Oral History and Physical Therapy: The Importance of Physical Therapy History

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The study of physical therapy history in Canada has focused mainly on the profession's origins and its development alongside medicine after World War II.¹ While it is important to document our professional origins, our history also includes local and broader community narratives across the country that need to be studied and celebrated. While physical therapy scholars have embraced the diversity of research orientations, approaches, methods, and modes of analysis in their work, one research genre that has not received much attention is oral history.² Adopting an oral history approach can facilitate inquiry focusing on physical therapy community efforts—narratives that have not been reproduced or showcased in our documented history.

In this editorial, I briefly discuss oral history, its origins, and its unique qualities and strengths as a form of academic inquiry. I then offer a few examples of oral history/history articles written by physical or occupational therapists and show their implications for the physical therapy profession.

WHAT IS ORAL HISTORY?

Oral history has its roots in the oral traditions of many groups who have been marginalized in society^{2,3} and, having no written language, passed down history, culture, and language orally to the next generation.² Modern-day oral history approaches focus on the history of groups that are not generally well represented in traditional historical sources and have remained invisible or in the background within the dominant history discourse.

Oral history involves recruiting oral sources (participants) and collecting their accounts related to specific topics or events within a specific period. Oral historians seek to capture the essence of people's everyday experiences,² which may not have been known or recorded by others.

ORAL HISTORY'S UNIQUE QUALITIES AND STRENGTHS

Alessandro Portelli,³ an internationally renowned oral history scholar, has discussed the qualities of oral history traditions and how these qualities should be seen as strengths of the approach.

Oral history is inherently interdisciplinary,⁴ as its origins and critical developments reflect a blend of anthropological, sociological, and psychological concepts and perspectives. Focusing on the lived experiences of people as data sources brings new breadth and depth to the scholarly scope of history.² Portelli argues that oral history can shed new light or focus on unexplored areas of daily life.³ Feminist historians^{5,6} argue that oral history is important because it can serve both scholarly and activist purposes.

The central trait of oral sources is the extent of the speaker or narrator's subjectivity. According to Portelli,³ subjectivity is as important to history as the "facts"; what informants or narrators believe can be considered to be a "fact," as people act based on what they believe. This is what makes oral history different, as we predominantly learn about the *meaning of events for people in their daily lives*. One of the main criticisms of oral histories is that the oral source may not be credible: oral sources can be removed from events, and this distance may alter their memory of the event. Both Portelli³ and Longmore and Umansky⁷ argue that by directly questioning the informant about his or her accounts, the oral historian can potentially compensate for this chronological distance.

Portelli suggests, quite rightly, that the same criticism can be levied about written documents.³ Written historical documents are developed from a specific point of view; some aspects of history are included, while others are not. When reading historical accounts and texts, we must ask ourselves, whose history is this? Whom does it include, in what way, and who is excluded from this historical narrative?

EXAMPLES OF ORAL HISTORY/HISTORY RESEARCH RELEVANT TO PHYSICAL THERAPY

While there are many sources to choose from, articles by Carol Miles-Tapping¹ and the late Mary Tremblay⁸ are good examples of oral history / history research that remain salient today. Miles-Tapping's article, "Sponsorship and Sacrifice in the Historical Development of Canadian Physiotherapy,"¹ provided a critical analysis of

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the growth and development of physiotherapy in Canada from its roots in British massage therapy. The author suggested that while the development of physical therapy in Canada benefited from British sponsorship, this sponsorship also provided a direction for the growth of Canadian physiotherapy that may have prevented other avenues for development.

Tremblay's article, "Going Back to Civvy Street: A Historical Account of the Impact of the Everest and Jennings Wheelchair for Canadian World War II Veterans with Spinal Cord Injury,"⁸ used oral history interviews and archival materials to illustrate how the original self-propelling and collapsible wheelchairs allowed veterans (and civilians) to return to their communities to live and to seek work and educational opportunities. Tremblay highlighted the work of veterans to develop an organization to help both veterans and civilians. However, she pointed out that the broader issue of architectural barriers remained unacknowledged until the 1950s.

IMPLICATIONS OF ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH FOR PHYSICAL THERAPY

I have briefly outlined a research genre that has been only marginally used by physical therapy researchers and scholars and touched on two oral history/history articles that have historical but also contemporary relevance for physical therapy. It has been said that people should look to history to see what lessons have been learned. Both these articles point to the continuing importance of establishing strong and equitable collaborations with other professions and with various communities. In particular, Tremblay⁸ illustrates the importance of developing strong collaborative relationships with various disability communities. In the current health care climate, much that determines health goes beyond

traditional health care strategies. Supporting and strengthening social environments (i.e., communities) is an important focus for health.⁹ Physical therapists must continue to extend their collaborative efforts not only to other professions but to the communities we serve. History, in this way, is a positive lesson to take into the present and future.

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L'histoire orale et la physiothérapie : l'importance de l'histoire de la physiothérapie

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L'étude de l'histoire de la physiothérapie au Canada a porté principalement sur les origines et l'évolution de la profession parallèlement à la médecine après la Seconde Guerre mondiale.¹ Il importe certes de documenter les origines de notre profession, mais notre histoire inclut

aussi des narrations locales et de la collectivité en général d'un bout à l'autre du Canada, qu'il faut étudier et célébrer. Les chercheurs en physiothérapie ont adopté dans leur travail la diversité des orientations de recherche, des démarches, des méthodes et des modes d'analyse. Il

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