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Research Note

The witness seminar: A research note

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Abstract

The 'witness seminar' as a method for recording contemporary histories is neither well known nor widely employed. By inviting a number of people who were involved in a particular historical event to come together and tell this history collectively, the method enables the production of rich and compelling accounts of contemporary histories. In this article, I introduce the method and the procedures followed in four witness seminars that I organised and co-convened on various topics relating to HIV. I then go on to reflect on the value of this method and how the connections between seminar participants both gave shape to the narrative produced and were also telling of the collaborative history of HIV.

Keywords

contemporary histories, HIV/AIDS, witness seminar, oral history, event

Introduction

I began organising and co-convening witness seminars in September 2017 for a research project on the ways histories of HIV have been mobilised in current policy and activism[1]. As the project was concerned with the relationship between the past and the present, the witness seminar as a method provided a useful venue in which to address the unfolding of the UK HIV epidemic, while also making room for thinking about the current response and possible futures of HIV and other health conditions. As a form of oral history, the method is one in which key participants in a particular issue are invited to tell the history of it together and, as such, constitutes a forum in which to combine, navigate and examine different experiences and narratives. The method was initially developed by the Institute of Contemporary British History and has since been taken up by others, including the History of Modern Biomedicine Research Group (Tansey, 2006). Although other researchers have also employed the witness seminar as a method in a number of fields (e.g. Crowson et al., 2011; Daddow, 2015; Godwin et al., 2009; Kandiah, 1999a, 1999b;

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Ward et al., 2006), it is not widely known as an innovative practice. My aim in this article is to help to rectify this by giving a brief description of the method applied in relation to the history of HIV, as well as offer some reflections on its value.

Beginnings

The witness seminar method described here was developed following the first meeting of our advisory committee, which was intended to help flag key points and actors in the history of the UK HIV epidemic. This was the first meeting of all advisory committee members and was primarily in the interests of introducing the project and what had been achieved so far, including the themes on which we had decided to focus within the broad remit of the project. We wanted to know committee members' thoughts on the decisions we had made so far, on potential future directions and also to invite suggestions for potential interview participants and archival sources.

I had planned to give an initial presentation before opening out to a group discussion, however, what happened during this meeting was something rather more provocative. Indeed, I had not even reached the end of the presentation before members of the advisory committee began retelling the history of HIV. They responded to my presentation from multiple perspectives, revealing the hidden tensions in some of the debates that I had drawn on and fleshing out issues I mentioned without realising that I had only picked up half of the story. While I never did get to the end of the presentation, it became clear that the project and the history it sought to engage with was not so much being guided by the advisors but, rather, it was being talked into being, navigated and negotiated in the room itself. Following this rich discussion, it seemed important to attempt to create other similar events in which the kind of dynamic energy which acquired expression in that room could be recorded.

As we were interested in the relation between the present and the past, as well as in problematizing and destabilising linear narratives of HIV, the inclusion of a number of voices allowed a way of capturing multiplicity and in maintaining the tensions in these histories. As Seaton (2008) has mentioned, communal narratives are unlikely to maintain a linearity and, as such, the witness seminar offers the potential for creating a space for shifting, reshaping and querying dominant histories. We also sensed that there was something about the group format that might set it apart from what was offered by the one-to-one interview for recording HIV histories in particular. Although we didn't articulate this explicitly at the time, an important element of the history of HIV has been the collaborations and alliances that were formed in response to it. This response was mobilised by alliances between people living with HIV and their doctors, civil society organisations, academics and activists, but was also reliant on developing working relationships with those from government and the statutory sector. Thus, it seemed entirely appropriate that the recording of this history should include a diverse array of voices and, indeed, that these voices might be in conversation with each other. That is, as this history is one of collaboration, the telling of this history should also be collaborative.

Enlivened by the discussion in the advisory meeting, we decided to hold witness seminars on a number of issues pertaining to the history of HIV: *The History of Antiretroviral Drugs*, *The Criminalisation of HIV Transmission*, *HIV Prevention and Health Promotion* and *Women and HIV*.

