

TOP TIP 2: EMBRACING OUR MEMORIES

“We look at the world once, in childhood. The rest is memory.”

So wrote Louise Glück in the final lines of her poem entitled ‘Nostos.’

How many childhood memories do you have which are still a core part of your identity today? The term ‘nostos’ come from the Greek for ‘homecoming.’ The notion of ‘home’ is a powerful one and for many of us, transcends time and space. Recalling our memories is likely to invoke a sense of nostalgia and with it, both ‘home’ (nostos) and ‘algos’ (pain). In oral history, we recognise that the memory is not a passive entity. Rather, it is where we assign meaning to past events through narration.



“In oral history, memories are seldom recounted chronologically. Instead, memories flow ebb and flow shaped by the narrator’s (re)presentation and (re)construction of the past in the present. The mention of a person’s name, recollection of a sensation or unique sense of place may all shape the flow of the interview.””

Before aged three years old, we are likely not to be able to remember our actual lived experiences. This is known as ‘infantile amnesia’ and is attributed to insufficient neurological development. Our very early childhood memories are therefore likely to be ‘inherited’ memories told to us by others.

Oral history places the narrator in the centre of their own story recounted in the own words on their own terms.

As oral historians, we embrace the subjectivity of memory allowing for the richness of personal testimony to rise to the fore.

Our interviewee’s insights to reveal accounts of the past which have been marginalised or deliberately silenced.

We are hard wired to forget most things. The act of remembering takes intention. Consequently, the skills and attributes of the oral historian are crucial in enabling people to recount their past experiences.

