

A New and Growing Profession: Personal Historians Listening to Elders' Life Stories

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In 1995, the Association for Personal Historians (APH) held its first meeting in Cambridge, Massachusetts with about 12 participants. Personal historians assist individuals, families, community groups, and even some businesses, to record their history in written, audio, and/or video format. Now a 501(c)(4) trade organization with an average membership of about 600, the APH has developed annual meetings, an active listserv, and a website. The academic literature indicates that in uncovering traumatic memories, caution for narrators is warranted. The article identifies skills and issues to be considered as educational programs for this new profession develop.

In a 1996 article proclaiming "The Age of the Literary Memoir Is Now," James Atlas discussed best-selling memoirs and described literary agents chasing memoirists for six-figure deals. While his article clearly indicated the growing interest in reading others' life stories, what it didn't mention was the large number of ordinary people, such as elders, who were recording their stories for family archives. Seventeen years later, the trend of ordinary folks recording their stories orally, in writing, or on video in limited editions for their progeny has led to an emerging industry and an international organization, the Association of Personal Historians (APH), with approximately six hundred members committed to helping them do so. Just a year before Atlas's proclamation, Kitty Axelson Berry coined the term *personal historian* and gathered a dozen or so such historians who had developed small businesses in this new field for their first meeting in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Since this group, which became the APH, was founded, according to *New York Times* reporter J. Peder Zane, the rise of new information technologies "dovetail[ed] with a larger cultural shift recognizing the importance of ordinary lives.... The shift is helping to redefine the concept of history, as people suddenly have the tools and the desire to record the lives of almost everybody" (2013, p. F7).

As the information age has moved into the 21st century, we have additional evidence of the popularity of ordinary people's recording their life stories. For instance, "approximately 85,000 veterans have donated

their stories" to the military Veterans History Project, created by the U.S. Congress in 2001 and housed in the Library of Congress (Harris, 2013). Similarly, StoryCorps® is an American nonprofit founded in 2003 whose mission is to provide Americans of all backgrounds and beliefs an opportunity to record, share, and preserve their stories on a compact disk that, with permission, is also preserved in the Library of Congress. Since 2003, 50,000 people have shared their life stories this way, and a few are being selected for Friday morning airing on National Public Radio's "Morning Edition."

In addition to personal historians, other history-related business professionals also collect personal information from ordinary people. For years, oral historians have persuaded both famous and not-so-famous individuals to recall personal stories related to an historical event of significant import. In a similar vein, genealogists have meticulously and ardently traced birth, marriage, death, and other important information back into centuries of family histories.

What separates those in the new professional field of personal historians from genealogists and oral historians appears to be method, a micro-business format, and theoretical framework, each of which will be discussed below. The APH has a very active website for clients and members and a listserv that links members. This provides prospective clients with easy access to locating a practitioner in nearly all of the fifty U.S. states, Canadian provinces, and several other countries. Most members are female, and 11% are videographers (Coffin, 2013). The APH hosts an annual meeting, which has been held in various locations in the United States and Canada. The membership of 600 tends to be fluid; in 2012, for instance, 30% of the membership left the organization, but the organization

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grew by 45%. As executive director, Linda Coffin, explains, “The dropout rate tends to be the highest among new members, indicating that many people simply join to explore the field and test the waters” (Coffin, 2013).

Methods

Although the formats used by personal historians vary, they generally include the following:

- interviewing individuals or groups and then publishing the results in written form;
- video and/or audio recordings of edited interviews; and
- teaching workshops, in which individuals learn the art of constructing an interesting life story.

Microbusiness Format

Most APH members and others operating under this new shingle own and operate small businesses (most by themselves, some in pairs), which also entails learning and applying marketing and advertising techniques. Additional skills are needed to interact with government entities concerning registration, collecting state or local taxes, and complying with state/province rules and other regulations, such as copyright law. Many practitioners consult with others for assistance in accounting, book design, legal questions, printing, binding, technical support, research services, and other functions involved with delivering end products to clients/narrators. Business savvy is no small issue, and the APH’s listserv, members’ section of the website (www.PersonalHistorians.org), and annual meetings are heavily used to seek such counsel and advice from other members.

