

# The Human Factor in Oral History as Agents of Social Transformation

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## Introduction

Today the challenge for social scientists working for transformation in South Africa lies in changing the direction of human progress. Attempts should be made to rescue what still remains of what I, for lack of a better word should term, the transcendental, spiritual and human content. A radical change in the way life was viewed would ensure that progress and development were not conceived solely in terms of transfer of skills and economic power to the previously deprived, but help all recover their humanness. The society of which we are part needs to be helped to recover its human character lost through the experiences of colonisation, racism and apartheid. Our recent historic past had a way of turning us into homonised objects distinguishable from animals in the way we talked, walked, ate and slept. It is possible to be homonised as part of the evolution process. But it is through sharing biographies (individual stories) and learning our common history of South African society from new perspectives that dignity, identity and humanity shall be restored. It is going to be important for South Africans to acknowledge their responsibility and accountability for what may pass as the history of the nation.

To implement what seems to be advocated here, is not going to be an easy exercise considering the academic orientation of many in this country who are trained in the West European mould of schol-

arship. Is it not true that the positivistic approach has dominance over a significant number of academics and wields tremendous influence in determining what are acceptable procedures of research? Among members of the scientific community the positivistic approach is further used as a tool for distinguishing between what is academic on the one hand, and what is polemic. It must be admitted that as an approach, the scientific research method has features that certainly guarantee the reservation of fixed standards of objectivity, truthfulness and authenticity. A researcher using the natural science approach retains control over the process ie. from the formation of the hypothesis to the point where the report is produced.

Whether Studies, whose centre of focus are humans could be conducted in the crude detached manner as required by natural sciences is a question that this paper raises as a concern. Further, there is a definite capitalist attitude that seems to attend positivistic situation of study. It is one that compels emphasis only on production and profit. Among academics of this persuasion all talk tends to centre on production of knowledge if not accumulation of information. There exists among western-trained scientists an obsession to produce most accurate descriptions about the conditions of people. Humanity is itself reduced to the level of minerals such as ore, as peoples' value and worth are weighed in terms of profit. The difference here is that while people will go for the best in ore, it is stories about gruesome conditions of men and women that tend to sell. What benefit can I hope to derive out of this situation? Where else could one hope to find the reason for the crises that both capitalist and Marxist society are experiencing presently.

Those supposed to work for the improvement of the social conditions of people tend to see their task as that of tempering with the infrastructure and the superstructure of the situation they work in. Very little attention will they give to the human life or spirit in-between the two segments. So far, the study of orality as carried out by some prominent South African historians has been guided by a curiosity to accumulate information about African polities, farm

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labourers, experiences on Robben Island etc. Restricted to descriptions of the vicissitudes of life in the said situations, the researchers' role has taken forms of academic lamentation. What comment has been made has been characterised by a tendency to pontificate from a distant position as from a missionary veranda.

### **South African Oral History: *Local and Global Needs***

Recently concerted efforts have been made the world over to restore voices lost by disadvantaged communities through one form of oppression or the other. Some progress has been made in allowing people space wherein they should take control over their lives. People that were formally discriminated against on the basis of race, gender, age, sexual orientation have been given the latitude to state their case or even protest. In Great Britain, America, Australia, Germany and Sweden, European scholars have met in annual conferences to exchange information on oral history research from various parts of the world. The concerns, the fears and hopes have been aired at such conferences where researchers provide detailed information for consideration. However the people that meet at these conferences tend to retain some homogeneity about social background. Comrades met to exchange new and exciting information about the latest stories from Robben Island, or what it meant to be detained under the apartheid regime of South Africa. These and many such narratives tend to be shared as part of the academic exercise, particularly as support for certain social theories that are being propounded. Would it be better if the people, who have experienced the problem, represent themselves personally? The American Red Indian and Australian aborigine live yet to have their voice heard by the world.

