knowing that you are interested in what they have to say.



## Further reading

- The Oral History society have a fantastic website and set of resources, including information on training in Oral History methods
- The US based equivalent, the Oral History Association, also have a very useful website
- The UK-based Scouts and Guides have some information on their website about activities and reflection on writing to future selves

**To reference:** Hall, S.M., Barron, A. (2021). 'Oral Histories and Futures' in Barron, A., Browne, A.L., Ehgartner, U., Hall, S.M., Pottinger, L. and Ritson, J. (eds.) *Methods for Change: Impactful social science methodologies for 21st century problems*. Manchester: Aspect and The University of Manchester.



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