In contrast to the microbusinesses operated by personal historians, credentialed professionals involved in the telling of life stories through reminiscence and life review (psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, nurses, occupational/art therapists, and others) have primarily utilized them to provide further research, psychological therapy, dementia care, and group activities in long-term care settings. Aides using reminiscence and life review, if not credentialed themselves, are carefully supervised. APH, however, currently does not require professional training nor offers a certification program to their members. Annual membership requires only a signed statement of compliance with their code of ethics.

Theoretical Framework

In *Transformational Reminiscence: Life Story Work* (2007), John A. Kunz and Florence Gray Soltys offer a theoretical framework called a Life Story

Matrix, which contains three dimensions or continuums of life-story work that personal historians consider when working with client narrators:

- from reminiscence to life review: Should the interviews and final product consist of a free flowing stream of memories or a structured list of questions?
- from private to public: Who will be the audience or target market (e.g., library, place of worship, community organization, family and friends, or general public)?
- from content to process: What is most important to the project: gathering exact details or impressions, the emotional impact on narrator or reader, and/or the informational impact on narrator or reader?

Issues and Challenges

Despite the benefits and satisfactions of life story work, personal historians must also be aware of several possible dangers and pitfalls of such work. During interviews about their life stories, individuals occasionally uncover traumatic memories. As Robert N. Butler advises, “Not all outcomes are favorable; sometimes life review results in a major depression or a depressive mood” (2000, p. 4). Kunz and Soltys emphasize that “in non-clinical applications, life story professionals must be prepared to screen for such issues, and know how and where to make referrals” to other helping professionals (2007, p. 9). Recent research by narrative gerontologists has observed that we continue to develop new meaning for our lives in later life, and elders who believe that their life story has come to an end (now identified as narrative foreclosure) may sometimes struggle with this as a problem (Bohlmeijer et al., 2011). Personal historians need on-going education, training, and practice to follow such developing research and expert recommendations and to apply this knowledge while working in the field.

Based on my experience as a personal historian helping more than 300 elders or persons in hospice produce their life stories in a limited edition memoir, the following skills are necessary to develop a successful and ethical practice:

- creating and managing a small business (e.g., business plan, pricing, marketing);
- assessing clients to uncover possible risk factors (e.g., possible depression, health limitations);
- developing interviewing principles (e.g., creating a safe environment and developing sensitivity to cultural diversity);

- adapting practices to the usual gerontological characteristics of late-life narrators (e.g., hearing loss, limited energy); and
- upholding ethical principles (e.g., reducing risk, confidentiality, setting clear family and personal boundaries, legal and business issues).

Each of these is critical to success (and is discussed in more detail in Tyrrell, 2012). Some of the skills can be accomplished through gaining new information, and others require sensitivities and discretion best learned in an experiential setting. Training programs are currently offered by a few private companies and emerging programs in academic settings, such as St. Catherine University in St. Paul, Minnesota and the University of Wisconsin, Superior.

Conclusion

Now that personal historians have become more numerous and visible, thousands of elders are being helped to tell and preserve their life stories for family and friends, sometimes concurrently resolving old issues and possibly being at risk for negative outcomes. In addition to the APH, the International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review has helped create a stable network of highly esteemed academic researchers in the field (IIRLR, www.reminiscenceandlifereview.org). And hundreds of new personal historians may need help translating that research into practice; not to provide therapy, but to safely assist elders in the “summing-up” phase of their lives, as Gene Cohen recently described it (2005).

Although elders have orally passed on their life stories to the following generations for millennia, personal historians are breaking new ground in demonstrating this venture as a successful commercial venture. With that in mind, several research questions beg for further attention. Among these are the identification of assessment and outcome criteria, the

development of training guidelines for this new profession, and an examination of the short- and long-term effects of the process of sharing a life story on clients and their families.

In the video, “The Joys and Surprises of Telling Your Life Story” (Kunz, 2002), James E. Birren, defines life story work thusly:

It’s therapeutic, but it’s not therapy. It’s not problem-centered. When you have a problem, you go see a therapist or a counselor or someone else. With your life story, it’s releasing to tell your life story, but it’s the same kind of release you sometimes experience by having a cup of coffee with a good friend and suddenly get an insight. It’s a part of normal life.

To capture that experience and conversation in a form that can be shared with others and preserved for future generations is the mission of the personal historian.

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