Oral History and Human Rights: The Archive and Disability at Winnipeg's Oral History Centre

by
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Abstract

Carlos Sosa, a member of the Manitoba League of Persons with Disabilities (MLPD) and the principal investigator in the MLPD Oral History Project, stated in a 2021 oral history interview that "it's absolutely critical that we understand history, but we also learn from history to come up with a way forward where our most vulnerable are considered" (Sosa, 2021). Through this statement Sosa demonstrates the way that human rights and oral history intersect while highlighting the impact that research occurring at this intersection can have on human lives. During my Master of Human Rights (MHR) practicum placement at the Oral History Centre (OHC), I was able to interview Sosa as well as immerse myself in the theoretical and practical aspects of the production of oral history archives. Working at the intersection of human rights and oral history, I realized that although I previously felt that there was no space for someone with my backgrounds, interests, and experience in the field of human rights studies, there was in fact a gap between the oral history and human rights offering me an opportunity to insert myself and my competencies into an academic field that I am passionate about. I entered a Master of Human Rights program and the discipline of human rights studies anticipating being able to make use of my historical training. While this has occurred to some extent, I do not feel historical theory, specifically theory that informs the practice of oral history, has had its potential fully realized in the discipline of human rights. While at the OHC I witnessed the way that human rights are present in the collection, production, and accessibility of oral histories. This experience at the OHC reinforced my perceptions of the necessary relationship between oral history and human rights, even as it also showed me that the two approaches have not yet fully realized the potential arising from their intersection.

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Introduction

Carlos Sosa, a member of the Manitoba League of Persons with Disabilities (MLPD) and the principal investigator in the MLPD Oral History Project, stated in a 2021 oral history interview that "it's absolutely critical that we understand history, but we also learn from history to come up with a way forward where our most vulnerable are considered" (Sosa, 2021). Through this statement Sosa demonstrates the way that human rights and oral history intersect while highlighting the impact that research occurring at this intersection can have on human lives. During my Master of Human Rights (MHR) practicum placement at the Oral History Centre (OHC), I was able to interview Sosa as well as immerse myself in the theoretical and practical aspects of the production of oral history archives. Working at the intersection of human rights and oral history, I realized that although I previously felt that there was no space for someone with my backgrounds, interests, and experience in the field of human rights studies, there was in fact a gap between the oral history and human rights offering me an opportunity to insert myself and my competencies into an academic field that I am passionate about.

Trained as a historian, I entered a Master of Human Rights program and the discipline of human rights studies anticipating being able to make use of my historical training. While this has occurred to some extent, I do not feel historical theory, specifically theory that informs the practice of oral history, has had its potential fully realized in the discipline of human rights. During my practicum placement at the University of Winnipeg's Oral History Centre I witnessed the way human rights is present in the collection, production, and accessibility of oral histories. This experience at the OHC reinforced my perceptions of the necessary relationship between oral history and human rights, even as it also showed me that the two approaches have not yet fully realized the potential arising from their intersection. In this paper, I do not intend to criticize the Master of Human Rights program at the University of Manitoba or the field of Human Rights itself; rather I aim to identify and discuss existing gaps in the way Human Rights are studied, and by doing so encourage reference to an even wide range of human experiences. I will begin this exploration by explaining my perspective, unpacking some key elements of the autoethnographic approach that I have used in this paper, mapping some of the intersections linking human rights and oral history, explaining my experiences in these two fields of study, and illustrating these ideas through a case study.

Perspective

I came to the study of human rights from the discipline of History; when I started the program, I had recently completed a Master's in History focusing on post-Second World War public memory in Germany. Much of the research for this project was done by studying first-person narratives of wartime and postwar life written by everyday people; that is, I spent two years analyzing public memory in the aftermath of mass violence. I emphasize the perspective that I entered the Human Rights program with because it shaped the type of research and analysis I wanted to do once in the program, and defined how I saw myself as an academic. I was drawn to the MHR because it offered a transition from my limited scholarly experiences to a growing field where I could realistically gain employment and contribute in a meaningful way to the world around me. In my first year, I was immersed in documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Convention on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, and the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights. While these aspects of Human Rights are necessary and foundational to the discipline, I struggled to see how my previous training and desire to amplify the voices of individuals could be put to use in the field of human rights. I felt isolated in my interests. This initial uncertainty in the program combined with a pre-existing case of imposter syndrome, and an eagerness to enter the workforce intensified my impression that there was no space for me in my desired field.

In retrospect, I figuratively held my breath for a year, waiting for professional opportunities at the intersections of my interests to reveal themselves. As my peers and I were preparing to start practicums in our areas of speciality, the COVID -19 global pandemic took hold of the world and changed the landscape of the profession I was trying gain experience in. I had envisioned completing my practicum at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, the Manitoba Museum or a similar institution. However, the public health necessities of the past year have made not only a practicum in these spaces impossible, but they have also dramatically changed my perceived chances of ever being employed in such an institution. I acknowledge that the present-day realities of this global pandemic may not become the "new normal," and that my hopes of being employed in a museum may still be realized. However, in the Spring of 2020 I still needed to complete the practicum placement of the MHR amid the realities of pandemic life, and this required me to pivot in my practicum placement slightly.

With the guidance of practicum supervisor Dr. Laura Reimer, I was advised to contact the Oral History Centre housed at the University of Winnipeg so as to complete my practicum placement. I was elated to discover the existence of this centre and the willingness of people there to mentor me. I was put into contact with Brett Lougheed, Kimberley Moore, and Kent Davies, who briefed me on the work of the OHC, its overall mandate, and the work that I would be doing there. From the very beginning of my experience at the OHC I felt that my involvement in projects was valuable, and that my specific set of experiences and training was an asset to the centre as a whole. In retrospect, that was a defining personal moment as it was the beginning of a growing professional confidence. As I began my work at the OHC, I was excited about the possibility of bringing forward my passion for history through everyday human rights-related work. During this placement I was able to listen to, transcribe, log, summarize, and process oral history interviews on a number of different projects, one of which I will use as a case study in this reflection.

While through my placement I was able to witness connections between oral historiography and human rights, I recognized that the potential outcomes of any such intersection has not yet been fully realized, in theory or practice. The field of human rights should more clearly acknowledge the alignment it has with the method and products of oral history. In the creation of oral histories fundamental aspects of human rights thought and practice are omnipresent, such as informed consent, the amplification of voices traditionally left out of elite discourses, and resource accessibility. While these qualities clearly align with the field of human rights theory and activism, direct links between the two approaches are not clearly stated and therefore the opportunity for information sharing between the field of human rights and oral history has not yet been put into practice. In my experience, further emphasis on connections between human rights and oral history need to be made in theoretical discussions, and present-day links between bodies, such as archives, academic research groups, and activist groups need to be made stronger. On a large scale, the field of human rights would be further enriched by the inclusion of even more oral history theory, methodology, and practice; the same is true for the further inclusion of human rights issues, discussions, and approaches in the creation and study of oral histories.

