

PLEASE NOTE, that the paper was written for my keynote and has not been language checked. If you have any questions or comments, please contact anheimo@utu.fi

**Histoire orale et culture numérique / Oral History und digitale
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ANNE HEIMO 26.3.2022: ORAL HISTORY, FAMILY MEMORIES AND ONLINE PARTICIPATORY HERITAGE ACTIVITIES

Though my background is in folkloristics, my fields of study stretch from oral history research to cultural memory studies and autobiographical studies. This means that my understanding of oral history is perhaps broader or should I say somewhat different from how oral history is often defined (**see slide 2**). By this, I mean as a method (an recording or an interview) or as an (oral) source or a genre (of history writing). By no means, does this mean that I do not carry out interviews or appreciate them. On the opposite, I am always amazed to listen to people talk and tell stories about their lives. But then again, I find autobiographical materials and life writings, like diaries, letters or thematic writings, just as fascinating – or in my case blogs and other forms of online memory work - and I am not alone.

Oral history research and cultural memory studies have largely developed separately as Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes have pointed out in the Introduction of their edited volume *Oral History and Public Memories* (2008). This applies to autobiographical studies too. However, in the Nordic and Baltic academic context all these three fields of study are closely intertwined and very few of us, who identify ourselves as oral historians, actually work only with oral sources. (See e.g. Heimo 2016.)

A major reason for this is that in Finland as well as in our neighboring countries, Sweden, Norway, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, we have many archives with vast archival collections dating back from the 19th century and we still organize writing competitions and ask people to write about various themes. For example, the archives of the Finnish Literature Society have been collecting and documenting folk life since the society was founded in 1831. Today the range of topics people asked to write about is wide. (**See slide 3**; Finnish Literature Society website.)

In fact, in Finnish it is more common to refer to oral history with the term *muistitieto* (memory-based knowledge / recollected knowledge), which highlights the nature of the source, but not the form of it than the literal translation of oral history *suullinen historia*.

Technology has played an important role in oral history research since the Oral History Research Office was set up by Allan Nevins at Columbia University in 1948 and the recording of interviews first began. (e.g. Ritchie 2012.) In his article “Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History” Alistair Thomson (2007) declared the digital revolution in oral history as a paradigm shift, which has changed all aspects of oral history from the creation of oral history interviews to the archiving, storing, analysing and distribution of these in fundamental ways. (See also Boyd & Larson eds. 2014.) Publishing oral history audios or videos online have become popular in some countries, whereas in some other countries like in Finland they are rare due to our strict personal data protection laws and now the GDPR, General Data Protection Regulation, has made Finnish archives and museums even more cautious about publishing any material in any form consisting personal data.

However, the issue, which oral historians have not yet, began to discuss, is the impact of Internet and social media to oral history and its basic principles. I find this a pity, because the study of these increases our understanding on what people themselves consider important to remember and consider their cultural heritage and I see that we should not leave the study of online memories only to scholars of memory studies or media studies.

If we look at how Alessandro Portelli (1991) and Michael Frisch (1990) have described oral history (**see slide 4**), it is easy to see similarities between oral history and everyday memory practices. In both cases, the aim is to understand how people interpret past events and give meaning to them and in fact if sharing memories online actually resembles oral communication in many ways. So, if the aim is the same, why do we still prioritise oral histories over other sources? We also have to ask, what might we be missing if we only stick to one kind of source, the oral history interview, when we all have so many alternative ways to express ourselves and remember our pasts? Furthermore, there is the big question of our role as oral historians: Are we still needed to interview people about their lives and experiences, when people can tell about these issues themselves and decide what they want to recall, and when and with whom they want to share their memories with? Please, do not get me wrong, I am not suggesting that we should quit oral history research, but I do see it worthwhile to think about these questions.

