

ORAL HISTORY WORKSHOP

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Humility and Empathy

Introduction and Overview

The oral history interview is an intense and personal search to learn something about the history of human striving and endurance. Most human history has been handed down and recorded using oral traditions rather than written records. Written records often privilege the voices and perspectives of elites and "leaders" in society. Rarely do written records incorporate the views of youth or the aged (especially in the United States).

The beliefs, practices and folkways of "ordinary people" are often ignored and misunderstood by official sources. Oral history is a wonderful way to bring the perspectives of working-class people of all colors and nationalities to the attention of the public. Oral history can also serve to help individuals, families, neighborhoods, and communities preserve their history for the benefit of their descendants or living neighbors. Oral history can also be used as a tool in the struggles of oppressed people to enhance their level of self-determination and self-respect in society.

As an oral historian, you need to recognize that you have ideas about the way the world works that may be radically different than those ideas held by the person(s) you want to interview. For example, you might find yourself interviewing somebody who is a fierce partisan of Augusto Pinochet or the Tea Party, whereas you might disagree with such individuals and organizations. Be aware of your own biases as you think about your project and try not to let your preconceived notions about the people you want to interview stop you from communicating with them in an effective manner.

The main rule is: **be flexible!** While we must follow ethical guidelines in doing oral history, there are no firm rules for conducting an interview, and there is no "ideal" interview. Each person that you interview will be unique. Each interview you conduct will be like no other conversation you have ever had. This handout is designed as a guideline and should not be considered the final word.

The objective of doing an oral history interview is to record the greatest amount of personally significant and historically accurate information as possible. In this handout, we will cover five steps in doing oral history:

- 1) Getting started and setting up the interview.
- 2) Interview preparation.
- 3) Recording the interview.
- 4) Utilizing good interview techniques.
- 5) The "final" product.

I. Setting Up The Interview:

A) Think about who you want to interview and why. Who will benefit from your project? What kinds of questions will you ask? You need to think through your motivations, because one of the first questions your narrator [the person you are interviewing] may ask is: "*why do you want to interview me?*" and "*what are you getting out of doing this?*" Another important issue to think about is what kind of final shape your oral history project will take. Are you planning to write an article or to create an oral history archive at a community or non-profit center?

Valerie Yow notes that "the practitioner of oral history has an obligation to tell the narrator [person being interviewed] honestly what the goals of the project are, the stages of the research the researcher expects them to unfold, and the uses to which the recorded information will be put."

B) Once you decide who you want to interview, you will need to decide on a strategy to make first contact. If you know the person(s), fine. If not, you will need some help. One of the most important issues at this point is to establish legitimacy in the community that you want to do interview work in. You need to build trust with the people you are trying to interview. If they do not trust you, you will go nowhere. If you are an "outsider" and you want to interview a particular group of people, say farmworkers, you need to find out the kinds of institutions that farmworkers utilize, respect, and trust in that particular community. Churches are often good places to start. So are, in most cases, community organizations.

For example, if you wanted to interview female farm workers in North Carolina, you would do well to contact organizations that female farm workers are involved in. Introduce yourself and your project idea. If possible, ask the organization if they would be willing to serve as a contact or reference for you as you begin to contact individual farmworkers. Some agencies, such as senior citizen drop-in centers, may ask you to stop by and introduce yourself during the time when elders are actually in residence.

C) Try to make first contact with the person(s) you want to interview by letter or by telephone if possible. It is a bit more difficult to establish trust with an individual by showing up unannounced at their doorstep. I have set up some of my interviews by going to church services or community centers and giving brief talks about my project. Again, this helps build trust. So, too, does a promise to provide copies of the resulting interview to the individuals you want to interview. They may want to listen to the interview or, just as often, have a copy to hand down to children or grandchildren.

D) During that first discussion or letter, give the person(s) an overview of what you hope to accomplish by interviewing them. *Be honest about your motivations.* Give the narrator a general idea of the questions you will be asking so that they will feel prepared for the interview session. Make certain to tell the person that you will be recording the interview because you want to be certain to accurately record their ideas and thoughts rather than rely on your rough notes. In

addition, explain that the interview becomes the property of both narrator and interviewer and that you must obtain permission from the narrator before you are allowed to use any excerpt of the interview in a public manner. If the person is still hesitant to be interviewed, assure them that they have the right to decline to answer any of the questions you might ask.

E) Try to schedule the first interview session as soon after the initial contact as possible. You will should schedule the interview at a time and place that is convenient for the **narrator**--if this time and place isn't as convenient for you, you will have to adjust your schedule accordingly! Ask for directions and repeat them back to the narrator to make certain you know where you are going!