It has been noted how students of oral history from Germany, Britain and America have looked to Africa for examples of what is presumed to be living oral traditions. Leading scholars in Oral history and anthropology have worked in Africa long enough to refer

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easily to African examples as they provide contexts for their work. Stories have been told or written about the people from various parts of Africa, who in most cases have been presented as inferior. The subtle scorn and derision with which these have very often been described has not been very helpful. If anything, it has made it impossible for people who have not had the opportunity to meet the people described, appreciate the fact that the people of Africa live in houses and not on trees. Not all recorded information has been bad. The effort made by some level-headed authors must be noted with appreciation.

Writing on the question of race relations, Rhodie, a sociologist, once made the point that South Africa should in good time prove to be a melting pot for relations throughout the world. This was long before the change ushered in the 1990s, who Rhodie anticipated how South Africa might provide answers to some of the problems of the international world. In this essay the plea for the encouragement of human encounter rather than simple exchange of information is advocated. Information that is gathered as data should not be isolated from its human sources. This is particularly true of oral history material. "The past is myself, my own history, the seed of my present thoughts, the mould of my present disposition. The past is not only a resource to deploy, to support a case or assert a social claim ... Literate or illiterate, we are our memories." (Tonkin 1992). The spirit in which dialogue between individual humans, cultures or races takes place cannot be adequately conveyed if academics remain the sole sources of information. The story that a squatter tells in the course of an interview is inextricably bound with his life. Neither for academic nor commercial reasons should that story be wrenched from him. The tendency to sell what are often described as thoroughly researched life stories entails possibilities of prostitution of the narrator by the researcher. Rather there should be sensitivity and commitment towards the human being who has dared to share oneself. A longing ought to be elicited in the way the story was narrated such that the audience would desire

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to meet the subject(s).

### **New Strands In Social Research**

Modern oral history researchers dedicated to contribute towards the social transformation of South Africa have advised the abandonment of the positivistic approach. There has been a belated realisation among some academics that Western thought forms has heavily influenced methods of research used. Two strands of reaction have emerged among South African historians. While one group has committed itself to work for change within the scientific community, the other has adopted participatory research as a strategy. There have been some positive gains emanating from the efforts to discard the positivistic in favour of the phenomenological or humanistic approaches.

In working for change within the social science discipline, some scholars borrowed the term 'paradigm' from Thomas Kuhn. The term referred to the manner intellectual boundaries were demarcated and served as frameworks for solving particular problems. Each framework retains features of a canon or measuring rod in that it distinguishes between what is acceptable and what is not. Practitioners of any single discipline tend to have a single system that they use as a *modus operandi* or regard as a common possession. The scientific community is usually established and centred on a paradigm.

Considering the spirit of comradeship that usually develops among practitioners of a discipline it is not always easy for change to take place. Those wishing for something different usually experience conflict. For that reason the shift of a paradigm can be an exercise in lip service. Real change here is normally brought about by the revolution within the discipline, but one linked to a change of world-view. For example, the change in the political situation of South Africa is posing problems for academic historians. Working in cross-cultural situations among a large clientele wrestling with issues of dignity,

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identity and humanity, it becomes impossible to justify neutrality as a stance. Whether this shift was possible is a monopoly among academics.

The second qualitative method advocates equal involvement by the researcher and respondents. The participatory research approach determines that those engaged should collaborate from the point where a hypothesis is formulated to the stage where a report and recommendations are put together. The role of the researcher assumes the form of facilitation to find solutions to problems that deserve attention. The stress here is on gaining as much insight as possible into the subject and first-order reality of the human actions. The world of meaning of the subject under study is explored in all its dimensions. In other words, the people under study are conserved as they deal naturally with situations they encounter on a day to day basis.

Both the paradigm shift and participatory research remain confined to gathering information. Data gathering and not encounter with fellow humans is the motivating factor. This is what happens in spite of the pretensions to facilitate democratic procedures. In situations where community developers have gained entry into the lives of people through the conduct of a social analysis of their life histories, people have been manipulated. Not all so-called community developers have been well meaning, and that has been in spite of claims to the contrary. Sometimes, it has been a matter of leering to use the relevant popular jargon (ie. terms like 'from the bottom up'—'authentic voice of the people') as the elite and politicians quite often do. The result is an escalation of the sense of dependence among the poor. Echoing the terms used by their masters, the poor soon refer to themselves as the 'marginalised', 'grassroots', 'deprived' and 'disadvantaged'. For these to break out of the dependence syndrome, it becomes quite a struggle both physically and psychologically.

