

ORAL HISTORY TECHNIQUES

How to Organize and Conduct Oral History Interviews

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Introduction

Oral history interviewing is one more tool in the larger repertoire of methodologies used for research in history, anthropology, and folklore. Oral history collects information about the past from observers and participants in that past. It gathers data not available in written records about events, people, decisions, and processes. Oral history interviews are grounded in memory, and memory is a subjective instrument for recording the past, always shaped by the present moment and the individual psyche. Oral history can reveal how individual values and actions shaped the past, and how the past shapes present-day values and actions.

Every interviewing experience is unique; this is part of the charm of fieldwork. So while there is some validity in the adage, "The only way to learn how to do it is to do it," there are things you can do before, during, and after your interview to make every interview more successful.

Before the Interview

Set goals for your project before you begin. First: what are you trying to learn? You might want to come up with a sentence or two that summarizes your research goals, so that you can easily explain to your interviewees what you are researching and why it is important. Second: what kinds of information already exists about your research topic, and in what form? For example, if you wanted to do a biography of a politician, you would want to look at campaign literature, political documents, other biographies that already exist—all the sources you could find that would tell you more about this person. If you were studying an event—for example, a strike in a factory—you would want to consult newspaper accounts, factory records, union records, perhaps even economic data that would indicate the effects of the strike. If you

were studying a family member, this kind of data may be in different forms—scrapbooks, photographs, family heirlooms, diaries, etc. Third: you need to consider who you will need to interview to learn about your topic. Make a list of potential interviewees; this list will grow as you are referred to additional interviewees. It may not even be a list of names at first; for the factory strike, for example, your list might include strikers, management, union representatives, police on the picket line, counter-demonstrators, etc. Fourth: what product(s) do you want to create from this study, and who is the audience for the product(s)? The answer to this question will help you decide what kinds of information you'll need and in what medium to record it. For example, if you were planning to create a website, you would need to have audio or video recording equipment that could create digital files of your interviews. You would need digital scans of any photos or documents you wanted to include as part of the history you're presenting. You would want to be sure that the people you interview know that their interview will be available to the whole world at the click of a mouse, and you will want to keep that in mind as you decide what to post on the website and what to leave out.

Prepare for the interview by knowing the subject you're studying thoroughly. Remember what information you want to gain from the interview, and design your pre-interview study with that focus in mind. Remain open-minded, however; data can take you in new directions as the research and the interviews progress. Use as many resources as you have available to become familiar with the person or people you'll be interviewing. If you are going to be interviewing someone about whom few or no written record exists, learn more about the times and circumstances of their lives. For example, if you were studying a woman who was an Army nurse in World War II, you might have access to some records of her service, but you should also learn about that time in history and its effects on the place where that person grew up so you can shape your questions to better capture the history she lived. Such knowledge will also assist you in establishing rapport with the interviewee by laying a groundwork of shared knowledge and confirming your interest in him/her.

Set up the appointment for the interview, confirm the appointment, and keep the appointment. Arrange to conduct the interview in a place and time most comfortable for the interviewee, away from noise and distractions.

Know your recording equipment thoroughly, be it audio, video, or both, and make sure it's in working order before you arrive at the interview. Test it again on site, with the interviewee and you both speaking on the recording to be sure you are both clearly audible. Use an adaptor in preference to batteries (so an extension cord is a good idea). If you use batteries, carry extra. Use high quality equipment and supplies; you get what you pay for. If you are doing analog audio recordings, use standard sized, 60-minute audiotapes, as longer tapes and microtapes tend to stretch and break over time. Bring at least one more tape than you think you'll need; it's better to bring too many than too few. Use an external microphone that is both stereo and multidirectional in preference to the recorder's built-in microphone. If you use digital equipment, record at the highest quality level on your equipment—do not compress the files as you record. This means you may need to have extra memory sticks or digital tapes or CDs—whatever your particular machine uses—so be sure to bring them along with you. If your digital

recording equipment (audio or video) has an ear bud that allows you to hear the recording as it is being made, get accustomed to using it and wear it during the interview to be sure there is no audio dropout or microphone failure.

Prepare a list of questions for the interview. You need not follow this list exactly; other questions will arise during the interview, but they will give a solid organization and cohesiveness to your interview. They also make it easier, if you do multiple interviews on a topic, to be sure you cover the same information with all your interviewees. Put the simplest questions, like biographical data, at the beginning, and the most complex or sensitive questions at the end. Group the questions logically, so you and your subject can easily follow the progression of ideas or chronology in the interview. If you're not sure of the wording of a question you've constructed, try it out on another person. Another good way to check the focus of individual questions is to ask yourself, "What am I trying to learn with this question?"

