



Methods for Change

# Oral Histories of Sensory Memories

Dr Roisín Higgins

*Maynooth University, Republic of Ireland*

# Oral Histories of Sensory Memories



*Sensory history is an approach that can be used with oral history interviews to deepen the understanding of participants' lived experience. Oral history interviews record people's memories of their pasts and a sensory approach builds on this by foregrounding the person's senses.*

A focus on the intersections between sight, sounds, smell, taste and touch allows interviewees to talk about many aspects of their lives in a human-centred and supportive way. This methodology draws on the idea that people hold stories in their whole bodies not just their minds and can help to explore the relationship between these memories and the society in which they were formed. This is particularly important when collecting histories from those who have been subjected to discrimination, prejudice or trauma. These are all multi-sensory experiences and the tension they generate can linger in the body.

Some sensory interview methodologies might isolate a single sense<sup>1</sup> or use drawing or walking as ways to engage with participants.<sup>2</sup> In the approach being outlined here, the interviewer and participant engage in a conversation which uses the five senses as prompts. The interview is very loosely structured and there is no need for it to be framed around a coherent or cohesive narrative. Participants can discuss fragments of memory, moments and sensations: the feeling of a tweed coat, patterns in a night sky or the sound of footsteps running down a street. Some people find it difficult to identify or articulate their sensory experiences. This approach, by being an open conversation, allows participants to describe what comes into their minds without any expectation that everything they convey will relate to specific senses. In fact, [we have more than five senses](#) including, some argue, an intuitive sense, or gut feeling. Often interviewees understand very quickly that what is being captured are experiences or their felt sense of the past, rather than events or complete life stories. This helps them to settle into the conversation and it is important to reassure people that they cannot 'get it wrong'. The senses are being used as a way of opening up conversation rather than constraining it.

<sup>1</sup> Perkins, C and McLean, K (2020) Smell walking and mapping, in *Mundane Methods* (Hall and Holmes, 2020)

<sup>2</sup> Rose, M (2020) Pedestrian Practices: Walking from the Mundane to the Marvellous, in *Mundane Methods* (Hall and Holmes, 2020)

# Oral Histories of Sensory Memories

---



A sensory oral history methodology, by asking participants to describe what was happening in their immediate environments, can help to release memories that may be lost within dominant political or societal narratives. This allows other, sometimes fragmented, stories to appear. While the approach is quite straightforward, by simply directing a participant's focus to their senses, the resulting conversations can be very impactful. By acknowledging that memories are carried physically as well as emotionally, the methodology allows interviewees to stay with the sensations of being alive at a certain time, facilitating an open, sometimes unexpected reflection of long-held memories. When used to interview people who have lived through war or instances of conflict, for example, a sensory approach expands our understanding of the physicality of violence as something that can be witnessed as well as felt. This helps to deepen our knowledge of the impact of conflict on individuals and communities.

# Oral Histories of Sensory Memories



## How does a sensory approach in oral histories create or contribute to change?

The use of a sensory approach in oral histories offers an important tool for support and advocacy groups. Conflict, prejudice, or trauma can lead to dehumanising and desensitising experiences. By returning to a sensory landscape in oral histories, it is possible to acknowledge the impact of this on human beings and to provide visibility of and validation for that which has been lost. This not only empowers individuals through an acknowledgement of the complexity of their experiences, it provides an important body of evidence which documents the psychological and social damage of traumatic events and the long-term repercussions for individuals and societies. The collection of this evidence has the potential to support reconciliation and repair for those living with traumatic histories.

Significantly, this methodology creates the potential for individuals, communities, or groups to draw on sensory testimonies in support of advocacy or activism that does not require participants to begin from a position of victimhood or defensiveness. Asking someone who is disabled to describe their sensory world allows them to relate their experience not from a position of disability but often from one of considerable strength. A blind person's description of touch, for example, can lead them to talk about reading, parenthood or nature in ways that reveal a much fuller sense of their lived experience. Asking a refugee to describe the light and colours they associate with their childhood provides an important point of human connection.

A sensory approach facilitates the composition of a different kind of history because it is not constructed within a political, military or economic framework. Rather, by centring human experience, represents the ordinary, everyday sensations of living through violence or trauma.

