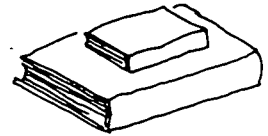


BOOK REVIEW



Ruth Martin

Oral History in Social Work: Research, Assessment, and Intervention.

Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995, 144 pages, paper

Ruth Martin's *Oral History in Social Work* is a concise and timely treasure. This fascinating book is written on several levels, beginning with Martin's own personal and professional story of her introduction into personal narratives and oral histories. As a child, she recounts her first exposure to the power of stories, through listening to African-American kin tell stories of the life and approaching death of her father. Later, through her subsequent experience as a practitioner and educator, Martin skillfully demonstrates how she became grounded in oral history methodology and began to forge conceptual and practice linkages between oral history and social work.

Oral History in Social Work is divided into two major parts, the first of which establishes the theoretical and research dimensions of the oral history approach. Martin locates oral history methods within the qualitative, constructivist approach to examining individuals' subjective experiences. She develops a multi-dimensional theory base, drawing on Kurt Lewin's (1951) seminal field theory of impelling and restraining forces affecting human behavior, Germain's (1979) ecological perspective which emphasizes the goodness-of-fit between individuals' adaptive

capacities and the "nutritive" qualities of the environment, and Germain and Gitterman's (1980) life model framework which examines psychosocial stressors between individual needs and capacities and the environment—particularly during periods of life transitions.

Martin then proceeds to demonstrate how to apply this theory framework to oral history research. Particularly valuable is her clear outline of "how to" design and implement oral history research projects. Martin guides the novice researcher through the various steps of selecting a project, reviewing the literature, developing research questions and topics, formulating tentative assumptions, sampling, interviewing, transcribing, analysis and interpretation, and dissemination. This section also includes a very helpful discussion about ethical considerations which need to be addressed in oral history research, as well as practical suggestions about how to gain access to knowledgeable informants in a community. In addition, there is an in-depth discussion of how the oral history researcher may use a grounded theory approach to search for individual respondents' narrative themes and topics, as well as patterns and themes across respondents. Several innovative suggestions are given for dis-

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seminating information from oral history projects, including both the traditional scholarly forums (e.g., peer-reviewed journals, professional conferences) and newer creative approaches (e.g., writing scripts for television shows, creating a museum of oral history repositories for a community).

As an social work education text, Martin has provided detailed accounts of how oral histories can be a rich source of learning for students, both experiential as well as didactic. Particular attention is drawn not only to the content of formal courses in oral history research, but also how students' field practicum experience can be used to understand the subjective realities of individuals and families, organizations and communities. Further, Martin links the concept of the helping relationship and direct practice skills in social work with the type of rapport and interviewing skills used by the oral historian. A recurring emphasis is the need for students to have direct experience with people who have felt the effects of discrimination, so as to link the larger social justice mission of the profession with the face-to-face interventions of micro-level practice.

In Part II, Martin provides numerous examples of her own and her students' research projects with diverse client systems. These projects range from young women who earlier experienced teen pregnancy, to elderly African American "wisdom keepers" sharing stories of family adaptation and survival, to recent Jewish immigrants

from the Soviet Union, to understanding the community leaders' experience of settlement house movement, to understanding the experiences of elderly residents in a low-income, urban neighborhood community. These projects show how oral histories can illuminate the adaptive strengths of historically oppressed populations as well as those whose lives have experienced major disruption and upheaval. In particular, Martin emphasizes the need to obtain the personal meanings of minority respondents—their own interpretation of experiences—which so often have been excluded from mainstream research and historical accounts. In this way, the oral history approach can be used to build new knowledge inductively, similar to other qualitative methods such as the case study and grounded theory.

In summary, *Oral History in Social Work* takes an activist approach to gathering, analyzing, and disseminating the oral histories of a wide spectrum of clients. Educators may profitably use this text in a variety of courses, including qualitative research, history of social work, community organization, and direct social work practice. The social work profession owes a debt of thanks not only to Ruth Martin and her students for showing how to bridge the gap between oral history methodology and social work, but also to the many individuals who generously shared their stories and first-person accounts of strength, courage, adaptation, and resilience. □

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