So, what has changed in everyday memory activities and practices since the 1990s when we all became users of the Internet and especially around 2005, when social media platforms were first introduced? One of the major changes is that now it is possible for us to take part in global activities, which transcend national and cultural borders and to share private and personal memories in public with people whom we do not necessarily know. In memory studies (see slide 5), this shift has led to the re-examining and contesting of former notions of memory, for instance the terms collective memory and national memory, which perceive groups, communities or the nation-state as certain types of containers of memory with more or less clear-cut borders. This has led to a shift from studying 'sites of memory' to examining the 'dynamics', 'flows' and 'travels' of memory and how meanings are shaped and reworked to new needs. (E.g. Erll 2011a; DeCesare & Rigney 2014.)

To overcome the problems associated with these former terms, new terms like *transnational memory* (DeCesare & Rigney 2014), *transcultural memory* (Erll 2011b), *multidirectional memory* (Rothberg 2009), *tangled memory* (Sturken 1997), and *prosthetic memory* (Landsberg 2007) have been introduced to stress the movement of memory across and between times, places, generations and various forms of media, from the private sphere to the public sphere, from individuals to communities and vice versa and beyond national (and other) borders.

The transfer of family memory to the online environment means fundamental changes to how family memory is constructed and whom family memories are shared with. For long family memory was considered personal and belonging only to the private and intimate sphere of the family. Today these same memories are eagerly shared with people, we might even not know in person or we have never met. (See e.g. van Dijck, 2007; Barnwell & al. 2021.)

In addition, some scholars have criticized the use of commercial platforms for memory work (see e.g. van Dijck, 2013), but users do not usually share these same concerns, which must not be mistaken for ignorance. Most users do realise the problems concerning the use of commercial platforms, but they see the benefits of using them greater than the risks.

Another significant change is that social media has also moved communication towards the visual at the expense of text and voice. Social and family historians have used photos for decades as sources, and the "photographic turn" in oral history. This has led to the examining of the role of photographs, photo albums and shoe box archives as memory aids in interviews

as well as key components of historical and family narratives (Freund & Thomson 2011), but not to the exploring of how people use photos in their everyday memory making.

Since the increase of affordable smart phones, visuality has increased immensely on social media to the extent that it has been referred to as “visual turn” (Gibbs & al., 2015). Now a photo or some other image like a meme can become the core of our interactions with others to the point that today it is difficult to arouse interest on social media without adding a visual component, photo or video, to a post. Digital anthropologist Daniel Miller has even stated that: “We used to just talk, now we talk photos.” (*Why we post*, 2016).

The visual turn has resulted that texts tend to be shorter than before (this affects also thematic writings sent to the archives!), but then again stories are rarely told as actual stories outside the interview situation. For example as Alessandro Portelli (1997; 2021) has pointed out, most of what we learn of our family pasts is told in “bits and pieces”, in fragments and anecdotes, during dinners and at family gatherings and by browsing through family photo albums, reading old letters and postcards and other personal items. This is also the manner we learn and gather knowledge about the past online. As media studies scholar Henry Jenkins (2006) reminds us: “Each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives.”

As we all know, the Internet is full of both large institutional as well as small-scale private sites of memory and commemoration, which are used to showcase lost heritage sites and to commemorate historic events retrospectively with both local and transnational audiences. Although more and more museums, archives and other heritage institutions around the world invite people to participate in their activities by sharing their memories with these institutions, people will still often choose to act outside these. Henriette Roued-Cunliffe and Andrea Copeland (2017), who both share an interest in the cultural outputs of individuals and community groups and how they take part in cultural heritage activities outside formal institutions, refer to these as *participatory heritage* activities. Here participatory is used in the way Henry Jenkins has described *participatory culture* as a bottom-up practice and not a top-down as participatory tools and applications are often used in museums, archives and other heritage institutions. Jenkins definition of participatory culture includes for example low barriers for participating in peer groups, mutual support and the sharing of one's creations with others and the right to also create new versions based on these. (Jenkins 2006). In this process, everyone is a producer and user, in other words a *produser* (Bruns 2007).

A typical online participatory heritage activity is a nostalgia group on Facebook, where people post photos for your current or old hometown from different times and share their memories about these or ask for further information. Or it can be a group to commemorate a certain event like a conflict or disaster. (See slide 6.)