Thus, a focus on sensory memories allows for a broader and more complex understanding of certain situations or experiences. For example, in the context of conflict research, it can offer a way of capturing memories of seeing, hearing and living within an atmosphere of violence that is sometimes lost when the research focus is on significant or specific events. The weaving of the experiences of ordinary lives and extraordinary circumstances can reveal how living close to violence becomes normalised as part of daily life. This creates the possibility of bringing into focus the ambient nature of conflict or violence, and the stress of living in its vicinity. It provides a way of accessing otherwise hidden trauma. By building this body of evidence it is possible to facilitate empathy across communities which can be important in supporting peace initiatives. It also provides important information about the nature and scale of the long-term interventions necessary to support those affected.

With a sensory approach, change can happen in the space between people as the methodology centres and acknowledges the specificity of the human experience. It provides a different way for interviewer and interviewee to connect and for participants to recount their histories. By beginning with the senses, memories may emerge that are disjointed, half-forgotten and without the expectation of narrative cohesion. The smell of cooking on an ordinary afternoon can be merged with other experiences in a way that integrates different elements of an individual's life. Change happens through the openness of the process: it is not a search for specific data or the construction of a specific narrative. Therefore, the interviewer can let this process unfold, listening intently, allowing them to be open to the other's experience. The act of listening can be a transformative experience. The interviewee, met with openness, can feel supported and seen.

# Oral Histories of Sensory Memories



## What ideas or concepts influence this approach?

Using a sensory approach in oral histories is framed by the idea that by listening to narratives of difficulty, and by paying attention to the relationship between the external world and internal interpretations, it is possible to deepen our understanding of the society in which people and events were and are shaped. This methodology builds on the field of sensory history, an approach that has gained prominence recently. For instance, in [‘The State of the Field of Sensory History’](#), William Tullett posits that, by being attuned to the senses, we can gain a multidimensional understanding of the past. Mark M. Smith’s body of work and ‘Manifesto’ have also been very influential in the field.<sup>3</sup> His work, and that of other major scholars such as Constance Classen and David Howes, can be found collected on the [Sensory Studies](#) website. Using a sensory approach in oral history also draws on the insights from the work of [McAlister, Neill, Carr and Dwyer](#) which is expanding our understanding of the experiences of violence.

This methodological approach is also influenced by the work of Arthur Kleinman, psychiatrist and anthropologist who, along with Joan Kleinman, pioneered research that focuses on the relationship between social relations, cultural values and how individuals perceive and interpret their bodies.<sup>4</sup> Kleinman has shown how chronic illness, properly listened to, provides a way to understand the connection between the social world and individual experiences.

Finally, this methodology has been formed within the increasingly innovative field of oral history which continues to expand ideas of what constitutes an archive, and to examine the dynamic relationship between historians, the historical record and representations of the past. Innovations include [Walk-along Interviews](#) and [Oral Histories and Futures](#).

<sup>3</sup> Perkins, C and McLean, K (2020) *Smell walking and mapping*, in *Mundane Methods* (Hall and Holmes, 2020)

<sup>4</sup> Kleinman, A. and Kleinman, J. (1994) ‘How Bodies Remember: Social Memory and Bodily Experience of Criticism, Resistance, and Delegitimation following China’s Cultural Revolution’, *New Literary History* 25:3, 707-23.

# Oral Histories of Sensory Memories



## Why might I want to use a sensory approach in oral histories?

- Interviewing someone about their sensory memories allows them to return to personal moments of recollection, the sensations and experience associated with their lives. This is particularly important when interviewing someone who may have experienced marginalisation, discrimination, or other moments of heightened emotions because it centralises their memories and allows them to isolate certain moments to talk about how they felt.
- Our senses are the bridge between inner lives and the society within which those lives are formed. Interviewing people about their sensory memories provides valuable insights into how sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touch have been received and understood by individuals. This helps us to gain a much better understanding of the people who are being interviewed and the society around them.
- Traumatic events often cannot be properly encoded in memory, so their recall is fractured and they exist outside a cohesive narrative structure. A sensory approach that attempts to capture moments and fragments of memory is sympathetic to and well suited to this form of remembering. This has potential application across many groups from those who have experienced conflict to those who have experienced eviction, displacement, discrimination, or different forms of violence.
- This is a non-judgemental, human centred approach that does not ask participants to explain or justify their actions. The interest is in experiences rather than how or why individuals or groups acted in a certain way.
- This is an open-ended approach so each interview is very different, directed by the interviewee, and the result can be unexpected and fascinating. This is a very simple method, but it is also quite profound.

