"I hear more than what you say":

Issues and resolutions in doing life history research with female composers, producers, and conductors

【Conference presentation】

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1. Title page

Hello Everyone,

I am Luna from the Institute of Education, University College London. Today I am very happy to be here and to share my stories. As the title of my presentation shows, I will talk about methodological issues during the data collection for my PhD research, a life history project with female composers, producers, and conductors in six countries.

In the presentation, I will introduce my music journey, the context and process of my research, and three cases in my study. I will then summarise the key points and be happy to answer questions at the end of the group presentations.

2. My music journey

The project starts from my childhood experience in the music island of China. Its name, 'Kulangsu', came from my dialect, a language used by ethnic minorities from Taiwan. The island is a UNESCO World Heritage site; however, its multicultural music history remains hidden. I was lucky to spend my childhood on this island, with professional musicians' families living upstairs, in the neighbourhood, and with residents from 13 different countries. In my early adolescence my family moved out of the island, but I continued music making with different communities and institutions until I came to the UK for my master study.

My adolescence has witnessed how urbanisation and modernisation had changed the music culture in Kulangsu. My music communities and peers left the island, and the music atmosphere on the island is no longer active. When I worked as a schoolteacher, I integrated music into my teaching. My students came to my concerts where I performed with bands and singing groups, and they started to learn music. From my own experience, I understand that we are the living histories of music and culture, so I embarked on the research journey.

3. Research context

The loss of music culture on my home island is not the only challenge for my research project. During my data collection period, the Covid-19 pandemic was at its peak. The pandemic has influenced every aspect of life and society; it also influenced my research.

As you can see from the lockdown timeline, in February 2021, we were in the third national lockdown. Since then, it was lifted step by step, and until September 2021, most of the public spaces reopened, but face masks remained a social habit.

In response to the pandemic, I could not travel to France, Canada, United States, Singapore, and China where my participants reside. There were times when I could not meet my participants who are here in the UK as well. Therefore, I decided to do remote life history interviews. This had been rare, so I spent a few months attending webinars and reading books to prepare myself. Also, I did some pilot interviews before inviting high-profile musicians to "sit in" a life history interview with me.

4. Research process

Globally, high-profile, or prominent female composers, producers, and conductors are few, and they are usually busy. Previous studies on female musicians' lives have attempted to invite famous musicians, but only one study has succeeded. In addition, all existing studies in this topic focus on women musicians in one society only, e.g., in the United Kingdom, in the United States, and so on (Halstead, 1997; Kelly, 2013; Scharff, 2017).

When I did the sampling, I did not focus on one country; therefore, my participants are with multicultural backgrounds. Among the twenty-six musicians contacted, ten accepted my invitations. They were also willing to talk with me for about two hours each, some even longer, while my original interview was only planned for 45 minutes. These were more than what I expected.

Due to the pandemic, all interviews in my study were conducted remotely, except for one interview, where there was a technology issue, so we had another in-person interview once the lockdown was lifted. I will illustrate this case later.

In 2022, a life historian in educational research wrote about three different types of life history interview. Respectively, they produce full life history, thematic life history, and occupational life history (Goodson, 2022). However, my data collection was in 2021, and I was not aware of the different types of life history interview, let alone thinking of a transition from one type to another. This will bring us to the first case scenario.

Before we open the stage for my participants, I would like to say thank you to my friends, Ash, Jane, and Hana, who are my voice guests. They play the voices of my participants, which we will hear soon. Unfortunately, they cannot be here today, but they are desperate to know what would happen at the conference. So, I might have three upcoming brunches – which is, wonderful.

5. Case One: Power dynamic and Changing the type of life history interview

In the first case, we come to know Yuan, who is a composer at senior career stage. She is among the first three musicians I interviewed. Yuan came from an intellectual family in Eastern China, and at her twenties, studied composition with one of the maestros in France. She then worked as a composer and composition teacher in France until now. Comparing the backgrounds of Yuan and me, we can assume that there might be a power negotiation during the interview.

Let me play the audio to relive the scenario [play the audio].

In the audio, she said that she did not have much experience on the gender inequality issue. We originally planned for two interviews. After the first interview, she emailed me that, if we only focus on gender inequality, she will not continue the research participation.

If I ignored her voice and continued to focus the interviews on gender inequality, I would have more authority in shaping the data, but the interviewee could lose the right to tell her own life story. Life history researchers have emphasised that the life narrative generated from the life history interview, including its emplotment and configuration, shall be decided by the teller, the participant (e.g., Goodson, 2016).

Therefore, it was possible that Yuan tried to negotiate the power dynamic with me during the interview and took control of her life narrative. This indicated that my initial interview theme was too narrow, so I left the interview direction open, followed her life narrative, and let the interviewee decided what was significant for her musical life. We then co-produced expansive life histories, changing the original thematic life history to full life history.

Perhaps this type of transition in life history research is not often. For my study, on one hand, life history method has been rarely used in studying lives of female musicians, so there was little prior research experience that I can learn from. On the other hand, life history project can take years to complete, so updates on its methodology may not be that fast. Nevertheless, this case has proved the importance of listening and thinking carefully at each life history interview, while being considerate, reflexive, and adaptive.