More concretely, I believe that the Master of Human Rights program would benefit from a partnership with the OHC and that the OHC could reach more people if existing links between

human rights and oral history were further emphasized. The centre is focused on providing education on the fundamentals of oral history, such as technical recording skills, interview techniques, and archiving as well as making available and accessible oral histories to researchers. The Master of Human Rights program is generally focused on training a generation of human rights scholars and practitioners. When examined simultaneously these two institutional bodies, the OHC and the MHR may therefore be seen to be engaged with similar research and goals. And yet these institutions use different names, language, and emphasis in order to conduct their work. I believe that enhanced forms of inter-institutional communication and collaboration would equip individuals like me to conduct, analyze, and make available records of human experiences.

Autoethnography

I am writing this paper from a perspective informed by the theory and practice of autoethnography because this innovative methodology allows my voice to be present in my writing, aligns well with the values of both human rights and oral history, and creates space for the idea that academic theorizing is an evolving process. Further, I view autoethnography as a written approach to analysis and communication that falls under the larger umbrella of oral history. Indeed, the relationship of oral history to autoethnography and the Archive is that of a type to a what philosophers refer to as a "token" of that type. This acknowledgement that both autoethnography and the Archive are examples of the classification of oral history clearly illustrates why I have chosen the writing style and approach of critical autoethnography. As is the mandate of oral history, autoethnography and the Archive work to create space for and emphasize the legitimacy of personal experiences and perspectives. These testimonial tokens of Oral History present a multiplicity of experiences and by doing so complicate simplified versions of the past and challenge the idea of anything like perfect objectivity. I view autoethnography alongside oral history as an enabler of human rights because both forms make visible those that the human rights project aims to protect.

Upon completing my practicum placement I struggled with the idea of how to write about my experiences because of my traditional training. As Carolyn Ellis states, in traditional academic disciplines we are taught to "protect against [our] own biases interfering with [our] observations and that [our] research should produce general knowledge and theory" (Ellis, 1999,

p. 673). My graduate education has been a deeply personal and emotional experience, and I therefore reject the idea that I could ever reflect on it without the influence of my emotions. Thus, I was drawn to autoethnography. Elizabeth Etorre explains that autoethnography allows researchers to be present in their writing because it "locates research experience in the changing ebb of emotional life, allowing interpretations of personal 'truths' and speaking about oneself to transform into narrative representations of political responsibility" (Etorre, 2017, p. 359). Etorre likewise discusses the power of empathy and the use of the "I" in autoethnographic works and emphasizes the need for the author in the writing.

My apprehensions about writing this paper stemmed from my discomfort with discussing emotional experiences in an atmosphere that, in my previous experience, had been devoid of not only emotion but my own voice. It was during a Zoom call with my academic supervisor Dr. Adam Muller when I expressed my uncertainty surrounding this research paper. He responded with a simple question, saying "Emily, who are you writing this for?". I was surprised, because I didn't know. Nobody had ever asked me who I was writing a paper for, who I was doing this practicum for, who I was completing this degree for. Ultimately, I started this degree because I wanted to gain meaningful employment and to make visible and accessible human experiences, the historical connections made between them, and individual experiences of human rights. I am writing this paper because I needed to hear this two years ago; I needed to hear that intersections can be found and explored and that just because your interests are uncommon doesn't mean that they are any less valid. As a member of the first graduating class of the University of Manitoba's Master of Human Rights program, I want to encourage those coming after me to challenge the pre-formed "boxes" set out before them and to contribute to the creation of a collaborative interdisciplinary program that centres on (while helping to centre) human experience.

Autoethnography emerged out of "traditional ethnography," which was the study of society and culture in "foreign or 'exotic'" locations where researchers "took advantage of often-vulnerable others" and created "representation of others [that] often were incomplete" (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015). Traditional ethnography allows researchers to "omit" themselves from the narrative and create accounts that were "distant, removed, neutral, [and] disengaged" (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 10-11). Autoethnography challenges the assumption that research has to be "scientific," static, and devoid of emotion in order to be valid, an assumption that stems from gendered assumptions surrounding what we understand knowledge

to be. Adams, Holman, and Jones explain that "personal experience, storytelling, care and emotions, and bodies were considered 'feminine' and unpredictable and, therefore, a barrier to producing objective and rational research" (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 8). Autoethnography emerged alongside second wave feminism, as autoethnography challenged the pervasive gendered assumptions within academia in the 1970s and 80s and the feminist movement encouraged a social and political re-evaluation of the role of gender in society more generally. Further, as a scholar engaged with feminism and feminist theory within academia, critical autoethnography proves to be an apt choice to conceptually and methodologically anchor this aspect of my reflection.

Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis explore the emergence of autoethnography and the social and political realities that this academic practice challenges. They explain that in the 1970s and '80s social scientists "started to 'radically rethink' how they conducted and represented their research" as they recognised that they could not "separate [them]selves from the research experience," creating a "crisis of representation" (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 8). Social scientists challenged the underlying assumption in their field that they could separate their subjective experiences from what was being touted as objective truths. Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis explain that "*social* life is messy, uncertain, and emotional. If our desire is to research *social* life then we must embrace a research method that, to the best of its/our ability, acknowledges and accommodates mess and chaos, uncertainty and emotion" (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 9). This shift described by Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis illustrates researchers' desire to acknowledge their positionality and include their personal reflections in their work.

Autoethnography can be better understood when its' three titular elements 'auto', "ethno", and 'graphy' are broken down and explained. Specifically: "auto" refers to the of personal experiences; "ethno" refers to a cultural experience; and 'graphy' to the writing of these experiences (Lapadat, 2017, p. 590 ; Chang, 2016, 445). Accordingly, autoethnography is the study of cultural experiences written from the researcher's personal experiences. While this method had been adapted over time, the way in which it emerged is vital to understanding this evolution, in the following section I will outline the emergence of autoethnography and the creation of critical autoethnography.

Stacey Holman Jones builds on the assertions made by other researchers and explores how personal reflections can be understood alongside theory using critical autoethnography. Holman Jones explains that "where autoethnography brings the personal, the concrete, and an emphasis on storytelling to our scholarship, it often leaves us wanting for clear and powerful theoretical frameworks for understanding how such stories help us write into or become the change we seek in the world" (Holman Jones, 2016, p. 228). She explains that critical autoethnography "reminds us that theory is not a static or autonomous set of ideas, objects, or practices" but is rather an "ongoing process that links the concrete and abstract" (Holman Jones, 2016, p. 228). Holman Jones' argument tasks social scientists with not only challenging the tradition of scholarly "detachment," but also acknowledging that theoretical understandings are not static, but dynamic, and so must be treated as such in critical autoethnographies (Holman Jones, 2016, p. 228). This perspective also fosters research to emerge at the intersection of theoretical understandings and personal experience, something with special relevance to my desire for linkages between this research method with my overall discussion of oral history and human rights.