# Oral Histories of Sensory Memories



## Step by step guide to using a sensory approach in oral histories

- 1. Ethics:** Before you begin, give time and consideration to the ethics of your project. Write a clear Information Sheet (see pop-up box below). It is very important that all participants give informed consent. Draw up a Consent Form in which participants agree to be interviewed, and a Copyright Form in which participants agree to give the copyright of the interview to you/your research project (see pop up box below). Send the Information Sheet and consent forms ahead of the interview so that participants have time to read and think about the project and any questions they might have. They can ask questions and sign their forms when you meet. It is very important that it is clear the focus of the interview will be on sensory memories and potentially difficult subjects.
- 2. Archiving:** If interviews are being recorded for academic purposes arrange to have them stored in an archive or digital repository in digital form. If participants want to be anonymised, the access to the interviews will be restricted. However, anonymised, redacted transcripts may be made available to the public.
- 3. Meeting:** Let participants decide where you will meet. They will be more likely to feel relaxed and comfortable. If they want to meet outside, make sure you have a wind-canceller on your recording device. Always think about your own safety when agreeing to the meeting place.
- 4. The interview:** Move through the five senses. Keep it simple by asking, for example, 'What comes into your mind when I say "touch"'? Keep all questions open-ended and free from judgement. Interviews can vary in length but generally average an hour.
- 5. Follow up:** Email participants to thank them for taking part.
- 6. Final version:** Send a copy of their transcript to participants asking if they would like anything removed. Sometimes people want to remove stories that relate to family members or friends which might identify or hurt them. It is important that they are given the opportunity to do this. The interviewee must feel happy and comfortable with anything that will be made public.

### What should I include in my information sheet?

*Outline the purpose of the project and answer relevant questions including:*

- *How will information be collected and stored?*
- *How will you protect personal data?*
- *Can my identity be anonymised?*
- *What are the benefits and risks of taking part?*
- *What happens if I change my mind?*
- *What happens if I reveal illegal activities?*
- *Who has access to the material?*
- *What happens at the end of the project?*
- *Will the research be published, and will I be quoted?*
- *Who can I contact if I am unhappy with the process?*

### What is a copyright form and why do I need it?

*In a copyright form, participants are asked if they agree to their interview being part of a research project and any outputs that come from it. This is a way of ensuring that everyone involved has a clear understanding that their interview may be used as part of, for example, a book, exhibition, policy document, art piece or television documentary.*



## Examples of Remembering Conflict through Sensory Histories in social science research

### Sensing the Troubles

#### Researcher:

*Dr Roisín Higgins*

*Teesside University, funded by a Leverhulme*

*Research Fellowship, 2021-2*

My aim in this project was to collect memories of the 1969-98 conflict in Northern Ireland. I wanted to write a different kind of history, one that wasn't tied to the political narrative. Beginning with sensory memories, what emerged were experiences of everyday life in the midst of conflict, including bomb scares, security checks, helicopters overhead and, in some areas, rioting and the constant threat of violence. In recorded conversations, I asked participants to describe what came into their minds when I mentioned sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. Each person's memories started in a different way, and all were very individual and included domestic scenes and external landscapes, providing textured, intricate memories of their younger selves.

The methodology I have outlined in this How-to Guide was developed as part of this Leverhulme project. I interviewed 61 people, individually and in groups. I approached advocacy organisations in order to reach people who are members of the deaf and blind communities, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and members of ethnic minorities. I interviewed people from a variety of geographical areas and with a range of life experiences.

I explained to each person I spoke to that I wanted to know what was happening around them, not the big news stories but their individual experience. A focus on the sensory impact of living in proximity to conflict (the impact of seeing, hearing and being touched by violence) helped to expand the understanding of how violence reverberates through lives and communities. Participants have acknowledged the importance of their experiences being heard. One interviewee, who was a young nurse during the Troubles, said, 'I think it's a great thing that you're doing, I really do. I think it's a great thing because... I mean who wants to listen to the like of me talking about that [being a student nurse during the conflict]?' I am writing a book about the project findings and about the experience of doing this research, and will collaborate with arts practitioners to disseminate the work to academic and non-academic audiences.





## Towards a Sociosomatic History of the Troubles

### Researchers:

*Dr Roisín Higgins, Teesside University, (PI)*

*Professor Cahal McLaughlin, Queen's University Belfast (CI)*

*in collaboration with Kabosh Theatre Company.*

*Funded by an AHRC Networking Grant, 2022-23.*

The aim of the networking activities in this project is to promote (and provoke) new thinking around how we record, write and represent the social history of conflict. This project is ongoing.