6. Case Two: Technology use and Remote life history interview

Elena is a British conductor. We had a remote life history interview during the pandemic lockdown. We do not live close to each other, which might influence the stability of the internet connection. At the beginning of the interview, there was a technological issue, and she fixed it by changing to another device.

Let me play the scenario [play the audio].

We can hear that Elena used the computer audio first but found that she could not hear my voice. Then she switched to her phone and the audio worked. During the interview, I noticed that her voice was a bit vague, but I thought, if I could understand what she said, the recording shall be identifiable. This turned out to be a mistake.

Also, because I had another interview shortly after, I did not transcribe the interview with Elena immediately. This turned out to be another mistake. When I had time to start transcribing the interview, her voice in the recording was surprisingly very vague. This resulted in an invalid transcript for research use. Therefore, we agreed to have an in-person interview after the lockdown was lifted.

In this case, the technological problem at the beginning of the interview, both my participant and me identified as audio clarity, was seemingly resolved by her changing the device. However, neither of us realised that the problem was in fact the internet connection.

Therefore, for future life history research, especially those conducted remotely, a trivial error in the digital setting or device can possibly has a significant impact. So, we need to be extra careful, paying attention to details and having sufficient practices in the digital environment.

Another point is to transcribe the interview as soon as possible, even with a tight interview schedule. Life history researcher is, as everybody else, with limited memory capacity, and we need to be aware of that before the fieldwork.

A final reflection on this case is an idea forward. The technology issue has accidently resulted in a re-conducting of the life history interview. In the remote interview, Elena had been familiar with what to talk about in the interview. Then, at the in-person interview, she added a substantial amount of historical and cultural backgrounds of her music experience, such as the music scenes and festivals in Britain right after the World War II. This historical data can provide substantial contextualisation of her life narrative, making the second interview almost like a life history (Goodson, 2016, 2022); a surprise out of an accident.

In future life history project, if the geographical locations of the researcher and the participant is distanced, it might be helpful to have a remote pre-interview talk to establish rapport and test the digital settings on both

sides. The key points of using technology in life history research is to grow our digital awareness, and to benefit from the convenience of digital communication. Technology can possibly provide us opportunities to conduct life history and oral history studies unlikely to do in the past, and we can release this potential, but certainly, with caution, care, and cooperation spirit.

7. Case Three: Research rapport and Life history interview with a friend

Xing (pseudonym) is a mid-career composer. She is from Canada and was a personal friend of mine prior to the interview. We knew each other since mid-adolescence and having been in contact with each other over these years. Both of us moved to several different places since late adolescence; and when the interview took place, it was ten years since we last met.

Let me show you what happened [play the audio].

The interview started very well, as if we were having a catch-up as old friend. During the interview, she mentioned her encounters with two successful musicians in China during the years of her undergraduate study. That was before the two musicians came to fame, and after the interviews, she considered it would not be appropriate for me to write about their "private lives".

Therefore, when I sent the interview transcript to her, she required me to delete two pages of it (out of 32 pages) that was about her experience with the two successful musicians. As a result, I miss a part of empirical data about the social-cultural environment for China's most recent popular music wave.

After the interview, through emails and private chats, she also showed a tendency of distancing our friendship. I continued to care for her, like her posts, send her festive greetings. Gradually our relation becomes closer again, but I feel it difficult to go back to the time when we were friends and could talk about anything.

A participant-researcher relation, similar with any other relation, needs mutual efforts to establish and maintain. In previous life history studies, once established, the rapport between the researcher and the participant does not easily fade away (Goodson, 2001; Cole and Knowles, 2001). My assumption, accordingly, is that with my existing friendship with Xing, it would be smooth to build and keep the rapport. However, this was not the case.

Once the consent form is signed, protection for the data is guaranteed. But for Xing, who was my long-term friend, she might need more than the information on the consent form, which I could not have given to her. This is why she distances from me and cools down our friendship after the interview. Hence, in future life history research with a friend, I suggest having a bit more communication and letting the friend feeling safe and respected also in the research relation.

My second reflection is on the nature of a conversation. If my interview with Xing is a daily conversation between two friends, e.g., without the recording, then she might be comfortable for me to know about the experience with the two prominent musicians, and this would not change the mutual trust, hence the friendship, between us. However, in the life history interview, Xing is aware that the conversation is recorded. Hence, she is careful of whether her talk can have undesirable consequences, e.g., for her two musician friends. We can indicate this as a "Hawthorne effect" of the life history interview, which can result in a removal of data.

The case with Xing might not be usual in life history research but it implies the complexity of research relationships. As the researcher we can be perceptive and understandable towards each participant, because the nature of the relation might be perceived differently in each life history interview.

8. Summary

In my presentation I reflected these case scenarios in the life history interviews I conducted with prominent female musicians. The cases in my study point to three central issues in doing life history research, remotely, in-person, and with participants from different age groups and cultural backgrounds. I assume these are also important for oral history research in general.

As a novice in life history research, I have much more to learn. I am grateful to be at the OHS conference and to share the little experience I have gained with you. I would like to continue learning the act and art of listening, to further my understanding and practices of life history and oral history research.

Thank you very much for listening. I am happy to answer questions at the end of the group presentation. Thank you!

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