Overall, as Judith Lapadat states, "autoethnography (AE) is an approach to qualitative inquiry in which a researcher recounts a story of his or her own personal experience, coupled with an ethnographic analysis of the cultural context and implications of that experience" (Lapadat, 2017, p. 589). I have chosen critical autoethnography as an approach to making sense of my practicum placement because it allows me to discuss my experiences at the Oral History Centre, as a student of human rights, and the ways that my experiences at the OHC and in the MHR have shaped my personal perspective and professional goals. Critical autoethnography allows my personal experience to be analyzed alongside broader methodological and practical discussions of oral history and human rights. This coincidence has the potential to demonstrate the connections between oral history and human rights, and the potential research and human outcomes that lie at the intersection of these two distinct fields. This reflection is a cathartic and necessary process for my own personal development, but it also has the potential to encourage future students studying intersecting or emerging fields to realize that their interests not only have research potential but can also lead to employment.

From my experience, I believe that neither the field of oral history or human rights fully incorporates the potential of the other; oral history does not take full advantage of the terms,

concepts, and the rhetoric of human rights studies that it otherwise aligns well with, and human rights studies does not make enough use of what oral history offers. Before I can further discuss the simultaneous application of methods and concepts specific to the study of oral history and human rights, I would like to outline some of the academic work that has been done at this intersection.

Oral History

In order to explore the way that oral history and human rights studies overlap, I will outline the basic tenets of each field, discuss their similarities, and acknowledge the work that is being done at this intersection. The oral history that I primarily refer to in this paper belongs to a larger category of narrative construction that includes storytelling. I believe that in order to discuss those qualities of oral history that I believe are especially relevant to human rights I must first outline how I understand the historiographical aspects of oral history (i.e. historical storytelling as a kind of narrative history-making) as well as explain how oral history relates to storytelling.

"Oral History" and "storytelling" are often used interchangeably in groups outside of institutional academia and related projects. However, while these two methodologies are similar and share many overlapping qualities, they are in some ways distinct. For me, the delineations between oral history and storytelling are simply categories that can, despite their logical separability, simultaneously apply to the same project or specific interview. What this means is that a set of interviews can be conducted as part of an oral history project and be considered to yield both oral history and story. While oral history and storytelling have many similarities they have been understood and therefore used in research very differently. During my experience in the Master of Human Rights program I had the opportunity to take a number of courses in the Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS) faculty at the University of Manitoba. In these contexts, I realized that storytelling is much more prevalent and used more effectively in PACS discourses than in the study of human rights. Therefore, I aim to outline the basics of storytelling, explain how storytelling is used in PACS research, outline some of the main ideas of oral history, explain how oral history is included in human rights discourses, and present my point of view as to why oral history methodology needs greater recognition and presence in the research and presentation of human rights studies.

There are no official dates for the beginning of the oral tradition, as humans have engaged in and continue to engage in storytelling through everyday interactions. Jessica Senehi explains that "storytelling is a natural human process" and is rooted in "Indigenous, feminist, decolonizing, queer, critical race, intersectional, and/or arts-based inquiry" (Senehi, 2020, p. ix). These communities have used storytelling as a means to make visible their experiences in societies that worked to delegitimatize their existence, silence the reality of their experiences, and exclude them from traditional means of communication such as written text. It is vital to acknowledge the communities and intentions that have shaped the evolution of storytelling methodology in order to understand storytelling's intentions to "de-silence, to center, and to make visible the knowledge of people who have been silenced, marginalized, and invisibilized" (Senehi, 2020, p. ix). While storytelling has been and continues to be practiced amongst many different groups of people in various places throughout the world the important work of marginalized populations such as Indigenous communities, persons with disabilities, people of colour, queer theorists, and women must be highlighted and recognized as foundational to the emergence of storytelling as a legitimate area of academic study. While storytelling has, in recent years, been acknowledged to a greater degree in academic discussions it is fundamentally founded by the idea that all people are storytellers, and that storytelling occurs in everyday interactions (Senehi, 2020, p. xi). Storytelling has been incorporated into Peace and Conflict Studies research and has allowed for researchers to understand and convey the experiences of individuals who have lived through experiences such as war, mass violence, and extreme poverty. The methodology of storytelling does not *require* audio or video recording and can occur outside of formal interview style settings, thus making research accessible to individuals who are not comfortable with or unable to access traditional means of academic research. These aspects of the methodology put the needs of the participant ahead of those of the research project, therefore embodying the principles of peace and conflict studies. Storytelling has allowed PACS research to more clearly centre the experiences of participants in research and in doing so has created space for previously silenced experiences to be brought forward and acknowledged in academic discourses.

Similar to storytelling, oral history falls under the broad categorization of oral research and while these two approaches intersect in many ways there are some key differences in their methodology and use. Modern day oral history – that which occurs within the confines of formal

institutions such as universities, academic research groups, social justice activism, and archives – is a product of the way oral history has been practiced in the past. Donald Ritchie explains the complexity surrounding the historiography of oral history, stating that "oral history is as old as the first recorded history and as new as the latest digital recorder. Long before the practice acquired a name and standard procedures, historians conducted interviews to gain insight into great events" (Ritchie, 2011, p. 3). Ritchie's account of the history of oral history does not acknowledge the substantial shifts that occurred regarding who's stories, experiences, and lives are "worthy" of being recorded; oral history as it is known today is a result of the social and political movements of the 19th and 20th centuries. Throughout the 1860s there were active oral history projects, but they were primarily focused on the collection and archiving of experiences of wealthy government officials (Shopes, 2014, p. 2). A major shift occurred in 1884 with the emergence of the Marxist influenced Fabians; they challenged the social and political system of the time period by working to "foste[r] equality and community action in public policy and education" (McKernen, 2013, p. 417). They questioned the domination of the wealthy, discussed ideas of equality, and proposed that social inequality could be addressed with greater research and education (McKernen, 2013, p. 419). I include the work of the Fabians as part of the historiography of oral history because it was the beginning of social history which initiated a shift from studying those in positions of social power – the wealthy, white, and male – to examining the lives of non-dominant group within society.