II. Preparing for the Interview:

A) Before doing the interview, you should (if possible) get some information about the narrator's background and general life experience; this can be done during your initial discussion with them. Of course, it may not be possible to learn a great deal about the person in advance. However, if you are interviewing a farmworker, you will want to have a good background in the history of farmworker life and culture. Use your Community Stories readings, and do some outside research if necessary. The purpose of this is to be able to frame intelligent questions to ask during the interview. For example, if you are interviewing a farmworker who has migrated recently from Guatemala, you should brush up on your Guatemalan history. This does not mean that you have to know "everything" about Guatemala; it only means that you will be able to better understand the life history your interviewer is trying to tell you during the interview. In addition, this knowledge will alert the person you are interviewing that you care enough about their history to take some extra time to research it. If you are interviewing folks who have lived in a particular neighborhood in Durham for the last sixty years, you can use Durham city directories, maps, and newspapers to get a better idea of what changes the neighborhood has gone through over the decades.

B) Create a list of at least ten sample interview questions. Develop some "open-ended" questions such as: *What was your community like growing up? Could you describe the process you went through in deciding to move to this area to work? What have been some of the challenges you have faced in coming to the United States?* An open-ended question gives the narrator space to answer a question **at length** on their own terms. In contrast, close-ended questions are designed to get one-line responses: *What year were you born? How many people lived in your household growing up? Do you like working here?*

Sometimes, when you need to get basic information regarding names and dates, close-ended questions are appropriate. However, if you ask too many close-ended questions, you will begin to get a string of one-line responses ("yes" or "no") during the interview. Think about how you might structure your questions in such a way that your narrator will feel comfortable with talking more expansively. For example, instead of asking: *"Do you like working here?"* Try: *"How does working here compare with your other work experiences?"*

Remember: **an oral history interview is not a job interview.**

III. Recording the Interview:

How can we be certain after the interview that we have really captured the essence of what the narrator was trying to tell us? Hand-written notes are good, but not nearly as accurate or dependable as the recorded interview. People are very hesitant to allow their voices to be recorded, and for good reason. I have found, however, that I have been able to convince most of the people that I have tried to interview that a recording will be a more faithful rendition of their thoughts and life history than my hastily-scribbled written notes.

A) Select a good recorder that is easy to transport and easy to set up. Use high quality recorders. (The Samuel Proctor Oral History Program uses Marantz recorders)

B) Practice using your equipment before your interview. Do a mock interview with a friend. Become familiar with the specific workings of the machine, including the steps necessary to begin and to stop the recorder. Record yourself talking and make some mental notes on how far the recorder should be placed between interviewer and narrator to ensure optimal sound quality.

C) Try to arrange the physical setting of the interview so that the narrator is comfortable and so that outside noises and interruptions are minimized.

D) Achieve and maintain good recording quality.

1. *At the beginning of the interview:*

- a) Set up the recorder so that it is level.
- b) Check the battery level, and plug in an electric cord if necessary.
- c) Make that your narrator's interview release/deed of gift form is signed and that they understand the terms of the release.
- d) When you begin the interview, be certain the "record" button is turned on! Double check.

2. *During the interview:*

- a) Confirm that the recorder is still on.
- b) Make sure that neither you nor the narrator are tapping on or touching the recorder or the area around it.
- c) Listen for external noises that will affect the recording quality.

3. *Preserve your recording:*

- b) At the conclusion of your interview, upload the digital files to a computer as soon as possible, and make duplicates to ensure the safety of the recording.

IV. Utilizing Good Interviewing Techniques:

The success of the interview depends to a great degree on the amount of trust and understanding the interviewer is able to create with the narrator. Courtesy and empathy are a part of this process. As you start to do oral history interviews, you will begin to understand the importance of doing background research. You will also begin to pick up on other "intangible" gestures and personality traits that make for a good interview.

A) When you arrive to begin the interview, set up your equipment as soon as possible. Your narrator's time should not be taken lightly. As you are setting up, give another general overview of the types of things you are interested in as well as some questions you might ask. At this point, discuss the **interview release/deed of gift form** and the various restrictions the narrator might want to put on the interview (more on this below).

B) If the person begins talking about their life history before you are able to start the recording, so much the better; this means that you have already "broken the ice," so to speak. If this is the case, you might be able to start the interview by saying "Mrs. ___, you were telling about the reasons your family left Florida for North Carolina. Can you tell me about this again now that the recorder is running?"

