

Creating and Presenting Oral Life Histories in Exhibitions

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Paper presented for the conference "Can Oral History Make Objects Speak?", Nafplion, Greece. October 18-21, 2005.

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1. Creating Oral Life Histories

When oral life histories are created or elicited for exhibitions, researchers or exhibitors must pay attention to the nature of oral life histories. Life history is a personal account of one's experiences. Life history as a text—that is, as a document that fixes the transient even of telling—has three basic constituent features: narrativity, temporality, and subjectivity.

First of all, life history is a narrative, which has a story, told or elicited. Narrative as a “manner of speaking” about events (White 1980:7) has three elements: story, discourse, and telling (Bruner 1986:145). Story is a means of organizing and articulating experience with a beginning and an end. Discourse is what the story manifests; telling is the act of forming discourse from the story.

Second, temporality is basic to the study of lives. While lives are lived in the present, biographic time of the past, present, and future is not linear, but interactional (Denzin 1986:10, Corradi 1991:107). Telling of the past is always present, and the past events to be told are selected deliberately under the criterion of their significance to the context of the present situation (Kohli 1981:67). Our memories are also selective. In Langness and Frank's (1981:109) words, "to remember something is not just to repeat it." Meaning is replaced and recreated whenever the events remembered are told (Barthes 1982:289-290). In this sense, telling is not only a way of describing what happened, but also an important way of making things go on.

Lastly, one's life history presents a temporal, narrativized self through discursive practices with one's own subjectivity. The biography as the flow of experiences is one of the essential dimensions in which the stream of consciousness is articulated (Schutz & Luckmann 1973:56-58). The story of a life is, however, not an accomplished fact of consciousness, but an emergent form in discourse with another or with oneself (Frank 1979:86).

2. Presenting Oral Life Histories in Exhibitions

When oral life histories are presented in exhibitions, exhibitors must pay attention to several methodological issues on life history studies: the representativeness of a subject, "truths" in stories, and the role of researchers or exhibitors in their interpretation.

The representativeness of a subject is related to researchers' (and exhibitors') motivations for life history projects. Those who are interested in portraying a culture through a detailed narration of a subject's life events are more concerned with the representativeness of a subject. The life histories concerning not a culture but an individual life, however, deal with a subject's own account rather than a typical, representative, or ordinary person's account. Of course, anyone is both unique and representative.

A subject's own account may be examined in terms of the articulation between personal and cultural meanings, a reworking of basic cultural representations, or the tension between social pressure and individual responses. In order to understand the interplay between the individual and her culture, we must understand the position and typification of a subject in her culture and society. In other words, we must examine

“life cycles” in a subject’s culture (Rosaldo 1976:149. Watson & Watson-Franke 1985:59) or life histories other than the one to be interpreted (Modell 1983), paying attention to the “person-in-setting” or a “background” as it is composed by every single individual. Contextualizing a subject’s life or situating her in a cultural or social system becomes a primary approach to the analysis and presentation of life history.

Telling and memory are selective. The past events to be told must be understood as only the expression of one facet of experience. By paraphrasing James Clifford’s argument on ethnographic writings (1986:6), life history is a “true fiction” which does not connote falsehood or something opposed to truth but suggests “the partiality of cultural and historical truths.” Truth in the life history rests not in “facts,” but in the degree to which the narrator’s presentation of self communicates to her intended audience (Angrosino 1989:9).

Since a life history is a communication of oneself to others and is generally elicited by a researcher, the eliciting process is an integral part of the life history. Furthermore, interpreting the life history already begins with the process of eliciting it, because the preunderstandings of a researcher or an exhibitor affect eliciting it. When a Western anthropologist interprets life histories of non-Western peoples, anthropological assumptions and the Western assumption of biography constitute a part of her preunderstandings. Lawrence Watson (1989:324), for example, admits that Western anthropologists’ identification of individuality and uniqueness in their interpretation of non-Western people’s life histories ultimately results from their own special activities of engaging and appropriating the texts of non-Western people’s lives into the interpreters’ world.