In addition to the work of the Fabians, the Annales School made vital contributions to the development of social history and therefore the practice and methodology of oral history. The interdisciplinary Annales School was founded in 1929 by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre with the intention of bringing greater "scientific" analysis to the study of history and had an emphasis on "understanding social interactions" (Clemente, Durand, & Roulet, 2017, p. 20). Annales historians also embraced a "*subjectivist* approach to time" and introduced the "history of mentalities, or the attitudes, values, and beliefs of social groups" (Clemente, Durand, & Roulet, 2017, p. 20-21). Annales historians studied "the automatic ways of thinking" that shaped people's actions and the "long-lasting trends in history"; in doing so these thinkers challenged the academic community that they were a part of (Clemente, Durand, & Roulet, 2017, p. 21). They challenged engrained practices and expanded the way that historians look at the past; Annales historians advocated for greater understanding of the "attitudes, values and beliefs of

social groups," an idea that is directly linked to oral history methodology (Clemente, Durand, & Roulet, 2017, p. 21). I believe that oral history can be understood as a facilitator that allows researchers to understand the underlying "attitudes, values, and beliefs" that exist within certain social groups. (Clemente, Durand, & Roulet, 2017, p. 21). Along with the work of the Fabians, Annales historians continued to challenge what "counts as history" by questioning why individuals think and do the things that they do. Annales historians began asking some of the questions that oral history methodology has the potential to answer, at least partially.

The social history movement of the 1970s was the by-product of groups such as the Fabians and Annales historians who created space, over decades, within hegemonic academic discourses that was amenable to different approaches to studies of human experiences. Linda Shopes explains that while oral history projects occurred before the technological advancements of "digital recording devices" they lacked uniformly "rigorous" methods and were dependent on human notetakers (Shopes, Making Sense of Evidence: What is Oral History?, 2002, p. 2). Allen Nevins' historical research project at Columbia University in the 1940s marks a significant shift in the practice of oral history as he was the first recognized researcher to "initiate a systematic and disciplined effort to record on tape, preserve, and make available for future research recollections deemed of historical significance" (Shopes, Making Sense of Evidence: What is Oral History?, 2002, p.2). Although he standardized the practical guidelines that shaped Oral History, Nevins continued "to focus on the lives of the 'elite' – leaders in business, the professions, politics, and social life" (Shopes, Making Sense of Evidence: What is Oral History?, 2002, p.2).

A fundamental shift in the practice of oral history occurred with the social history movement of the 1970s, which called on historians to re-evaluate their choices of who, what, and where they place their research focus. While these ideas had been introduced earlier by the Fabians and Annales historians, the 1970s social historians exposed ways that the writing of history continued to emphasize the experiences of primarily wealthy white men. Despite the assertions of earlier movements, historical accounts continued to focus on upper-class white men until social historians in the 1970s began researching "blue-collar workers, racial and ethnic minorities, women, [and] labor and political activists" (Shopes, Making Sense of Evidence: What is Oral History?, 2002, p. 2). This turn towards social history coupled with the technological advancements that made recording possible is reflected in modern day practices of

oral history. As Alessandro Portelli explains, "many theories of oral history are, in fact, theories of social histories as a whole" (Portelli, 2016, p. 50). The influence of social history has "helped realize oral history's potential for restoring to the record the voices of the historiographically – if not historically – silent" (Shopes, Making Sense of Evidence: What is Oral History?, 2002, p. 2). Oral history has the potential to amplify or otherwise make audible the voices of those unable to record or have their history recorded within the confines of academia, such as those without access to education, women, children, and persons with disabilities. Shopes argues that "oral history has over the past half-century, helped democratize the historical record," a process and outcome that I contend is fundamentally linked to ideas of human rights (Shopes, Making Sense of Evidence: What is Oral History?, 2002, p. 2). Before I explore the relationship between oral history and human rights further, I would like to note some of the ways that oral history methodology can be understood in comparison to other oral methods, such as those found in storytelling.

As previously established, oral history and storytelling both fall under the umbrella of historiography of oral history. However, there are different methodological qualities within interviews that signal whether on oral record is oral history or storytelling. Oral history is defined as "a self-conscious, disciplined conversation between two people about some aspect of the past considered by them to be of historical significance and intentionally recorded for the record" (Shopes, Making Sense of Evidence: What is Oral History?, 2002, p. 2). Oral History occurs within a discursive framework marked by a specific set of qualifications that do not necessarily apply to other forms of oral research (e.g. the signing of consent agreements, audio and/or visual recording of the interview, and a defined scope of questions are all qualifications that must be present). While many research projects that utilize storytelling do employ many of these practices, they are not necessary in order for the interview to be considered an example of storytelling.

In addition to its methodological facets, the theoretical underpinnings that shape the practice of oral history must also be understood. The fallacy of objectivity and the interpretive nature of oral histories are theoretical aspects of oral history practice that must be grasped in order for oral histories to be used as intended. The fallacy of objectivity refers to the misconception that any reflection on the past can be entirely removed from personal experience and perspective. This is related to discussions of "capital T truth" as oral history complicates our

understanding of truth by adding variations of the past to the historical record and challenging the idea of a singular truth. The fact that oral historians accept that interviews are one person's experience of an event often leads to discomfort and to questions of truth and the need of verification of one's statements. Shopes explains that "an interview is inevitably an act of memory, and while individual memories can be more or less accurate, complete, or truthful, in fact interviews routinely include inaccurate and imprecise information, if not outright falsehoods" (Shopes, Making Sense of Evidence: What is Oral History?, 2002, p. 6). Scholars acknowledge and accept these more contingent aspects of oral history not to discourage the creation or use of this type of source, but to instruct on the best practices of oral history.

Even with acknowledgements of the fallacy of objectivity and need for interpretation, the use of oral history is still continually questioned for its perceived limitations. When I presented on my practicum experience in the Fall of 2020 at the University of Manitoba Master's Human Rights Symposium, the primary questions that I received from my peers regarded verifiability. I had individuals asking how I might verify whether or not a recording I am listening to is in fact true. At the time I gave the rather simple answer that ascertaining the veracity of someone's oral account is not part of my job. I was processing interview materials after the interview had been conducted and looked over by my supervisors. However, I now see that the belief in truth is still pervasive amongst my human rights-oriented peers, who were most likely referring to the oral testimonies of war criminals that we had discussed in our classes the year before. In said interviews, individuals with connections to mass violence attempted to use oral history interviews as a means for constructing narratives in which they are innocent, or perhaps themselves victims of a larger cruel system. While I see that the intent behind these types of recordings matters in terms of justifying them, they still serve a purpose and reveal something about post-conflict attempts to evade guilt or punishment for their actions. Portelli addresses concerns similar to those put forward by my peers by explaining that although participants can potentially share "'wrong' statements" these accounts are still important because to the individual they are, at times, "psychologically 'true' and that this truth may be equally as important as factually reliable accounts" (Portelli, 2016, p. 53). The attempts made by some interviewees to construct an attractive or sympathetic image of themselves is still valuable research material. However, it is also necessary that the researchers involved in its collection and distribution demonstrate the situation surrounding the interviewee's claims. Researchers can

never *know* what happened in the past; there is no one correct recollection of past events. However, oral history allows for more people to share their individual perspectives and by doing so to create a more complete depiction of the past (Portelli, 2016, p. 54). While Portelli emphasizes the necessity of oral history documents, Shopes explains that researchers must "consider the reliability of the narrator and the verifiability of the account" when they attempt to use such accounts in larger research projects (Shopes, Making Sense of Evidence: What is Oral History?, 2002, p.6). Therefore, while verifiability is not a necessary qualification for an oral history interview to be a valuable research resource it does contribute to greater academic recognition when such interviews are included in large research projects.

