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Falls Community Council's oral history archive: Dúchas

Reading an article in the Guardian recently, I was struck by a definition of quantum physics by David Lodge that reminded me of oral history – ‘the discovery in quantum physics that an event is ultimately inseparable from its observation, undermining the assumption that science is absolutely objective and impersonal’. The practice of oral history finds the meaning of events in the memories of people who experienced them and therefore opens up many layers of historical interpretation. There is I believe an ever growing realisation that history cannot be absolutely objective and moreover should not be handed down to us from a powerful establishment.

Oral history is an approach that can give a more complex and nuanced account of history as well as giving a voice to those most marginalized. In many ways the whole project of oral history directly addresses and challenges concepts of power and authority. This is clearly evident in the project of giving a voice to people who are usually ignored in official accounts. It is also manifest in the method that is used, the interview, which opens up the account to individual interpretation. The oral history interview also permits examination of the role of the researcher, the assumptions she brings to the interview and the interaction between researcher and contributor. In all of this there is much potential for deeper understanding and for a history that places ‘ordinary’ people as agents rather than objects of history.

Falls Community Council's oral history archive Dúchas, is an oral history of the conflict as experienced by the people of nationalist West Belfast. The project began three years ago and now has a digital sound archive to enable public access. Eighty interviews have been recorded to date with some forty currently available through the archive. The archive is currently accessible by visiting the Falls Community Council and plans are underway to make it available on the internet.

The word Dúchas means the experiences that make us what we are and this conveys something of the motivation for the project. The origins of Dúchas lie in the peace process which began in the early nineties. The idea began to be formulated in Falls Community Council in 1994 although it was some six years later before initial funding from the first European Special Programme for Peace and Reconciliation was secured. It stemmed from a desire to recount a history that has not yet been told and in doing so to contribute to a process of political and social transformation. As a history of conflict and war it seems to me that the issues of power and authority are thrown into strong relief with the risks of speaking out still very immediate for many of our potential contributors.

From the beginning there was a strong commitment for Dúchas to encompass diverse accounts. This very commitment revealed an understanding of power relationships and the development of hierarchies by Falls Community Council. The fact that Dúchas is part of a community development organisation that has been going for thirty years is I believe one of its greatest strengths. There is a shared philosophy in the processes of community development and oral history which brings in an

understanding of power and opens up the space for the possibility for diverse accounts and perspectives. Applying the concepts of power and hierarchy to achieve diversity goes against the prevailing discourse of two communities here in the North, a discourse that actually stifles creativity and the questioning of the status quo.

Linked to the idea of hierarchies is the pitfall of the dominant narrative which can exclude alternative views. The danger of the dominant narrative is spoken about by Lapovsky Kennedy in her critical reflection on her work of recording the histories of lesbians in Buffalo, USA. Her article describes the danger of constructing a meta narrative – an overarching story – around the formation of a unitary lesbian identity with the Stonewall riot as a key moment in lesbian and gay history. She argues that while this yields much, it also commits the oral historian to a particular vision of gay and lesbian history which leaves out many people and alternative perspectives. She argues for opening interpretative frameworks. It strikes me that she is describing a process, perhaps a necessary one, of discovery and development in her work that I can see also in Dúchas.

Originally we began the interview collection by interviewing people affected by defining events of the conflict such as the attacks on Catholic homes in August 1969, the introduction of internment in 1971, the hunger strikes of 1980 and 81 and so on. However as the project progressed we began to adopt a life history approach to the interviews, asking people about their early years and moving the interview through their life. This is a counter I believe to the meta narrative tendency described by Kennedy. The interviews still maintain a focus on the conflict and our understanding of it but there is more room for the contributor's interpretative framework to emerge. For Dúchas it has yielded immense benefits in the richness of the material collected. It also furthers one of the aims of the Dúchas archive to enable understanding of the conflict. The life history approach exposes a lived experience of the sectarianism and discrimination under the Northern Ireland state before 1969 that is more revealing than any statistics and that provides a context to the outbreak of the conflict. The approach also creates other interpretive frameworks around gender and class for example as well as revealing social, economic and cultural histories.

A process of informed consent underpins the Dúchas process of interview collection from the first approach to do an interview until the contributor agrees to its entry in the archive. The interviews are transcribed in full and can be both read and listened to through the digital archive. This reveals also the interviewer role in the interview. Recent debates in oral history have given much attention to this, seeing the interview as an interplay or interactive event in which both interviewee and interviewer are actors. This further highlights the agency of the interviewee and makes the interviewer more conscious of their role. Grele for instance talks about the interview as a contest between interviewer and interviewee with each contesting for control of the interview and the interpretation of the interview. Seeing the interview in this way allows the observer to see the worldview of both participants and how they fit. It also allows for an analysis of the power relationships at work in the interview. Grele theorises that that while the interviewer uses a language of analysis the interviewee uses a language of narrative and proposes that the interviewer language of analysis can undermine the interviewee in situations where they are attempting to break through a dominant worldview or express dissent. This is not to say that the interviewer should not adopt a questioning or analytical stance, merely that the

questions asked may interrupt the emergence of a narrative particularly if the questions are underpinned by dominant world view assumptions.

For the researchers in Dúchas this increasing awareness of our role and the knowledge that we too are being exposed in the interview situation is a good leveller. Moreover it brings a critical approach to our own practice that can only support the histories we are aiming to uncover.

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References

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