Planning

We planned for the witness seminars to last two hours, although two of them ran over by half an hour. This is a short timeframe in which to gather detailed histories of the topics under discussion, however, it is also short enough to avoid the fatigue participants might feel having been asked to engage for longer periods. Seminars included between 8 and 11 participants, who were all selected based on our own knowledge of who had been involved in the issues being addressed. Additionally, an invitation to recommend other potential invitees was often extended to participants. Participants included HIV nurses and clinicians, people with experience of working in statutory agencies, people living with HIV, academics and activists, including those involved in voluntary organisations of various kinds. Many participants fell into more than one of these categories.

Aware that many of those invited would have busy schedules, for each seminar, we selected a time and date by sending a Doodle Poll[2] to a small number of key participants and, once we found a time everyone from this initial group would be available, we extended further invitations to other potential participants, including those who had been suggested by these initial invitees. Finding a time and date was often challenging, even when invites were staggered in this way. We were also not able to confirm the precise location of the meetings until after the time and date had been selected, but we let invitees know that we would endeavour to secure venues in central London for ease of access. For three of these meetings, we booked a meeting room which was a five-minute walk from the nearest Underground station and 15 minutes from Kings Cross (allowing easy access to those travelling from outside London). The final seminar was held in the home of the Principal Investigator as we were unable to secure a suitable date on a weekday and finding a bookable room was more challenging during the week-end. Although a less than ideal arrangement, this seminar had the fewest participants, some of whom were personally known to us already through our engagements with the field. We were also sure to ask participants whether they would be comfortable with this arrangement before proceeding. Participants were offered reimbursement for travel expenses but were not paid for their time.

The initial e-mail sent to potential participants explained what they could expect should they accept our invitation to participate in the witness seminar, including an indication that we intended to make edited transcripts of the meeting available to the public and the editing process we would undertake. Once the location had been confirmed we e-mailed again to let participants know, and then a week or two before each meeting, we sent another e-mail, which included a pdf file restating information about the witness seminar method, proposed topics of discussion on the day, information about the location of the meeting (including directions) and the consent forms and recording agreement we would ask participants to fill in on the day. At the beginning of each witness seminar, we briefly recounted this information again, invited questions and then asked participants to fill in the forms.

All the seminars were closed meetings. Although many participants were experienced public speakers, a more intimate setting was preferred for the reason that it would lend itself to a more open discussion. Different researchers have employed different formats for their witness seminars, including selecting key witnesses to open up particular elements of

the subject they are discussing with a five-minute presentation (Tansey, 2006), or circulating briefing papers beforehand (Godwin et al., 2009). However, the seminars I describe did neither of these things. Instead, and as mentioned earlier, a week or two before the event, we circulated a list of proposed topics, along with a disclaimer that participants would be welcome to disregard the suggestions if they felt that other issues would be of more importance to discuss. This invitation was not an attempt to remove the influence of the researcher, rather, this flexibility was derived from a belief that participants were better placed to decide what they thought was most meaningful and valuable to discuss and record. Indeed, if we hadn't already been convinced that this was the case, the advisory meeting I described at the beginning of this article had made abundantly clear to us that participants would be better placed than us to decide on what was important. As the two researchers on the project, myself and the Principle Investigator acted as chairs to the meetings.

On some occasions, and in favour of following the narrative emerging from the selected group of participants, very little attention was paid to the circulated list of proposed topics. This was welcomed on the day and this free-flowing group narrative was particularly compelling, as the open space and lack of structure enabled participants to follow what was most meaningful to them (c.f. Wilkinson, 1998b on focus groups and participants following their own agenda). Focus groups have been acknowledged as having the potential to destabilise the power of the researcher (Jowett and O'Toole, 2006; Wilkinson, 1998a), and witness seminars similarly have rather different dynamics to other forms of oral history – such as interviews – in this sense. Here, the researchers are 'outnumbered,' and participants are not only sharing their experiences with the researcher, but also with their peers.