In addition to discussions of objectivity and verifiability in oral history, scholars emphasize the need for interpretation when using oral history interviews as a research tool. Oral histories are meant to be interpreted since they are reflection of the way a participant feels about their experiences. They are thus less about the sequences of events of which the situation is comprised. They must be read as documents that can inform researchers "not just [of] what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did" (Portelli, 2016, p. 52). Therefore, oral history centred research requires researcher interpretation, background research on the events discussed, and an awareness of the context of the interview. Shopes emphasizes the role of interpretation when using oral histories for research purposes stating that "oral history is, at its heart, a dialogue," it is shaped by the circumstances of the interview, the time restraints, the questions asked by the interviewer and their previous knowledge, and the relationship established between those involved (Shopes, Making Sense of Evidence: What is Oral History?, 2002, p. 3). Therefore, not only are oral history interviews shaped by the circumstances under which they were created, the conditions around the use of this a particular interview are also shaped by the perspective of the researcher. The ideas and intentions that an interviewer enters into an interview with fundamentally shape the direction and scope of the interview (Shopes, Making Sense of Evidence: What is Oral History?, 2002, p. 8). Shopes acknowledges that "oral history interviews are not an unproblematic source," and as a result "historians must exercise critical judgement" (Shopes, Making Sense of Evidence: What is Oral History?, 2002, p. 5). The interpretive nature of oral history research also includes an awareness and recognition of not only "what is said" but also "what is not said, what a narrator misconstrues, ignores, or avoids" (Shopes, Making Sense of Evidence: What is Oral History?,

2002, p. 10). The avoidance of a certain topic or an unwillingness to discuss particular events provides unsaid information regarding the interviewees discomfort with or inability to discuss aspects of their past (Shopes, Making Sense of Evidence: What is Oral History?, 2002, p. 10). Overall, interpretation is an often-overlooked yet vital part of oral history research. By examining the circumstances in which an interview was conducted, as well as the researcher's positionality, the surrounding social, political, economic, and cultural factors of a document's creation and accession have the potential to reveal dynamic human experiences. The necessity of interpretation and the subjective nature of OH are often employed in efforts to delegitimize the use of oral history in academic research; however, I believe that these two factors illustrate the potential of this type of methodology. Doing history differently not only has the potential to reveal unrecognized aspects of human experiences but it also adds further complexity to our understanding of the past and its impact on the present.

Oral history is linked to the theory, practice, and implementation of human rights ideas; the concept of human rights as a whole is founded on the idea that all people are entitled to equal treatment "simply because they are human beings" (Shelton, 2014). While this brief definition does not map the entirety of the human rights project it does demonstrate why oral history is a useful methodological approach to use within human rights-based scholarship. As noted previously, oral history breaks from hegemonic practices within academia by focusing on individuals and groups deemed "unimportant" and thus who are written out of historical narratives. Oral history methods are simply more inclusive with respect to a wide range of individuals and their experiences.

Human Rights

In order adequately to demonstrate the significance of my practicum placement and my experiences as an MHR student I would like to not only to say something about the field of oral history, I'd also like to address some aspects of the study of human rights. I will briefly detail the history of the human rights project, its intentions, and then transition to a discussion of its contemporary practice in connection to oral history. I hope to not only highlight the ways human rights connects to oral history but also expose the gaps that exists between the two fields as well as within the University of Manitoba's Human Rights program.

Dinah Shelton defines human rights as the "consideration of what 'rights' a person possesses by virtue of being 'human', that is, rights that human beings have simply because they are human beings, independent of the infinite variety of individual characteristics and human social circumstances" (Shelton, 2014, p. 1). The idea of human rights is not new, societies have grappled with the concept of human rights based on religious, philosophical, and scientific evidence for many years leaving records of the legal rules created to protect humans' rights. Shelton highlights the Code of Hammurabi, Persia's Great Charter of Cyrus, the Edicts of Asoka, the Magna Carta, the Habeas Corpus Act, and the Declaration of Independence as documents that have shaped our contemporary practice and study of human rights (Shelton, 2014, p. 16-18). Prior to the Second World War, international human rights were discussed and defended to some degree, but it was not until the establishment of the United Nations in the aftermath of that conflict that "human rights [were acknowledged] as a matter of international concern in which State action is constrained by binding legal agreements" (Shelton, 2014, p. 31). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the framework for contemporary studies of human rights, states that "all human being are born free and equal in dignity and human rights". (UNHR, article 1). This fundamental assertion of the goal of the human rights movement is clearly connected to the goals of oral history as a movement. Oral history emerged in response to what I would consider an infringement of human rights, demonstrated through the silencing and therefore devaluation of human life and experiences. The Fabians, Annales historians, and 20th century social historians as a whole paved the way for practice of oral history which, by focusing on marginalized groups, embarked on a human rights affiliated goal. While this outline of the human rights movement was brief it is necessary in order to grasp the way that the human rights movement emerged and evolved alongside oral history. In this paper I contend that human rights and oral history are not fully linked in academic discourse or social justice discussions; however, there are some research projects that have begun the process of prying open the artificial walls that separate human rights and oral history.

