

What is a Witness Seminar? How Is this Method being applied in the current study?

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"Witness seminar" is an established technique in the field of social history. The current application of the "witness seminar" method constitutes a vital step in long-standing research project being conducted by Christopher Sellers, Professor of History at Stony Brook University in New York <http://stonybrookhistory.org/blog/chrissellers/> , with funding from the National Science Foundation http://search.engrant.com/project/3SBHIF/the_uneven_development_of_industrial_hazards_lead_and_oil_in_the_u_s_versus_mexico_1930-1990 . Since 2009, this historical and social scientific study has probed the history of four industrial communities, two of them in the US and two of them in Mexico, with a view to comparing their historical dealings especially with industry-related hazards. In the month of August, 2013, we are planning witness seminars for three of the four communities under study: El Paso, Texas, and Chihuahua City, Chihuahua (communities long centered around lead smelters), and Minatitlan-Coatzacoalcos (a network of communities long centered around petrochemical industry). We are not as yet planning a seminar in the fourth site, Beaumont –Port Arthur, Texas (also a petrochemical region), for limitations of time and financing.

In the case of this study, a "witness seminar" means: bringing together 10-12 people with extended but very different perspectives on the history of an industrial site and its relations. In the course of the seminar, they discuss their recollections of this history, each from the standpoint of their own experience. One goal is for key members and representatives of different parts of a community to share their memories, recognize and discuss any conflicting recollections, and arrive at a better understanding if not a reconciliation of differences in what they remember. In this way, the witness seminars we are now planning will bring back some results of our study to the communities themselves. Other goals are more social scientific and historical. For instance, comparing the discussion of similar questions in such different communities and contexts promises to shed light on: the varieties of narrative available to different people, groups, towns and cultures to frame and understand their pasts; the different ways in which conflicts have unfolded and been contested; the varieties of relations between experts and lay people at the local level, and the ways in which supposedly "universal" knowledge about lead poisoning or benzene's effects has been taken up—or not—and by which groups, experts and lay people alike.

The witness seminar idea has been most fully employed in Britain. Here's an example: <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/innovation/groups/ich/witness/archives/science/NorthSea.aspx> And here's an overview of how the method has been taken up in history of science and medicine: <http://www.history.qmul.ac.uk/research/modbiomed/what-is-a-witness-seminar/>

Attached is a transcript of another one conducted on the development of the Concord. Such seminars, like those being planned, are of limited size and thematic focus. Most of these are also closed to a public or general-interest audience, just as we are planning with our seminars. In our case, having a small closed group is even more essential, as some of the topics under discussion have been locally quite

controversial. Not bringing in the press for example, is necessary to ensure frank and honest discussion, rather than grand-standing. Our seminars will depart from many of these, in that most all of these British examples involve historical decisions and events shared by mostly elite actors: highly educated scientists and professionals. We are attempting a somewhat different combination, however: hoping to bring out voices not just from elite and educated actors, but also others, whether workers or local residents, who may not have such qualifications. The only close model is a witness seminar undertaken by the well-known Scottish oral historian, Arthur McIvor, among those involved in the Scottish asbestos industry <http://www.strath.ac.uk/humanities/courses/history/staff/mcivorarthurprof/> . Professor Sellers has been in close consultation with McIvor in developing the protocol for these seminars.

Another social scientific methods similar to the one we are applying is that of the focus group. A focus group is a method developed mostly by American social scientists, to probe public opinions about particular topics in greater depth than a survey or some such method would allow. Here's an outline of the method online: <http://www.odi.org.uk/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/7074.pdf> While this method has not been employed by historians (to my knowledge), many of its principles are similar to those we will employ. The biggest difference is that while we are interested in different groups' perceptions of the hazards involved, and having people talk about these differences, we are also interested in bringing out differences in narratives, the ways do (or don't) situate, frame these hazards in terms of their own life stories. Hence the breath of the main questions being posed: they are to allow our contributors a freer reign, allow them to tell stories about their experiences, rather than just give opinions.

In sum, our seminars, while borrowing on established methods, will also be forging methodological innovations of their own. That is because of the kind of history we seek to illuminate as well as the fact that having three of these, in two very different national cultures, adds to the comparative dimensions. As with all these other models on which we are building, full consent forms and permissions will be presented to participants before and after the proceedings, and all proceedings will be recorded and transcribed, as well as videotaped, although their public release will hinged upon permissions that participants have been willing to sign.

Dates and Places:

August 3—Witness Seminar in El Paso, Tx,

August 10—Witness Seminar in Chihuahua City, Chi.

August 12—Follow-up Witness Seminar in El Paso, Tx.

August 16—Follow-up Witness Seminar in Chihuahua City, Chi.

August 17—Witness Seminar in Minatitlan, Ver.