Participatory heritage activities are examples of non-institutional heritage, which emerge without outside governing and may oppose, support, or simply remain outside the terms of what critical heritage scholar Laurajane Smith (2006) refers to as *authorized heritage discourse*. This heritage process is dynamic, ever-evolving and ephemeral, and it is curated and managed independently by the same people who create it or participate in the process and not by outside experts.

In time, online participatory heritage activities can produce vast collections of posts, photos, videos and text files. These online collections can be perceived as certain types of independent community archives, which are created and curated by and for the members of these groups, which oral historian and archival studies scholar Andrew Flinn (e.g. 2010; 2015) has studied. However, I prefer to call these types of online archives as *spontaneous archives*. Like archives proper they are also about selection, displaying and curation even if they are created by and for the members of the users themselves. Spontaneous emphasizes the unofficial nature of these archives in the same manner vernacular and grassroots memorials are on occasion referred to as spontaneous shrines. Spontaneous archives are often created on the spur of the moment, and therefore they may disappear or be removed without former notice or they may just as well turn into long-lasting online archives, which might or might-not be actively updated, but in many cases can be found using search engines even when they are no longer used. (See e.g. Heimo 2017.)

Already in the 1920s, Maurice Halbwachs (1992) recognized the importance of family memories passed on between generations in the form of narratives, but for some reason the significance of family memories has for long gone quite unnoticed. In the last decades there has been a growing interest in the study of family memory, but there are actually very few studies, which focus specifically on family memory. (See slide 7.) One of these is the new volume *Family Memory: Practices, Transmissions and Uses in a Global Perspective* (2021) edited by Radmila Švaříčková Slabáková in which I have written a chapter on family memories published in Facebook, and which my talks is partially based on.

Already in 1998, Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen noted in their book *Presence of the Past. Popular Uses of History in American Life* (1998) that family history had become one of the most popular reasons for people to engage with history and family memories were regarded as a valuable and trustworthy source by most people. A decade later Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton noted the same for Australia in their book *History at the Crossroads. Australians and the Past* (2007). Since then interest in ancestry and sharing family memories has kept on growing. This increase has been seen to spring from the need to personalize and democratize history, but it has also to do with the rise of internet and digital technologies, which have enabled these activities. Now that museums and archives have digitized and opened their collections, the searching and sharing of family documents is easier than ever before and websites and social media sites are commonly used for the exploring of ancestral roots.

Especially for transnational families dispersed around the world the internet and social media have become vital for various reasons including keeping in contact with family members and friends living around the world and family memory practices. People are more than eager to share their findings and family memories together with others online. Many willingly also celebrate their family heritage by sharing memories of significant family events and images of cherished objects from their family archives. Sometimes this sharing is spontaneous and aimed priory to the person's immediate connections, but in some cases posting is intentional and directed to others interested in the same topic, be it local history or their mutual family heritage.

As a research environment, social media has its own specific characteristics. The research environment is scattered across the web, dynamic and is linked in many ways to off-line practices, and therefore, demands the use of "messy methods", in other words, the applying of multiple methods and the mixing and combining of these in innovative ways. Social media sites cannot be regarded only as platforms or communication channels, but as places and sites that make possible the examining of relationships between people, technologies and forms of expressions as well as interaction, social exchange and feelings of presence and spontaneity. This means that each site must be considered unique and must be analysed from the perspective of having its' own premises, which guide users on how it is used.

At the same, it also means that one cannot follow only general guidelines of research ethics, but must take into consideration the demands of each site and what is considered appropriate use by the members of the site. For example, I mostly follow Facebook groups without making my presence known – except the occasional "like", question or comment –, but I have in all cases informed the admins of the group, that I am a researcher when joining the group and asked

permission from those, whose posts I end up using as examples, including the ones I am presenting to you today. No one has yet refused my request. Mostly people seem to be delighted that an academic scholar shows interest in their family history.