A chronological account was rarely produced in these witness seminars and, instead, the past and present were brought into conversation with each other. Regardless of whether the topic guide was followed, its circulation gave participants a sense of how we understood the issue under discussion, and how we envisioned the witness seminar. Many involved in the HIV field are experienced in interviewing or focus group methods, either as research participants or as researchers themselves. As the witness seminar is a method not widely known about, we felt that circulating this topic guide would help to give a better sense of what would happen, and should thus allay any doubts or anxieties about participating. Although participants were also told that they did not need to prepare for the meeting, this also offered the opportunity, should they wish, to think over the kind of contribution they wanted to make.

Editing

Following the witness seminar, the audio recordings were transcribed and then edited by me in order to produce a document more akin to a written text than a transcription of spoken language. These edits were intended to preserve meaning while making the text easier to follow. I also added footnotes where appropriate, for example in order to provide full references to publications or conferences mentioned or to give brief descriptions of technical terms. The texts were then circulated to participants with the invitation that they add, edit or redact their own contributions as they saw fit. The intention was to create readable accounts of the history of the topic under discussion and although we did invite participants to also elaborate on their contributions, for the most part they used this opportunity only to

correct, sharpen or clarify what they had said on the day. Although most participants did not make substantial edits to the texts, this invitation was an important one. Most straightforwardly, this is because these texts were intended to be made accessible to the public, so it was important that participants were happy for their contributions to be read by a wide audience and that any memory lapses on dates, for example, could be corrected. Offering participants the opportunity to edit the text can also be said to enable a further reconfiguration of power relationships, as they are invited to participate in editing the narrative. While group discussions have been acknowledged to facilitate rich data, in which participants are more likely to discuss sensitive topics and ask questions to each other that the facilitator may find difficult (Wilkinson, 1998b), offering the opportunity to later edit or redact the record similarly works to enable a more candid and open discussion within the room itself, as this creates the opportunity to share reflections and recollections that can later be redacted. This was especially important considering that most participants remained active and engaged in the field, often in both personal and professional capacities.

Upon opening the witness seminar, participants were reminded that the text would not be made public until they'd been given the opportunity to approve or edit the transcripts. This necessarily meant that, unlike some witness seminars, the original sound recordings of the conversation have not been – and will never be – made public. Our decision not to deposit the original sound recordings or unedited transcripts may be frustrating to some historians, or indeed to those committed to an archival logic of 'naturalness' and 'impartiality' (Eastwood, 1994). However, this offer was, in part, a practical decision, as it was felt that participants would be more likely to agree to participate if given this option. Although some participants may have been happy to participate should the original audio recording be deposited in an archive, it was clear that some participants valued the opportunity to review and edit their contributions.

There were other reasons we chose to take this course of action. Although witness seminars are 'social' situations, they are also artificial in the sense that participants are there because the researcher has asked them to be (Jowett and O'Toole, 2006: 458). As such, just because it happened to be said in a particular way on the day, there seemed to be little reason why this should be privileged over the potential for participants to rethink or clarify their contributions in the following weeks. Indeed, as with all historical work, the witness seminar produces, at best, a partial account of what happened (Svorenčík and Maas, 2016). As such, the editing process was also felt to acknowledge that what was produced was also only one possible version of the history on which it focussed. Although these seminars were undertaken partly in the interests of contributing to an archive of HIV, we know already that the historical record within an archive is always subject to human intervention (Lynch, 1999) even before the historian enters the scene (Bradley, 1999). Purposely leaving open the opportunity to edit the texts felt like a way of acknowledging the partial and constructed nature of what had been produced.