Oral History and Human Rights

Despite the existence of academic work at the intersection of human rights and oral history, I contend that the full potential of oral history has not yet been fully recognized in the field of human rights. In this section, I intend to collect and analyze some of the existing

literature at the intersection of these two fields and therefore initiate a discussion on the way that oral history is used in human rights discourses. An example of work occurring at the intersection of human rights and oral history is Amy Starecheski's "Squatting History: The Power of Oral History as a History-Making Practice" in which she explores the multi-generational history of squatters in New York City. She explains that in the 1970s and 80s many New York City landlords found that their land was valuable, but this value could not be realized while "hundred-year-old tenements" were still standing (Starecheski, 2014, p. 190). Simultaneous "cuts to government spending on anti-poverty programs and infrastructure weakened the physical and social fabric of these neighborhoods", resulted in a significant rise in rates of homelessness in the city of New York, and the emergence of human rights issue amongst these individuals who were now without homes (Starecheski, 2014, p. 190). Starecheski discusses the "informal modes of public oral history telling" that became publicly recognized after the 2002 deal that legalized many squatters' residence in these buildings (Starecheski, 2014, p. 188 &193). She explores the relationship between oral history and human rights by examining the way oral history methods were used in this case study to address the right to housing, however the connection between the two fields is fractured as Starecheski does not refer to the infringement of the squatters' human rights or reference the human rights at all. The oral histories of this community aimed to both "humanize" squatters who are often "demonized in the press" and "convey a political lesson" (Starecheski, 2014, p. 188 & 193). The humanizing of individuals is made possible when aspects of an individual's life are shared and therefore made easier for the reader or listener to understand. In the case of Starecheski's article the testimonies of the squatters have the potential to demonstrate that these individuals are not bad, lazy, or greedy but that they like most individuals are looking for a home in which to feel safe and protected – a nearly universal human desire.

In this case study, the creation of oral histories had multiples purposes. They created a means by which "to pass on activist knowledge" and a way to write their actions into the historical record that had silenced them (Starecheski, 2014, p. 195 & 205). As Starecheski explains "oral history telling was a crucial part of the project of turning their activist pasts into history and producing narratives that might compete with versions that erased direct action and struggle from the historical record" (Starecheski, 2014, p. 205). These projects, along with Starecheski's article, emphasize the potential when the foundations of human rights and oral

history are brought together. The form – oral history telling – made it possible for antipoverty activists fighting for the fulfillment of the human right to housing to etch their experiences into the historical record, thereby making visible the reality of their disenfranchisement.

Bronwen E. Low and Emmanuelle Sonntag's "Towards a pedagogy of listening: teaching and learning from life stories of human rights violations" illustrates how the fundamentals of oral history align with the goals of human rights. Low and Sonntag's oral history project employed the "philosophy of listening," which "aims to: promote more democratic relations, build a listening community …and support critical reflexive practice and movement towards social action" (Bronwen & Sonntag, 2013, p. 768). Ideas presented through the articulation of the philosophy of listening align with that of human rights; the promotion of "democratic relations" connects to the right to vote and the "movement towards social action" is related to the right to get married, the right to fair wages, and the right to freedom of expression (Boersema, 2011, pg. 1). Not only are the methodological underpinnings of Low and Sonntag's work indicative of the relationship between oral history and human rights, so too is their project's intention – namely to understand the ways that "teaching and learning become complicated" when the "oral histories document stories of displacement, war and genocide" (Bronwen & Sonntag, 2013, p. 769). By including oral histories as documents that students can learn from, these histories work to complicate and thus enrich their interactions with the past.

Erin Jessee complicates the ideas presented in Low and Sonntag's article by arguing that, despite its importance in certain projects where human rights are at issue, oral history is not an appropriate research tool for human rights work generally. In the article "The Limits of Oral History: Ethics and Methodology Amid Highly Politicized Research Settings," Jessee acknowledges on the one hand that:

> oral history has been celebrated by its practitioners for its humanizing potential, and its ability to democratize history by bringing the narratives of people and communities typically absent in the archives into conversation with that of the political and intellectual elites who generally write history. And when dealing with the narratives of ordinary people living in conditions of social and political stability, the value of oral history is unquestionable. (Jessee, 2011, p. 287)

However, Jessee goes on to state that there are limits to the use of oral histories containing of "intimate accounts of extreme human experiences"; limits that are reached when the damage

inflicted to the participants through reliving prior violence outweighs the benefit of their sharing that experience. I do not disagree with the need to balance access to information with the potentially harmful content. While not outwardly obvious in Jessee's article, this work is indicative of the pervasive idea within the field of human rights that only exceedingly violent and atrocious wartime actions are warranting of further discussion. I fundamentally disagree with the engrained narrative that the "worst" human rights abuses occur during wartime or are outwardly violent; I believe that everyday experiences of neglect, abuse, institutional violence, and systemic poverty can be harmful, albeit harmful in different ways as events that occur during wartime. In my practicum placement I worked with oral histories recounting the "everyday" barriers that individuals with disabilities have faced in Manitoba society; however, their "everyday" quality does not make them any less damaging or harmful to those who experience them. There is an underlying focus on human rights violations that are outwardly violent, shocking, and often happening across the globe. In contrast to this tendency I want to emphasize the potential of oral history to create space for and make accessible pervasive "everyday" human rights abuses such as those characteristic of the experiences of persons with disabilities in Canada.

Personal Experiences

In addition to discussing theoretical issues relating to (or arising from) the connection of oral history and human rights, I want also to explore some of my personal experiences working at the intersection of these two fields. As noted above, I completed my practicum placement at the University of Winnipeg's Oral History Centre, and while there I witnessed ways in which oral history and human rights overlap, finally concluding that considerable space continues to separate these two disciplines. Drawing on both my scholarly training in human rights and my practical experience with oral history, I argue that further understanding of the complexity of human experiences and democratically orientated research lies at more cohesive collaboration between these two disciplinary approaches. The cohesive collaboration that I suggest would involve the solidified institutional ties, such as research partnerships between the Master of Human Rights program and the Oral History Centre and increased publications at the intersection of these two fields.

We as researchers can better represent the goals of the human rights movement, such as equality and representation, by better incorporating the values and practices of oral history into the study and broader social and political defense of human rights. Fantastic experience-centered research is occurring in both of these fields. My argument is that through greater recognition of their similarities, both the study of human rights and oral history can be made more academically rigorous and, most importantly, better reflect the spectrum of human experiences. By focusing those who experience human rights abuses like racism, ableism, and sexism, researchers have the potential to include experiences and perspectives in the historical record that have long been silenced as well as re-assign agency to those who rights have been abused. Oral history was originally developed and is now practiced as a method to add information to the archive and complicate our understanding of the past. Portelli explains that oral history interviewing gives members of "social groups whose written history is either missing or distorted" the space to enter their experiences into the historical record (Portelli, 2016, p. 50). The social groups that Portelli references are those without access to the recording of experiences, for example: children, persons with disabilities, working classes, those without access to education, the elderly, and racialized groups. The exclusion of these groups from contributing to historical records was not a passive action, but an attempt to construct a specific and limited image of what life was like for individuals in these portions of society. I believe that the work of writing the experiences of previously "invisibilized" people back into the historical record is accomplished through the Manitoba League of Persons with Disabilities Oral History Project (Senehi, 2020).