In some cases, the pleased family historian might even show his appreciation by telling others about the interest his family history has aroused like in this case, where I asked if I could use his story of a sugar bowl as an unlikely memory object of the civil war (Taavetti & Heimo 2022). Here (**see slide 8**) is the first post which aroused my attention from a few years ago and here is a second post posted this January posted after I had informed him that the article about his family keepsake will finally be published this spring. This is also a good reminder of the dialogical aspects of the research process in which both the researched and the researcher both take part in.

Most users will use various social media platforms for different purposes and in different ways. Posts can be simultaneously published on several different social media applications, for example, a photo on Instagram and Facebook, or a blog post can be linked to Twitter for maximum publicity. Some platforms are suited better for being in contact mainly with family and close friends, some for following certain topics or people without needlessly having to know the other users or even having contact with them as in the case of YouTube.

The reason why I focus mainly on family memories created and shared in Facebook groups is that these are the most popular for this type of memory work, because they are easy to create and manage. It is also easy to link different kinds of material like scanned family documents, photos, YouTube videos, blogs, online news and even digitized archival materials in Facebook groups. This is also why many so called nostalgia groups dedicated to local history and other forms of participatory heritage are practiced mostly in Facebook groups and not on other social media sites. (See e.g. Gregory 2015; Heimo 2021.)

In recent years, the relationship between material objects and oral history has begun to interest oral historians. Points of memory are testimonial objects inherited from the past, which are used as tangible reference points to the past. In their article “The interplay of memory and matter: narratives of former Finnish Karelian child evacuees” Anna-Kaisa Kuusisto-Arponen and Ulla Savolainen (2016) propose that narrated memories are always material-discursive. Of material objects, the photograph is perhaps the most common to be studied by oral historians, but narrators also refer commonly to other objects, like letters or books, as sources to verify their claims. Objects can act as points of remembrance or loss, give structure to the narrative and

connect the past with the presence. For evacuees, displaced persons and migrants the objects they have managed to keep are often as important as the ones that no longer exist. The significance of both objects and the senses is apparent in online family memory practices.

The one most popular way to share family memories in Facebook groups is to post old photos of passed relatives or personal documents belonging to them. It is also common to share old or new photos of places, buildings, gravestones of other sites of importance to the users' family history. In this composition of several photos posted on May Day Eve 2018 to commemorate the memory of the users' relative, who was shot during the 1918 Finnish Civil War in a group dedicated to the 1918 Finnish Civil War (**see slide 9**). In her post she first tells about the fate of her relative and that she had visited his grave the same day. Then she comments, that all this has made her think of her family history and how societal events have affected her grandparents' lives, and makes it easier for her to understand her parents and the choices they have made. She does not say what choices she means, perhaps political ones. She has only received a few comments, but these have led to more comments, which have given her more information about the circumstances, which led to her relative's death. (See Savolainen, Lukin & Heimo 2020.)

In their article "Family memory, 'things' and counterfactual thinking" oral historians Anna Green and Kayleigh Luscombe (2019) examine the role of material objects like inherited family heirlooms in oral history interviews with multicultural families. In their study, Green and Luscombe note that not all artefacts were considered equally important by their interviewees. People owned "objects" that they had inherited, but had little emotional or mnemonic value to them and then they had "things", which had considerable significance to them and had a place in the family narrative. Viewed from this perspective a bottle of seashells or a dried flower can be as "valuable" as a piece of jewelry.

In the Facebook group Finnish Genealogy, a descendent of one of the first Finnish families to settle in Australia published in January 2019 two images of handmade knives ("puukko") his grandfather had brought with him, when he migrated from Finland to Australia at the turn of the 20th century (**see slide 10**):

My great grandfather [name removed] and his family emigrated to Australia in early 1900. My grandfather was about 9 years old at the time. Both have have long passed. Although a little worse for wear, we still have these family treasures.