Our aim is to construct a methodological approach for creating a sociosomatic history of the Troubles. By sociosomatic we mean the impact of society on the body. By bringing together national and international cross-disciplinary expertise, the network is developing the theoretical framework and research tools to support an approach to past conflict which considers the impact of social dynamics on individual experience.

Participants consider how sight, sound, smell, taste and touch (and their intersections) can be most effectively used to recall and represent moments from the past, and how these embodied memories provide significant insights into wider social structures and interactions during and after conflict.

Central to the network is a discussion of how to represent and understand aspects of conflict and its legacy through a variety of media including art, literature, museums, architecture and theatre.

The project includes five networking events which bring together academics, arts practitioners, community activists and members of advocacy groups. A focus on a sensory approach creates an inclusive and creative starting point and has drawn interest from a wide range of disciplines and practices.

Dissemination of the network's findings will include a website, peer-reviewed articles and a creative piece by Kabosh Theatre Company. Conversations and outcomes from the network can be found at [www.sensingthetroubles.com](http://www.sensingthetroubles.com).



## Where else could sensory memories in oral histories be used?

### Connecting with refugee communities

A sensory approach is a sensitive way to interview people who are vulnerable and may have been marginalised, as it allows them to describe rather than explain. It creates the potential for participants to recall a range of experiences from food and music to fabrics and the familiar smells of home. A sensory approach can provide a way to discuss traumatic events or deepen the understanding of what has been lost, and it also creates an opportunity for interviewees to depict multiple aspects of themselves and their lives.

### Listening to prison populations

Prison creates a whole range of sensory cues which can become normalised to those who have been incarcerated. A sensory approach is a different way of asking someone about their life and also has the potential to deepen our understanding of the experience of being in prison. It is a good way of beginning a conversation with people who may feel judged or defensive. This may be a particularly effective method for understanding the lives of people who have been held in institutions.

### Learning from disability groups

Locating questions in the embodied experience is a wonderful way to talk to people who are disabled by society and who may have an acute awareness of the range of sensory information they receive at different times. Recording the memories of, for example, deaf or blind people also heightens awareness of their particular vulnerabilities during times of upheaval or conflict.

## Top tips

- Remember that the person you are interviewing is more important than any outcome. Take care of them and respond to what they need.
- Be curious and listen intently. Try not to hurry the process.
- Be open. Let the research evolve and follow its own pattern. Don't try to control it. Give yourself permission to feel lost.

# Oral Histories of Sensory Memories



## Further reading

- Hall, S.M and Holmes, H (Eds), (2020), *Mundane Methods: Innovative ways to research the everyday*, Manchester University Press
- Higgins, R. "You didn't see it, but you could hear the echoes and the sounds": sounds and silences during the Troubles', Irish Studies Seminar, Queen's University Belfast, 21 November 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CYCQnR8ZpK8>Roisín Higgins
- Higgins, R. 'The sight, sound and smell of the Troubles: a sensory way of remembering the conflict', Irish Times, 31 May 2022 <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/the-sight-sound-and-smell-of-the-troubles-a-sensory-way-of-remembering-the-conflict-1.4885930>
- Higgins, R. 'Fragments of Conflict' Writing the Troubles blog, <https://writingthetroublesweb.wordpress.com/2022/01/10/fragments-of-conflict-a-sensory-history-of-the-troubles/>
- Kleinman, A. & Kleinman, J. (1994) 'How Bodies Remember: Social Memory and Bodily Experience of Criticism, Resistance, and Delegitimation following China's Cultural Revolution', *New Literary History* 25:3, 707-23.
- McAlister, S., Neill, G., Carr, N., & Dwyer, C. (2022) *Gender, violence and cultures of silence: young women and paramilitary violence*, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 25:8, 1148-1163
- Smith, M.S. (2021) *A Sensory History Manifesto*, Penn State University Press.

### To reference:

Higgins, R. (2023) 'Oral Histories of Sensory Memories' in Rodekirchen, M., Pottinger, L. Briggs, A., Barron, A., Eseonu, T., Hall, S. and Browne, A.L. (eds.) *Methods for Change Volume 2: Impactful social science methodologies for 21st century problems*. Manchester: Aspect and The University of Manchester.

### Funding:

The methodology outlined in this guide is the product of research funded by a Leverhulme Research Fellowship, 2021-2.



**To read about more exciting social science methods, the full range of Methods for Change 'how-to' guides can be found here.**