Common involvement participatory research projects may not necessarily be all that the researcher and subject(s) have been formed

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into a homogeneous body comparable to a compound. They each retain vested interests and expectations which impinge on the relationship so formed. The relationship will invariably reflect the wider social context within which it exists. Because the subjects of research are in most cases naturally the weaker party the tendency is for them to interject the culture, the norms and values of the researching party. They will do this to the point where as we have already indicated, they use the stereotypical language of the researcher to refer to themselves. The party that issues the invitation for the collaboration in a participatory research will tend to retain its superior position throughout the process.

### **The Researcher's Motive and Objective**

It may help us to withdraw as oral history practitioners in order to reflect on a number of questions. Why are we keen to study oral history or other people's life histories? Is it out of curiosity to gain access into the innermost parts of other people's psyche? Do we have it as a genuine concern that we intervene in other people's lives in order to bring about improvement? Or is it simply a matter of accumulating more information or knowledge? What do we strive for in research? Is it to have the questions on our interview guide answered? Those who have been involved in research for some time have advised that our enterprise should consist in a quest or journey into the unknown. The venture is taken alongside other humans. Central to the activity is the fact that two humans meet. Not every detail can be predicted with the precision about the coming together of any human beings. Integration among two or more humans may result in the creation of a totally strange social reality. A researcher able to move into a situation of human misery without being touched or caused to speculate on possible solutions could not be expected to cope with what is propounded in this paper.

In conclusion, it should be clear that there are definite problems that a Newtonian model of society poses. There is a cold rigidity

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about that view which cannot be tolerated by students of social sciences. It does not leave scope for the entertainment of what is human about us. Therefore the positivistic approach best suited for studies in natural sciences cannot be applied in social situations where researchers come into close contact with subjects whose cosmological world he tries to make sense of. Such interaction with the subject(s) requires that the researcher become immersed in the culture of study. Demands will sometimes be posed for a voluntary submission to disorientation where the researcher learns to depend on the subject(s). That will happen for he will experience some liminal form of existence. At the same time the subjects will be helped to regain confidence in so far as they realise how much they can give. That which they give is far more than the information they would provide had theirs been simply a matter of responding to an array of questions.

Transformation is elicited rather than conveyed onto people doing it from an external position. Sometimes change is possible through fitting together the pieces that are already present, as in a puzzle. Again the approach differs from that of physical science for when dealing in social situations it is advisable not to atomise. Humans have to be handled in their state of wholeness at all times. The social scientist who discovers as well as describes the salient features of the world of the subjects has not completed the task. This is irrespective of the accuracy as to detail and proper choice of words of description. There remains a responsibility to let the audience encounter the inhabitant(s) of the cosmological world so described. Irrespective of the deplorable condition in which they live, it is their world. They are masters and madams of that world, and that reality the social researcher must at all times respect. That world is their creation and without them that world is dehumanised.

South Africa development programmes recently launched and implemented among historically deprived communities have not met with much success. This has been in spite of the promise to

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improve social conditions in villages and townships. To some extent some community members have been given skills. A restricted number has benefited from job creation. But it must be admitted that not many have derived benefit from the initiative of the Reconstruction and Development Programme. Reports about funds that have gone astray either in government offices or among village committees have been deafening, to say the least.

South Africa's programmes of social transformation have been denuded of that very important and valuable component, 'ubuntu' (humanness). That has been regrettable, particularly as ubuntu was earmarked to determine the critical path of the projects under the aegis of the Reconstruction and Development Programme. For any improvement to be effected in the lives of deprived South Africans there definitely must be a drastic change of attitude among the stakeholders in the transformation process.

The worst accusation that Bantu-speaking Africa can level against anyone is, "Akunabuntu" ("You lack in humanness"). The crime is comparable to 'treason' among Westerners. You could have been well-meaning and doing the best for society.

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