Nearly 130 people including myself people responded to his post with likes, hearts and wows. The comments included discussions about the maker of the knives and the reputation of knives

from Kauhava, Finland, suggestions on where to find more information about the knives and mentions of similar family keepsakes. One of threads led even to the discovering of mutual relatives. Memories of knives or the collecting of Finnish knives is popular also among Finnish-Americans and people are eager to post photos of their knife collections. The knives are appreciated as exquisite examples of Finnish handicraft and basic tools, but they are also carriers of family memory and the history of Finns. (Heimo 2021.)

Although it is possible to do searches using terms like “family” or “memory” in Facebook groups, it is not always clear which posts can be counted as representing family history, because family history can be dealt with in manifold ways, as we can see from my next example (**see slide 11**).

In August 2018, an image of laundry drying outside in a yard was shared in the group American-Finnish people by an active third generation member of the group with the declaration: “I am a Happy Finnish Woman!” Then she continues:

When I hang up my clothes is when I feel closest to my mother as I hear her voice in my head instructing me as a small child how to group things, how to hang shirts so you won’t see the clothespin mark, and how to hang certain items flush with the line instead of bent over because of her strict preferences. I miss you [mother’s name removed].

The post attracted 195 likes and hearts and 108 comments, which is quite astonishing. The comments consisted mainly of similar memories about the particulars of hanging up laundry to dry, which all the commentators had learnt from their Finnish mothers and which they considered distinctive for Finns. Many of the commentators also mentioned the smell of freshly dried clothes and sheets, which for some was as dear a memory as the smell of freshly baked “pulla”, a Finnish delicacy still cherished among people of Finnish ancestry in North America. The hanging up of washed clothes and sheets is an example of embodied and performative memory, which is reenacted time and again in everyday situations and connects generations.

These examples of family memory and participatory heritage activities may at first glance seem trivial, mundane and fragmented, but they can still lead to long and meaningful discussions about family history and or Finnish ancestry. All the examples link memory and matter together, but in several different ways. In the first example, visiting the grave of a relative who died during the civil war and finding out about his past helped the author of the post to understand better her own family history and her parents. In the second example, the knives portrayed in the post are recognized as precious family heirlooms, but the commentators note also on the

craftsmanship needed in the creating of the knives, the feel of the knives as well as their personal memories of similar knives owned by their family members or by themselves. In the third example, the commentators share embodied and sensory memories of a weekly chore, the hanging up of laundry, passed down in the family not easily even recognized as something that could be considered a cherished family memory.

In her article “Oral history and the senses” Paula Hamilton (2016) criticizes oral historians for neglecting to examine the role of senses—sound, vision, touch, taste and smell—in oral narratives though they are essential part of human experience. Like objects, we use our memories of how something sounded, looked, felt, tasted or smelled like to describe our past experiences. All the five senses, especially smells, also act as mnemonic devices and memory triggers in the present, as these examples show and can be recognized from memories posted on Facebook.

The last two examples also act as markers of symbolic ethnicity with which the user can claim Finnish heritage. These markers are especially important for those members of these groups, who no longer have a command of the Finnish language or who may have never visited the home country of their parents or great-grandparents, but still want to identify themselves as Finns.

To conclude: Formerly everyday memory and participatory heritage practices have been examined either as vernacular or institutional, individual or collective, private or public, local or global, or commercial and non-commercial, but today I see that there is no need for divisions like these anymore. On the contrary, contemporary everyday memory and participatory heritage practices mix all these different features. This is why it is useful to examine how memories are studied in other fields too and not only oral history, though we might feel a bit uncomfortable applying theories and methods we do not know thoroughly.

People are drawn to participatory heritage sites on social media for various reasons. Taking part in these activities are an easy way to share family memories within a group one feels connected to even when they do not know each other. The sites also provide peer support and help people to find and share information on various topics be it a family recipe or a new academic study on some topic. Neither does participating in these activities demand more commitment than people are ready to commit. People respond to posts that they can relate to by exchanging similar kinds of memories and experiences. At the same time, they present what they themselves consider worth remembering and cherishing in their past in their own terms and for their own needs. For

these reasons, it is important that oral historians acknowledge the changes that have happened in family memory practices and at least consider what they might benefit by studying these.

Thank you!

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