As a practicum student at the OHC I processed interviews with members and employees of the Manitoba League of Persons with Disabilities. This involved my listening to, logging, transcribing, and imputing data into an online synchronizing platform for the 16 sessions that I was assigned to. The project's principal investigator, Carlos Sosa, chose to interview past MLPD provincial coordinators as well as those who worked or volunteered with the league. I listened to the experiences of multiple members of the Manitoba League of Persons with Disabilities, an organization focused on the accessibility and attitudes surrounding persons with disabilities, a group of individuals whose rights have historically been abused. The MLPD has been responsible for activism resulting in the creation of accessible public transit, formerly known as Handi-transit, and for adequate access to homecare services (Kierstead, 2015). These issues

directly affect the lives of persons with disabilities and a result the league advocated for their protection and for the human rights of individuals with disabilities (Sosa, 202).

My work on the MLPD project is linked to this discussion of human rights because, it has generally been recognized that individuals with accessibility challenges have been historically discriminated against and excluded based on negative perceptions of their disability. Throughout the interviews I was working with, participants when asked to tell their life story recounted details of their disability, their early family life and experiences in school, involvement in the work force, and activism. Many interviewees discuss the physical, emotional, and social barriers they overcame in their lives. For example, many interviewees described problems they faced physically accessing public transit, schools, and housing, problems that they have faced throughout their lives.

Carlos Sosa explained that there are emotional and social barriers that affect persons with disabilities as well. He did not join the disability advocacy community until later in his life, when he felt more "comfortable with" his own disabilities, and as a result of his personal journey he now believes that social perceptions of ability/disability create "a lot of stigma around people with disabilities" that stop individuals from advocating for their rights (Sosa, 2021). The social and emotional impact of disability on individuals is further explored by Derek Legge, who explains how he came to develop a very outgoing personality and sense of humor as a child in an attempt to compensate for a physical disability that limited his use of his legs (Legge, 2015). Providing a different perspective, Paula Kierstead explains that her parents encouraged her to run and play outside with her neighbours, allowing her "to not view [her]sel[f] entirely as a person with a visual disability" (Kierstead, 2015). Despite her parents' support, Paula experienced bullying, was discouraged from entering her desired professional field, and had to advocate for herself in order to become a foster parent. Paula's interview, like many of the others in this project, illustrates specific details about the barriers confronting many persons with disabilities, and shows how these obstacles undermine human security by inhibiting the fulfillment of basic human rights.

The underlying influence of Human Rights theory and practice on the MLPD project is demonstrated through the project's ambitions, which are in turn, reflected in Carlos Sosa's actions. The Manitoba League of Persons with Disabilities is a local organization that engages in advocacy for the protection of the human rights of persons with disabilities and is concerned

with the creation of a community of disability activists and allies. I consider the MLPD to be a part of the Canadian disability activism community which consists of individuals who speak out against disability rights abuses, lobby the federal government, and discuss disability access and representation on a national level. As a member of both the MLPD and the Canadian disability activist community more generally, Carlos Sosa chose to interview members of the organization in order to ensure that the history of the organization and its accomplishments are not lost or forgotten. I had the opportunity to conduct an interview with Sosa in the winter of 2021, during which he explained his intentions behind starting this oral history project. He noted that "organizations in the disability community were struggling, leaders were passing away, funding was tight [and] when your funding is tight you want to capture that story on the record, so it's preserved for future generations, it's a reminder that the organizations existed" (Sosa, 2021). In addition, Carlos explained that the MLPD project is a "reminder that these issues have been relevant for 50-60 years" amid "systemic biases" that continue to disadvantage people with disabilities (Sosa, 2021). He hopes that the (now archived) interviews that he conducted can act as a "reminder for researchers that these issues existed [and] the organization existed [….] it's a reminder for not […] only historians but also for the general public" (Sosa, 2021). We can glean from the intentions behind the project something about the way that oral history may be used as research and communication tool in efforts to affirm human rights and facilitate the entry of previously silenced accounts of human rights abuses into the historical record.

The Manitoba League of Persons with Disabilities (MLPD) Oral History Project highlights the experiences of the disability community in Winnipeg who were "previously silenced" through social and economic marginalization (Williams, 2019, 788). The MLPD Oral History Project demonstrates the connections between Oral History and Human Rights, the gap that exists at the intersection of these two fields of study, and important research contributions that can be made at this junction. As the principal investigator, Sosa employed a life story approach when interviewing during the MLPD project, which involved asking the interviewee to "tell him the story of their life." This story in turn allowed participants to establish the initial narrative of the interview. Not only does the life story approach give interviewees the power to shape the direction of the interview, it also creates a space for the interviewer to interpret the interviewee's perception of self. Using a life story interviewing style, the interviewer traditionally asks a number of questions after the interviewee has come to the end of their life

story description, this allows for the interviewer to direct the interview back to the intended topic if not discussed initially. Sosa's interview style allowed individuals to share experiences that were not limited to their identity as a person with a disability.

In addition to the use of a life-story approach, the accessibility of the project aligns with the fundamental objectives of the Human Rights movement. Oral history interviews are increasingly accessible for both participants and researchers as the use of orality allows participants with disabilities that prohibit their typing or writing to contribute to the overall narrative in a way that traditional academic research does not. Further, the audio recording expands what is captured from a traditional transcription, audio files make aspects of an individual's response such as pauses, hesitation, frustration, and uncertainty part of the historical record. In these ways the method of oral history brings forward aspects of participants' perspective in research settings, allowing researchers to better understand not just the idea of human rights but how they are experienced. Oral History is more easily accessible to researchers with disabilities such as those with impaired vision or learning disabilities.

While the form of orality increases accessibility for some, the use of Oral History does present some challenges for other individuals. The recording of oral history does involve the use of rather expensive recording equipment thus decreasing its accessibility to all individuals, however organizations such as the Oral History Centre do loan out the equipment necessary for recording oral histories with suitable audio quality. This sharing of equipment works to democratize and make accessible the tools needed to record oral history. The methodology of oral history is also valuable and accessible in this current period of physical distance; during the COVID pandemic I conducted an interview using a remote recording system called Zencastr, I was able to record and save both the audio and video recording from this interview. This program increases the potential of researchers, even outside of pandemic concerns, to conduct interviews with individuals around the world and thus make accessible the first-hand experiences of individuals with varied life experience in different geographic contexts. While the accessibility of tools such as Zencastr are still limited by subscription and internet costs, this is much less than the cost to travel to locations in order to conduct in-person interviews and the health limitations of travel. Overall, oral history methodology presents a different kind of accessibility to social science research and in doing so reflects the ideals of human rights by making research and knowledge sharing a possibility for more people.