Ask open-ended questions rather than questions that can be answered by yes or no. You want to elicit the fullest response possible to each question. Especially don't ask leading questions. For example, if you were interviewing a line worker, you would not ask, "Don't you feel that management was hostile to your concerns?" but "What was the attitude of management to your concerns?"

Ask simply structured, single-stranded questions. Compound questions, multiple rephrasing, and false starts are harder to answer, and harder to transcribe. Take your time. If you have more than one point to pursue on a given topic, compose follow-up questions. And if a point that hasn't occurred to you in composing your questionnaire flies by in the midst of an interviewee's answer, you can always go back to it later in the interview. Keep a pen and pad handy to jot down a word or two during the interviewee's response to remind yourself to follow up on that point when the interviewee is done speaking.

Questions should be not only open-ended but concrete, avoiding as much as possible jargon or theoretical concepts (unless the jargon and concepts are part of the interviewee's experience). Remember that people's memories hang on substantial hooks. Asking for a description of a typical day, a family gathering, or breaking a subject down into its component elements (for a study of a factory, for example, asking about coworkers, foremen, work processes, job training, etc.) will give the interviewee points of reference from which to reminisce.

Interviews are generally improved by sending the interviewee a list of your questions or a summary of the topics you'll be asking about—in the latter case be sure that your summary is written in neutral terms that won't prejudice the interviewee toward a certain perspective. The point is to give the interviewee time before the interview to think about people and events that may not have occurred to him/her in a long time. Be sure to explain that the questionnaire or summary is only a framework, and that other points may occur to both of you that could be included during the interview.

Be aware of your personal appearance before you go to the interview. The tone you set nonverbally can be as important to the interview's success as what you say. Your attire tells the interviewee something about how you view him/her and the interview itself. Casual clothes can suggest a more informal atmosphere, but they can also suggest a lack of care or respect to some interviewees; businesslike clothes can suggest a more formal, purposeful atmosphere, but can intimidate some interviewees. Try to match your appearance to what will best put the interviewee at ease with you and the interview process.

Be aware that there can be subject areas or data out of your reach because of some inhibiting factor in your relationship to the interviewee: sex, age, class, etc. Be sensitive to these factors, and try to work past them, but don't alienate the interviewee by pressing too hard for information he/she doesn't want to share. The single best strategy for bridging these kinds of obstacles is for the interviewer to show respect and courtesy to the interviewee, and to make the interview itself a "safe place" where the interviewee feels heard and understood. Part of that atmosphere comes from the interviewee understanding the goals of the interview, his/her role in the research, and how the interview will be used. This is the essence of good ethical practice in interviewing. Part of that atmosphere comes from the interviewer being a friendly, non-judgmental, interested listener to the life experiences of the interviewee.

Unexpected barriers to full disclosure can also arise from your level of familiarity with the interviewee. Sharing a lot of history in common with the interviewee can be as challenging to work past as meeting the interviewee for the first time. This can be a particular challenge when interviewing family members. Things you both know can be taken for granted, and things taken for granted are generally unspoken. Try to stay alert for this kind of data, and don't be shy about stating what is (for both of you) the obvious. Remember you're speaking for a third person who may not know either of you.

Know your ethical responsibilities as an interviewer. Be prepared to answer any questions the interviewee may have about the interview or the research project. Have a "deed of gift"—a permission form—ready that explains what will be done with the interview and has room on it for the interviewee to state any restrictions on the interview's use. Both of you should sign this form at the close of the interview. Our Center also uses an "informed consent" form that explains the interview process and the rights and responsibilities of both parties. The interviewee reads and signs this form before beginning the interview and is given a copy. Be sure the interviewee reads and understands all forms prior to the interview and signs them at that time—or agrees to sign the deed of gift after having reviewed the recording or transcript. Explain that the interviewee can restrict an interview's use, and note any restrictions on the deed of gift form.

If you do not use a written informed consent, it's still a good idea to have an information sheet to give the interviewee, or even a checklist of information to go over with him/her before the interview begins so that he/she has a clear understanding of the interview process, the research goals, and his/her rights as a willing participant in the interview. The permission forms used by the Center for the Study of History and Memory can give you examples of the

information they communicate. These forms can be modified according to your plans for the interviews gathered in your own project.

