

# Data analysis in oral history: A new approach in historical research

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Historical research has limitations in applying proper and credit-worthy chronology to clarify the data. In this methodology, the application of oral history is one of the ways in which answers to questions addressed by the research theme are elicited. Oral history, as a clear and transparent tool, needs to be applied with guidelines for qualitative researchers regarding data analysis limitations from oral evidence and face-to-face contact. Therefore, the development of a systematic method for data analysis is needed to obtain accurate answers, based on which a credit-worthy narration can be produced. The aim of this study was to introduce an ethical and objective approach for the analysis of data obtained from oral history.

**Materials and Methods:** This is a methodological article that suggests an analysis method based on qualitative approach and experiences of the authors.

**Results:** A systematic method of data analysis for oral history research, based on common qualitative data analysis methods, has been suggested as the result of this article.

**Conclusions:** This new technique is equipped with measures that would assist qualitative researchers in the nursing field and other disciplines regarding analysis of qualitative data resulting from oral history studies.

**Key words:** Data analysis, Iran, nursing, oral history, qualitative research

## INTRODUCTION

Nurses have implemented historical research methodology in order to explain the history of nursing. Historical methodology guides us in making decisions based on past experiences.<sup>[1]</sup>

Nursing history can be a source of cultural identity. It reveals and defines both the scientific and artistic dimensions of nursing. In spite of the validity of historical research, there is some paucity in analyzing data to produce credible results. In addition, there are no classic references for the novice about how to analyze a huge amount of data.<sup>[2]</sup>

Historians believe that using theories and models creates bias toward the investigations. If this is true, how do novice researchers become familiar with robust techniques and

processes of inquiry required in research?<sup>[3]</sup> Hamilton stated that novice historians can understand the importance of historical techniques by immersing themselves in good historiography.<sup>[4]</sup> But this strategy seems too difficult to follow by novice researchers.

History means the complete documentation of people's ups and downs. History is not merely a list of events, but an impartial evaluation of the entirety of human interrelationships in time and space.<sup>[5]</sup> Historical research stages consist of the following: Identifying the area of interest, raising questions, formulating a title, reviewing the literature, data gathering and analysis, interpreting data, and writing the narrative. Due to the importance of the data gathering and analysis stage in qualitative historical studies, and the interconnection between these two stages, it is vital that the researcher selects a proper research method at this point.<sup>[6]</sup> One of the methods used in a qualitative historical studies approach is the oral history method,<sup>[7]</sup> and this was applied in a project related to the nature of nursing practice during the Iran-Iraq war. Since oral history lacks a clear and well-developed analysis method, the authors decided to develop a method based on the experiences they have had during their research, and also considering the strengths and weaknesses of the methods that have been used in the other oral history project. The aim of this study is focused on the development of an analysis method for oral history.

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## MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this methodological article, a method for data analysis suitable for oral history researches has been suggested based on qualitative research tradition and experiences of the authors.

## RESULTS

### Suggested data analysis method in oral history

In order to clarify the data obtained by the researcher through oral history interviews, a historical research methodology is required to produce a good narrative, along with the application of a proper analysis. For this purpose, a four-stage method is introduced and adopted. Each stage is connected and related to the previous one, while the final stage connects to the first and closes the circuit, which means that all data analysis stages, in a sense, are complementary to one another.

These analysis stages are:

- Data gathering through interviews with the oral witness and first-level coding
- Second-level coding and determining the sub-categories
- Third-level coding and determining the main categories
- Connecting the main categories to each other and writing the narrative.

The authors hope that by applying this method, researchers in the field of nursing would be able to analyze oral history data in a new form.

The authors are of the opinion that this method is applicable in all disciplines which are concerned with oral history. This method has been practically applied in two articles titled “Nurses experiences in chemical emergency departments: Iran–Iraq war, 1980–1988” and “The wartime experience of civilian nurses in the Iran–Iraq war, 1980–1988: An historical research.”<sup>[8,9]</sup> It should be noted that most of the information in recent decades concerning the digital oral history paradigm have applied the related computer software.<sup>[10]</sup>

### Stage one: Data gathering and analysis

At this stage, the data collected through interviews, oral witnesses, and first-level coding evolve into the following two facts:

- Familiarity with the data and its organization
- Extraction of the initial codes.

Familiarity begins as the interviews proceed; therefore, the proper selection of participants is essential. In

reference to the digital oral history paradigm, the interviews are recorded with a voice recorder, and other primary sources like personal notes, photos, etc. are evaluated. Since there is a close correlation between the data, well-conducted interviews contribute to the next stage’s analysis. The interview must be objective and proper arrangement of the questions is essential in order to obtain good results. The interviews consist of four sets of questions: Warm-up, memory, judgment, and follow-up.