C) Start the interview by asking an open-ended question that the narrator will be able to answer easily, at length. An open-ended question could be: "Could you tell me about what your community was like when you were growing up?"

1. Do not interrupt the narrator during this first part of their testimony, even if relevant information to your interests is being passed over. Make notes of questions that arise out of the narrator's narrative.
2. Demonstrate a strong interest in what the narrator is saying. Obtain respectful eye contact. Convey interest by facial expressions and the kinds of gestures you normally use when you are interested in what somebody is telling you.
3. Be alert for topics that should be expanded upon later, or hints given by the narrator of a desire to be asked to discuss in depth points merely alluded to.
4. Listen carefully and pay attention that your subsequent questions do not deal with information already adequately covered by the narrator.
5. Be mentally structuring new questions that should be covered. Make notes on your scratch pad so that you will not miss valuable information.

6. If the narrator pauses, do not ask a new question until you are certain that s\he is not simply reflecting.

D) As the interview proceeds, follow the same general pattern of asking open-ended questions. Be intensely involved in the interview, but avoid offering your peculiar value judgments. The more you offer your own opinions, the more chances you run in offending the narrator and shutting down the interview entirely. You are trying to find out what this person thinks. You already know your own opinions!

1. After the narrator has overcome initial shyness, you may want to ask questions that clarify specific points they made earlier. This is where the "close-ended" questions become more effective. Try to place the interview within an historical context by seeking information regarding "who, what, when, where, how" -- that is, dates, places, and examples to build on the narrator's statements.

For example: "Mrs. Hernandez, you said earlier that 'times were so rough when we were in Michoacan.' When were you in Michoacan, Mrs. Hernandez, and when you said 'we had rough times' were you referring only to your family or did you mean that everyone in the state was having a rough time?"

2. If the narrator first suggests it, encourage them to bring out a family photo album or heirloom that helps them to remember more clearly.

3. Always keep the issue of confidentiality in mind. If the person relates information that could potentially harm their job or immigration status, it is your duty to warn them that in oral history, there is no such thing as "lawyer-client privilege" and that interviews can be subpoenaed by courts. It is appropriate to erase parts of a recording that contains sensitive information before turning it over to a library or archive.

4. If there is an apparent contradiction in the narrator's narrative, do not hesitate to point out the contradictions by approaching them simply as something that needs clarification.

5. If you have questions that you feel are of a sensitive nature, wait until you have established trust with the narrator before you ask them. Remind the narrator that any part of their testimony may be deemed "confidential" if they wish.

6. If the narrator, when asked about a certain event, requests that you turn off the recorder: do so.

7. Always thank the person(s) you are interviewing for their time and efforts. Being interviewed is mentally and spiritually demanding. Narrators may become deeply moved as they recount

certain parts of their lives; they may even openly weep. It is your responsibility to show as much empathy as you can during these moments of spiritual anguish.

8. Be flexible!

V. Thinking About the "Final" Product:

*Many scholars and writers conduct oral histories solely for the purpose of writing books or articles. All of us who do oral history should ask ourselves one question: what are the costs of **not** preserving this history, this heritage and this culture for future generations? Is there a local library, archive, or repository that can store your interviews? How do the people you have interviewed feel about the preservation question?*

Along these lines, you will want to consider using forms that record family and basic biographical information. Ask the person(s) you interview to fill out this info or have them dictate it to you. Always ask the narrator if they would like a copy of the audio resulting from the interview.

The "legalities and ethics" of oral history are rather specific. Information about the legalities and ethics of oral history practice is available for download from the Oral History Association: <http://www.oralhistory.org/publications/pamphlet-series/>. Read the information carefully before you begin your project to avoid the legal dilemmas.

There are many outstanding examples of books, web sites, musical compositions that use oral history to extend knowledge of the human condition. A few outstanding examples of books and other sources that contain clues on how to use oral history as a tool of remembrance, equity and social justice include:

Stetson Kennedy, *Palmetto Country* (1942) <http://www.stetsonkennedy.com/palmetto.htm>

Stetson Kennedy, *The Florida Slave*, <http://myfloridahistory.org/>

Voices of Witness: *Illuminating Human Rights Through Oral History*, <http://voiceofwitness.org/>

Groundswell: Oral History for Social Change, <http://www.oralhistoryforsocialchange.org/>

The Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, <http://oral.history.ufl.edu/>

Daniel Kerr, Oral History and Social Justice course syllabus, <http://people.jmu.edu/kerrdx/OHIST/index.htm>

Bracero History Archive, <http://braceroarchive.org/>