Carlos identifies as a person with a disability, is a member of the MLPD, and is involved in both activist and academic work on disability rights in Canada. He shares a common experience with many of his participants – living with a disability – and this contributes to an increased level of comfort is sharing personal experiences and trust that their experiences will be accurately represented in the archive. Carlos' positionality as a member of the disability community contributes to the creation of ethical oral histories that prioritize the experiences of the participants and are therefore aligned with the foundations of human rights theory and practice.

The final aspect of the MLPD project that I believe highlights connections between oral history and human rights concerns outcomes, that is, the way the project impacts people. In listening to and processing these interviews I became more and more convinced that this project provides emotional benefit to its participants, as well as various organizational and social benefits. In the conclusion of their interviews many interviewees expressed their appreciation for the project and the opportunity it provided them to share their life experiences. Although not explicitly said by all who were involved, it appears that sharing their perspectives had a positive emotional effect on participants. In one archived testimony, Paula Kierstead explains that her advocacy work with the MLPD was the "beginning of [her] truly identifying what kind of person [she] wanted to be with what kind of values and what kind of commitments" (Kierstead, 2015). Following her formal interview she can be heard thanking Carlos for carrying out the project, and by so doing demonstrates the emotional significance of the opportunity for reflection that the oral history interview provided her (Kierstead, 2015). Kierstead's words were echoed by many of the project's other participants, underscoring the emotional benefit of these interviews. If nothing else, the existence of such an oral history archive tells persons with disabilities that their stories are no longer being silenced or ignored.

In addition to any emotional benefit of the MLPD Oral History project, there are organizational benefits to this testimony collection as well. As previously stated, Carlos started the project at a time when he saw the MLPD crumbling, changing from a unified institution into a fractured and aging cluster of activists. He wanted to preserve an image of what the league had been like at its best. This oral history archive thus documents all the accomplishments of the MLPD, especially during its height in the 1980s, and in doing so it affirms the struggles and triumphs of the disability community in Manitoba. I state the MLPD project affirms the work of

the league because it is part of an academic and social system that sees documentation as a requirement of truth. This record of the MLPD can serve as a template for future generations of disability activists in Manitoba by illustrating how change was bought about, potential funding opportunities found and exploited, and activism enabled and sustained. This story of the MLPD has the potential to spark interest amongst young disability activists now and in the future, since it demonstrates some of the ways in which public advocacy works. Interviews also help to deepen appreciation for the personal and emotional development made possible by the MLPD such as that which Carlos experienced. His involvement in this advocacy organization contributed to his own identification and acceptance of himself as a person with a disability. The MLPD oral history project has the potential to encourage young disability rights activists to get involved, advocate for their rights, and contribute to positive social and political change.

In addition to its emotional and organizational benefits, the MLPD oral history project also makes massive contributions to the historical record. As previously mentioned, the MLPD oral history collection ensures that the history of disability rights activism is not lost or forgotten. These interviews demonstrate that change can be brought about in human rights activism in Manitoba, and throughout Canada. The personal testimonies that have been recorded and preserved in the archive have the potential to contribute to bringing about significant social and legal reform in Canada. The MLPD oral history project facilitates our understanding of how "we" live, together and alone, and thus experience (or not) the protections afforded by a robust commitment to human rights.

Overall, my practicum placement at the OHC demonstrated to me the potential research findings that oral history methodology offers and their relevance to the pursuance of universal human rights. My experiences working on the MLPD oral history project have demonstrated the way in which not only does oral history contribute to a more complex understanding of the past but also enacts the human rights principles of equality and accessibility in conducting research.

Conclusions

When elaborating on the relationship between oral history and human rights Carlos Sosa stated that "there's a clear relationship to that […] many of our most marginalized people do not have their voices on the record." He goes on to emphasize the importance of oral history to the protection of human rights in the present and the acknowledgement of their infringement in the

past (Sosa, 2021). Through the term "marginalized" Sosa refers to individuals, such as those in the disability community whose human rights are often not met or protected. Sosa's statement is indicative of the existing relationship between the two fields; he agrees that there is an obvious linkage between oral history and human rights but does not directly reference the field using the phrase "marginalized" people rather than "victims of human rights violations." It was only after Sosa's acknowledgement of the relationship between these two fields that I truly recognized the void that exists between human rights and oral history that I had been grappling with – a gap arising from the fact that the two fields do not know how to talk to (or about) each other. Through this reflection I have attempted to plug the void that separates human rights and oral history and reveal the potential that lies at the intersection of these two approaches.

In an effort to expose this void, I have outlined the basic facets of oral history and human rights, reflected on my experiences as a student in the MHR program, my practicum placement, and I have used the MLPD oral history project as an example of the important and innovative research occurring at the intersection of these two fields. While doing so, I have shared my personal experiences navigating the professional academic world and etching out space for my own future work at the intersection of human rights and oral history. Fundamental aspects of the human rights project are written into the fabric of oral history methodology and vice versa. These two approaches occur along similar academic pathways yet have been artificially separated; as a student in the MHR I felt that oral history was rarely discussed and when I was it was not the primary topic, it was treated as an add-on. Through my work at the OHC I recognized that not only is oral history a robust area of study and that it provides a thorough methodological approach and is a facilitator to research involving many human rights issues. Despite oral history's assets, resistance to the use and efficacy of oral history in human rights discourse persists, as was demonstrated by my peers' reactions to my research. This reaction was, in my opinion, shaped by the persistent belief within many research fields, including human rights studies, that the written records are more reliable and therefore preferable to oral records. However, as I have explained this hierarchy in not neutral, rather it influences who is able to contribute to the historical record, have their life experiences acknowledged, and human rights abuses recognized as such. Within human rights discussions of a singular truth are common and often oral history is discounted because individual testimonies cannot be verified as true; from this, I propose a shift in the way truth and oral history are understood in the context of human

rights. Oral histories should not be critiqued on whether or not they are actually happened and are therefore true but understood as a piece of evidence that complicates our understanding of truth claims.

In conclusion, through my experience working in both human rights and oral history I have come to recognize their similarities and therefore the potential that exists at the intersection of these two fields. Greater recognition of oral histories and the resulting archive is an asset to human rights research and will more accurately depict the entirety of lived experiences of human rights. In addition, oral history is a tool to make personal the abstract harm that is discussed in the human rights classroom and is therefore a valuable educational tool. The affective tools of oral history and autoethnography reintroduce humanity into human rights discourse. From my experience, the field of human rights can often get overwhelmed with discussions of legal obligations and international governing bodies; these enablers – oral history and autoethnography – ensure that emotion and human experience remain a fundamental part of these discussions and therefore as Sosa states, keep the concerns of the "most vulnerable" at its centre (Sosa, 2021).

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