The researcher, through an in-depth interview, encourages the participants to recall the events and related details and to relate them clearly in the interview.<sup>[11]</sup>

According to Thomson, a voice-recorded interview not only allows the participant to verbally express their views, but also administers and illustrates the spoken words.<sup>[12]</sup>

The interviews take place in three stages. The first interview encourages the participants to recollect and arrange their experience. The second interview represents the experience in detail and the context in which it happened, while the third interview explores the meaning that their experience holds for them.<sup>[13]</sup>

After each interview, the researcher listens to the responses many times, in order to determine the applicable portions for planning and addressing the next interview to achieve the final objective.<sup>[13]</sup>

The recorded interviews are transcribed by hand or using a computer programs and then, the data may be transferred to a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) for textual analysis. The interviewer takes notes when the expression of the participant changes. These notes help the researcher to recall the expressions/emotions of the interviewee when writing the narrative.

The codes used are labels that contain the interview briefing or the researcher’s impressions regarding the interview. Coding takes place parallel to data compilation, by constant comparison of the codes against one another and by putting them next to other codes. Symbols or abbreviations categorize words or expressions of a given data, and coding facilitates data recovery.<sup>[14]</sup>

An example of coding at this stage:

*“... in some military operations like Kheibar, 1985, the conditions were such that we worked for three days nonstop due to the excessive number of wounded. There was no time to rest, eat or pray properly. I remember that the young doctors and*

*nurses couldn't resist and just lay on the floor next to the patient's bed."*

Code assigned to speech participant 2: (p2i1c156) *nonstop* nursing activities

According to Speziale (2010), the researcher should begin coding and analyzing data as he compiles it. This helps him to be innovative in his attitude regarding the next interviews.<sup>[14]</sup>

The first stage of coding summarizes the data along with organizing it to facilitate labeling of the categories.

### Stage two: Second-level coding and determining the sub-categories

Coding is considered as the first interpretation stage and is applied to obtain the participants' live experiences. The obtained codes are a practical ring in the chain of events in historical research.<sup>[15]</sup>

Lived experiences are what the participant has been through so far. At this stage, the following two things evolve:

#### Formation of sub-categories

The data with close conceptions are extracted from and studied on the initial codes and set next to one another to form the sub-categories.

#### Review on the obtained related codes

Here the selected sub-categories that represent the initial codes are reviewed. It should be mentioned that a sub-category may contain many codes, which are determined at stage one of the coding.<sup>[16]</sup>

### Stage three: Third-level coding and determining the main categories

At this point, the main categories are defined, labeled, and coded. The emphasis here is put on the key concepts that are going to be applied in the fourth stage, where the study starts to take shape.

In fact, at this stage, the pieces of the puzzle are arranged in a manner in which the whole picture is revealed. The credibility of the oral history method and this critical stage is determined by analyzing the approved documentation. To assure coding validity at different stages, the codes are sent to the participants.

Stage three shows the focus of the study regarding data correlation with the study, and at this stage the main categories are formed by similar sub-categories and the inter-connections appear.

### Stage four: Connecting the main categories to one another and writing the narrative

The narrative is the outcome of the words spoken by the participants, and packed in correlation with the main categories. In the narrative, the historical picture of the participants' perspective on the historical events can be depicted in the research. To write the narrative, the following are used: Books, primary and secondary sources, newspaper articles, poems, songs, and other items that have played a role in the reconstruction of historical events such as wars.

Such historical narratives are of special importance: Revealing the events, projecting the findings, answering questions addressed in the study, exposing categories, clarifying ambiguities, and preventing bias in researcher's accounts.

Historic narration attracts readers' attention to the event by revealing a complete perception of the experience. Here, the authors respond to the questions raised in the process of the study, determine the primary and secondary sources, combine the ideas, and share the views of the participants. All these enable the reader to have a meaningful and inspiring assessment of the presented issue through this model [Figure 1].

Judging the study and its success is related to joining the categories to one another and the acceptance of the work for publication as a final product.<sup>[17]</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Historical research, as a research methodology, is supported by oral history (research method), which is a valuable tool for researchers in the nursing field. During the passage of time, a lack of an objective method to assist the analysis of

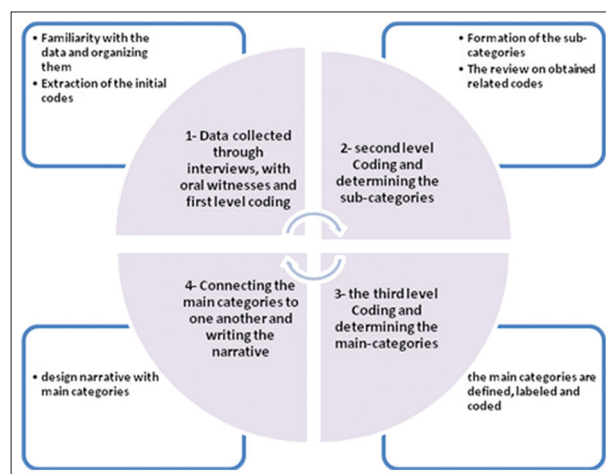


Figure 1: Analyzing oral history

the data obtained through oral evidence interviews limits the researcher's efforts.

Here, an attempt has been made to introduce a model for better data analysis with respect to oral history that would facilitate better research approaches where oral history is the main source. Through systematic application of this method, the nursing researcher would be able to produce a correct and reliable narrative that would illustrate nursing discipline abilities and assist in the production of knowledge in this realm.

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