

Witness Seminar Approach

to

Programme Implementation & Policy Development: A brief overview

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Witness seminar is a specialised form of [oral history](#) taking. The name ‘Witness Seminar’ has been coined by the [Institute of Contemporary British History](#) (now, the *Centre for Contemporary British History*), and the full list of all the Witness Seminars conducted is available [here](#). It basically involves collection of oral history to help historians and social scientists to track complex events and those which are missed out during the journey of large scale social and medical developments.

A Witness Seminar brings together individuals involved in a particular set of significant events associated with the treatment of a medical condition to describe its background and to discuss, debate, or disagree with their peers’ recollections (Snow, 2013; Reynolds, 2004). This novel technique is popular among British researchers, mainly to help track the history of biomedical advances and policies. Witness Seminar is an innovative qualitative research technique not often practised in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (Jones EM, 2013). The aspects of contemporary history, many of which have yet to be recognised or used as historical sources, are discussed [here](#).

Much of the medical science literature is available in fragments, concealing the relevant processes by which scientific medicines were developed. Many scientists state that scientific literature may be misrepresenting the thoughts and processes which gave rise to a particular innovation. Structured in rigid formats, most scientific literature, forbid the expression of known facts. Historians are now turning towards traditional techniques of oral history documentation to supplement, or extend their existing records and create new resources. Existence of the sources of contemporary medical history has encouraged the arrangement of Witness Seminars so as to record the recollection of the events from these sources. The main purpose of these is to gather the testimonials from eminent people, to explore facts that may have been omitted in the process of official documentation.

Witness Seminar is appropriate for data generation and filling the gaps in knowledge of significant events. It brings together a group of eminent people to reminisce and discuss their first-hand experience about the event. These discussions are recorded, transcribed, and made available publicly, with the permission of the participants. Once the topic is finalised and the academic advisers identified, participants are invited and a flexible outline for the meeting is planned. At times the meetings have to be called off if the key participants are unavailable. Some other issues may include incomplete recall, repetition of old tales, or candid reporting of history by the participants.

After finalising the research questions and incorporating feasible inputs from the invited participants, the actual discussion takes place. The discussion is recorded and transcribed, and the unedited version is immediately sent to the participants to check their contributions. They are also asked to provide their brief biography. The agenda being preset and when discussions are led by the Chair (Jones, 2016) (Jones EM, 2013), certain conceptual and empirical dimensions missed out earlier can be explored. The tentative plan is flexible where in a few participants are invited to discuss certain themes; the Chairman usually creates the ground for such discussions. The editors turn the unedited transcripts to readable formats by incorporating participants’ corrections and any additional points. Bibliography and biographical details are usually provided as footnotes, and the final script is sent to every contributor. They are required to sign a legal document for assigning the copyrights of the final script to the host organisation. Any additional evidential material or correspondences received are protected and archived.

The strengths of Witness Seminar, in specific instances, outweigh pragmatic concerns by providing valuable insights on the interpersonal dynamics, intellectual and cultural differences, and individual motivations influencing the event. The group activity may not be expected to bring about consensus though it may aspire to generate perfect collective memory, exposing areas of dissent or concordance. No representativeness to historical narratives needs to be attributed – which can be a benefit. The Witness Seminar transcripts provide deeper insights into the participants’ ideologies and theoretical assumptions, revealing their perceptions as ‘bearers of culture’.

For our WHO-TDR approved project, we intend to conduct a similar Witness Seminar focussing on patients’ involvement in public health implementation, by specifically emphasising the TB care initiatives. This being a new concept had been earlier employed by CEHAT in their study on corporatisation of private healthcare in the State of Maharashtra (Marathe et al., 2020). Adopting from some of their steps in conducting Witness Seminars, we are trying to concretise the potential participants, contextually relevant opportunities and challenges, and attempt to solve some of these challenges. By not limiting these seminars to recent history, we intend to explore how peoples’ involvement in public health has changed over time, and the way active community participation in control TB interventions have been perceived (Thomas et al., 2021).

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