Connection

As Tansey (2006) has commented, 'each [witness seminar] develops its own particular shape and dynamics, largely determined by the subject matter, the personalities of the participants and the chairman, and the relationships amongst those taking part' (p. 264), and

this is certainly true of the seminars I describe here. Each seminar was different in texture, depending on who was in attendance, their relationship to each other and their relationship to the topic under discussion. What ran through them all, however, was a sense of the connections already made between participants. Many seminars began with participants arriving and greeting each other with hugs, or one participant asking who else would be attending and beaming with delight as they said, 'oh, so-and-so is coming?'[3] These meetings were the coming together not just of people and their experiences and contributions, but also shared histories and futures which were brought about and worked on within the space of the witness seminar. Although some of these exchanges occurred even before the sound recorders were turned on, or were deleted as they would have added confusion to the transcript, this sense of a shared history remains within the text.

Indeed, it is perhaps reflective of the HIV field, which – as mentioned earlier – has relied on collaboration, that there were not many instances of disagreement or contestation and, indeed, why there were so many hugs and so much warmth in the meetings. Although the lack of friction may be indicative, from some perspectives, of a weakness – perhaps it is suggestive of an overarching narrative that has merely been reproduced, or that it reveals a weakness in participant selection – it also bears witness to some of the particularities of the field the witness seminars attempt to record. Much like what has been said of the interview, these events were the 'result of a relationship, of a shared project' (Portelli, 1998: 70); however, their collective nature is also reflective of the dynamics of the history participants were producing (Seaton, 2008).

Conclusion

In this article, I sought to rectify the lack of visibility of the witness seminar in the available repertoire of qualitative research methods. In doing so, I have described the procedures employed in hosting four witness seminars on various topics in the history of HIV in the UK and the editing of the resulting transcripts. This included an attention to the procedures taken in planning the meetings. Here I attempted to give a sense of some of the organisational and practical issues relevant to hosting a witness seminar. Any attempt to get this number of people in a room together will always be a logistical challenge and will often necessitate some degree of improvisation. However, we found identifying a core group of participants and then finding a date and time before extending further invitations to be the most pragmatic approach to this challenge. While acknowledging that some may be disappointed that the original sound recordings or unedited transcripts of the seminars will never be made available, I have also made a case for why we chose to do things the way we did. That is, we privileged the possibility of holding a space where more candid accounts were felt possible above producing a faithful account of what happened on the day. Indeed, we felt that this decision also acknowledged the always partial and constructed nature of historical accounts.

It should be said that we approached each seminar anticipating the unexpected, as we left the meetings as open as we could to what was found meaningful by participants. As the research we undertook was intended to explore the relation between the past and present, and as we were interested in complexity and multiplicity, the non-linear narratives produced in the witness seminars were of great value to us. However, it is worth

noting that if we had been particularly interested in trying to address *specific elements* of a topic, then this approach may have been found wanting. That is, it may be that a more structured approach would have been more appropriate (such as by following the pre-circulated list of topics or inviting presentations, for example).

In describing our approach to the witness seminars, I have drawn on my own experience, and tried to give a sense of what made the witness seminars so compelling for me. The lively nature of the meetings and the resulting transcripts were valuable not only because of what was said, but also because of the connections between participants which gave shape to the narrative produced. This sense of a shared history being worked on together was revealing also of the broader history of the response to HIV as one of collaboration.

The witness seminars are available at the European HIV/AIDS Archive (EHAA), hosted by the Humboldt University of Berlin Media Repository.

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Notes

1. Disentangling European HIV/AIDS Policies: Activism, Citizenship and Health (EUROPACH), funded by Humanities in the Euopean Research Area (HERA). The design and planning of these seminars was a collaborative effort between myself and Principal Investigator, Marsha Rosengarten.
2. Doodle is an online scheduling tool, which allows the user to offer a range of times and dates and invite poll participants to indicate their availability.
3. Many researchers organising witness seminars will circulate a list of participants before the meeting as a matter of courtesy. Regrettably, we were not able to do this as it was often unclear until the latter stages of organising who would be able to make it to the seminar.

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