ORAL HISTORY
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WHEN MEMORY FADES

Challenges and rewards when recording the oral histories of people with dementia.

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“Reframing dementia as a different way of being, as a window into another reality... it lets people living in that state be our teachers.”

{Dana Walrath, author}.

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Embrace the challenges & opportunities

Concerns around ethics, recruiting participants and preserving the dignity of those with this complex neurological condition are often seen as barriers to recording those precious stories.

But the rewards are immense.

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The starting point: high level ethical practice

As with all oral history work, high level ethical practice is our starting point.

Research integrity is especially important when dealing with vulnerable participants with this complex and dynamic condition.

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Dignity & insights

Through oral history, we can honour someone with dementia's life experiences so they are preserved for current and future generations.

Your narrator is afforded the dignity to share their oral history. Their lived experiences can also reveal unique insights so family, friends and carers may supported them more effectively.

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Top ten golden rules to support your oral history work with people who have dementia

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1.Get expert advice

Seek the input of a trained dementia specialist before you embark on an oral history project to safeguard an ethical approach. Build your collaborator into any research funding applications.

2.Maintain open informed consent dialogue.

Have ongoing dialogue with your narrator, family members and anyone involved in the provision of their care. Check arrangements for archiving and dissemination.

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3. Prepare the interview environment

Choose a calm interview location with no distractions. Your narrator may have a preferred location and/or wish to have a family member or health care provider with them. Use unobtrusive recording equipment.

4.Schedule your interview time

Ensure your interview slot coincides with your narrator's peak cognitive window.

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5. Observe the 90 second rule

You narrator may need a bigger time interval to piece together their own story. So be patient. A good rule of thumb is waiting for at least 90 seconds before you come in with your next question.

6.Use multi sensory interviewing techniques

Use prompts such as photos, music, recordings and aromas to help your narrator connect with their longer term sensory driven memories.

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7. Tangents are golden

Encourage tangents as these will help reveal the real lived experience of your interviewee free for any steer from you as the oral historian.

8.Do transcript & recording sensitivity checks

When you have completed the final recording, do a thorough sensitivity check to protect your narrator. The challenge here is preserving the individual's story but protecting their dignity.

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9 Be vigilant for verbal & nonverbal cues

Stop the interview immediately if there are any signs of your narrator becoming distressed, showing a sudden drop in verbal clarity or showing any signs of anxiety.

10.Build in additional safeguards

Consider anonymity, pseudonyms, staged access or restriction to family members only.

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AND FINALLY...

Your own health and wellbeing

Listening attentively to someone's life story is really rewarding. But it can also be tiring. So do what suits you best to decompress.

Reflect on the experience as part of your ongoing professional development. Keep a journal and/or discuss the interview(s) with a trusted mentor to help better prepare for next time.

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