Fast on the heels of the last interview recorded for the Australian Generations Oral History Project, the first conference about the project was held in Melbourne at the end of October.

The Keynote Address - Oral History in the Digital Age - was presented by Michael Frisch, Professor of History & American Studies/Senior Research Scholar, University of Buffalo, to more than a hundred people at the State Library of Victoria on Thursday 30 October evening. Some in the audience had never used oral history in their historical practice but were engaged and energised by Professor Frisch’s talk and his mix of metaphors registering theoretical (‘the clutch, allowing movement from one context to another’) and practical (‘cooking the raw’ in the open hub kitchen of spatial relationships) aspects of oral history and the digital age.

Highlighting the importance of accessing the aurality of the recordings (as well as transcripts), particularly in large-scale projects, Professor Frisch described a new mode of cataloguing oral history using software tools which provide multiple flexibilities to access stories and cross-reference different aspects of a single story. He gave the example of a bagpipe player: some researchers might be interested in the instrument, others in the music played, or the performer. His reminder about thinking early about the destination and end ambitions of a project takes on new meaning in the digital age.

The conference continued the next day at Monash University where each of the Project Partners and some of the academic and researcher team presented early findings. The papers will be published in an Australian Historical Studies theme issue in 2016. Only a few interviewees and interviewers were present, including some from interstate.

Professor Alistair Thomson, Project Leader, opened the conference with a statistical overview of the project which came in on budget at $1 million. Just how to choose 300 interviewees (who were never going to be entirely representative) from 684 EOIs was a choice of riches, and managing the administration of a national project was a challenge. 160 women and 140 men were interviewed; 181 in cities, 109 in regional and 10 in
remote areas; 71.6% (215) were Australian born and 85 were born overseas; 201 are available online at the National Library with timed summaries.

The structure and organisation of the Project was addressed by Kevin Bradley, one of the Project Partners at the National Library, and Anisa Puri, the Project Officer. To say the administration of the Project appeared seamless does not do justice to the immensity of the task of managing interviewees and interviewers across the nation, 1220 hours of recordings, equipment, a Zotero database and much else. Everyone acknowledged the grace and efforts of first Kate James, then Anisa Puri, in this pivotal role!

Each interviewee was asked the same set of generational questions at the conclusion of their interview yet it was the interviewees’ descriptions of attitudes articulated in the stories they discussed throughout the whole of the interview which are already proving more fruitful to researchers. Analysis of these textual and thematic aspects will provide a feast for cross-disciplinary studies for years to come.

Mental illness as experienced by interviewees or their family members emerged as a significant theme, according to Katie Holmes, and though broader community awareness and a greater readiness to discuss mental illness and its impact prevails, this did not always mean interviewees had the language to describe their experience. The way interviewers asked questions about mental health also elicited different responses; and sometimes truncated the story.

Making sense of the individual in rethinking relational networks, families; and opportunities for self-reformation with increased social and geographic mobility was part of Kerreen Reiger’s talk and Seamus O’Hanlon discussed ethnically and culturally diverse families.

Education was a significant theme and Christina Twomey and Jodie Boyd spoke about class, social equality and higher education in post-war Australia. A number of interviewees were the first in their family to attend university and extracts from the interview with Ouranita Karadimas articulated her recognition of the significance of higher education for her.

The panel session with interviewees and interviewers discussing the interview process (with Alistair Thomson asking identical questions of them both) was especially interesting. Interviewee Daniel Berk believed the ‘interview relationship’ was critical, a challenge and rewarding; Nicole Curby said it was an honour to be part of the intellectual research process and, with honesty, captured the sense of the unknown for all interviewers about to knock on that door, adding that she was unsure about what she was going to focus on and where she’d drill down in the interview! Sarah Rood acknowledged the generosity of the human spirit and the interviewees who are prepared to share so much of themselves.

ABC Radio National, as one of the Project Partners, has broadcast five programs based on the Project and Michelle Rayner emphasised the daunting process of generating a one-hour radio program from 1220 hours in the Project! The radio audience is uppermost in her mind so with time constraints and double-handling of audio while searching huge chunks of recordings (where frequently the follow up questions were absent or not immediate as they might be in a tightly thematic focused interview for radio) made the task doubly challenging.

At the end of a program Michael Frisch, elegantly summarised the day: describing the different textures in the papers as ‘intelligence gathering’ and an ‘exploratory’ approach to historical material (rather than ‘searching’) which would make the process more open to discovery as researchers “dig through” the data (instead of ‘digging to’); reminding us that the research question is not the same as the interview question and the ‘how and what’ – emphasising the importance of listening to how people talk about what they describe.

Roslyn Burge
13 November 2014