3. A Life History of a Jeju Woman

In order to illuminate how oral life histories are created and interpreted, I will introduce the life history whose subject was suspected to be a Communist guerrilla during April Third Uprising in Jeju Island, Korea (Yoo 2004). Led by Communist guerilla bands, the people of Jeju Island rose up on April 3, 1948, in opposition to elections scheduled for South Korea under the U.S. Military Government. It was followed by the mass massacre carried out in the name of hunting for the Reds and ended on September 21, 1954. During the uprising, about 30,000 people out of the then 300,000 odd people of

the island were killed by the army, the police, and Communist guerillas (Merrill 1989:63). The army and the police killed most of them.

Kang Jeong-Sun, a seventy-seven-year-old woman as of 2001, served the sentence for ten months from December 1948 to October 1949. She was suspected to help Communist guerrillas when she lived at her home village not far from the camp of guerrilla bands in Halla Mountain. She was even suspected to be a guerrilla who intended to kill her husband, a policeman, because a concubine of her husband informed against her. She was tortured during examination. According to so-called factual truth under martial law at that time, she was guilty. In a court-martial, however, she did not understand why she was given a one-year sentence. After serving the sentence, she married her second husband and had borne five children. She had no child when she lived with her first husband for five years. It was the reason why he had a concubine.

She interprets such suffering experience in the context of her family life, and then imputes it to her first marriage. The April Third Uprising in the event-time of her age of twenty-five is the turning point in her whole life. The body that had borne children becomes the main part of her subjectivity. With her storytelling, she has created her self by emphasizing her efforts in raising her children very well and in making a good living, rather than simply complaining of her pain mainly from being tortured.

Before I elicited her life history in two times of interview, it was already elicited in one time of interview by other interviewer. When three kinds of her oral texts are compared, her story is reiterated the same in each interview that she left her home village after her father and other villagers were killed during April Third Uprising. It is most important to her when and why she left for Jeju City where she was arrested. About the situation in which she was suspected to be a guerrilla, however, she tells a somewhat different story in each interview. The differences in some details come partly from her rhetoric that she cannot help emphasizing that she did not help guerrillas in any way, needless to say that she was not a guerrilla. The narrative truth that she is innocent is the only truth for her.

4. A Photo Exhibition on Oral Life Histories: From the Perspective of a Visitor

In order to illuminate how oral life histories are presented in exhibitions, I will introduce the photo exhibition, "Yesterday and Today: A Photo Exhibition on 80

Ordinary Korean People.” The Group for the People without History, a research team to collect oral life histories, photographs, and any other personal materials, held it in Seoul (July 6-19), Daegu (July 22-August 3), and Jeonju (September 7-25) this year. (see photo 1)



Photo 1: A visitor in the photo exhibition

In the exhibition three kinds of objects for each subject are displayed: from the right, a short summary of the life history, two recent photographs taken by a professional photographer, and two old photographs in the possession of each subject. (see photo 2) Their owner, the subject, selects two old photos. While two recent photos have no caption, old photos have it. The captions says when and where the photos were taken, what the subject told a researcher about the photos, or a researcher’s commentary contextualizing the photos in the whole life of the subject. During the exhibition, several subjects were invited to the gallery and they talked about their lives. (see photo 3 and 4) Audio-visual presentations of oral life histories were also given. (see photo 5)



Photo 2: Three kinds of objects for each subject to be displayed



Photo 3: A subject in front of the set of her photos



Photo 4: Several subjects to be invited to the gallery



Photo 5: Audio-visual presentation in the gallery

As a visitor, I would like to review the exhibition. In terms of communication between exhibits and visitors, all exhibits except for recent photographs are too small to

read and watch. Particularly, old photos are displayed with an original one. An enlarged copy should have been displayed with the original photo, because a part of the oral life history text of the owner, which had to be a caption, could make her old photos speak. A chronology of the subject's life is more readable than a summary of her life history.

With regard to presentation of oral life histories, the exhibition seemed to fail to contextualize a subject's life or situating her in a cultural or social system. Contextualizing it is a primary approach to the presentation of them. At least the turning point in her whole life, identified by the subject herself or a researcher, or what the subject told a researcher about her own old photos should have been positioned in her culture and society. The position or typification of a subject in her culture and society may be displayed in terms of posters to explain it and any other objects to show it.

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