At the Interview

It's best to have a one-on-one interview so that the interviewee's attention is focused on you, and yours on him/her. If you can't avoid it, or choose to do it, be sure to identify on the recording all the people who take part in the interview. Note: you need signed permission forms from each participant if the interview was set up with more than one person. For people who "wander" in once you've begun, use your judgment on getting signed forms depending on the person's contribution to the interview. Note: if you do an interview with more than one person—a married couple, for example—it's generally the case that one is the conversation leader and one tends to be more quiet. It is up to the interviewer to be sure that both people have the opportunity to answer the questions fully and without interruption or contradiction by the other spouse (which is why it's generally easier to do each person's interview separately!).

Place the recorder and microphone between you and your subject on a solid surface (or attach the microphone to him/her if it is the clip-on type). If you are using an analog recorder, do not place the microphone too close to the recorder, or it will pick up tape hiss. Do not hold the microphone in your hand. Be aware that moving objects on the table, shuffling papers, fidgeting (if the microphone is on the person) can cause noises that obscure the conversation. Know your microphone's strengths and weaknesses so you can plan around these kinds of disruptions as you set up the equipment.

Background noise can destroy an interview by making the recording unintelligible. Air conditioners, traffic noises, typewriters, clock chimes, ringing telephones, etc. should all be avoided if possible. It is important to examine the area around you before you begin the interview and choose the quietest location you have available to you.

Some people are nervous about being recorded, and some people who might allow an audio recording might balk at a video recording. Be sure the interviewee understands before the meeting that you wish to record the interview and in what format. If he/she does not want to be videotaped, for example, but you are working on a video project, one possible compromise is an audio recording and a photo of the interviewee. Put people at ease before beginning the interview with some pleasantries, and test your equipment with them, both so they can hear or see the playback, and to be sure the equipment is working properly. Never start recording until the interviewee is ready to begin, and never record without that person's knowledge.

Start your recorded interview with a statement of the names of yourself and your interviewee(s), the date, and the location. This is very helpful when you have multiple tapes or multiple digital files to sort through later. Then begin by collecting simple biographical information from the interviewee, such as full name, date of birth, and place of birth (which

should be at the front of your questionnaire). This helps put the interviewee at ease with being recorded and gets the basic information about your subject up front in the interview.

Once the recorder is running, focus on the interviewee, and give the machine only the minimum attention necessary to keep it recording smoothly. This will help the interviewee focus on you instead of the machine. Be sure to change tapes at the end of the second side (or change digital media when it's full), and to number the tapes so you'll have them straight when you go to label them later (or do the equivalent for your digital media). Do not turn off the machine during an interview unless the interviewee asks you to, or the interviewee is called away (by a phone call, for example). The only other time to turn off the recorder would be if the interviewee becomes upset (for example, becomes tearful remembering the death of a close family member) and needs a moment to regain composure. It is your responsibility to monitor the well being of your interviewee. If you are doing a long interview, those times when you change the tape or digital recording medium can be an opportunity to take a brief break. This alleviates fatigue and is beneficial to both of you. Be sure to turn the equipment on again when the interviewee is ready to resume talking "on the record."

Speak at a sedate pace, and speak clearly. The tone you set will generally be echoed by the interviewee.

After you ask a question, stop...and wait for the answer, even if you have to sit in silence for several seconds. Subjects often need several moments to think about the questions you ask. Give them quiet time; it's not really as long as it feels!

Once the answer comes, don't cut off or talk over an interviewee. Some people do like to go on and on, but let them talk to the end of their strand of thought and wait for an opening patiently. Cutting them off gives the impression that what they're saying isn't important to you, or that you're hurrying through the interview.

Verify verbally when people make gestures or point out something. The audio recorder can't see; this won't be as much of an issue if you are videotaping the interview. For example: "The fish was this big." Interviewer: "About eighteen inches." Or "The bandstand was over there." Interviewer: "Across the street by that pond."

Keep alert for cues from the interviewee that he/she will expand on a topic you bring up provided you let them know you want to hear it. For example, if an interviewee says, "Oh, that wasn't much of a problem, although I can think of several times where it was," it's a cue to say, "Would you like to tell me about those times?" This not only shows you're listening and enhances rapport with the interviewee; it can also give you good material the interviewee won't volunteer otherwise.

By the same token, keep alert for clues that the interviewee is uncomfortable with a question or line of questioning. This is more often clued in by body language than verbally, although some interviewees won't hesitate to tell you where to get off! You can prevent this

rapport-damaging eventuality by letting the interviewee know before the interview begins that he/she has the right at any time to refuse to answer a question without offending you.

Be alert to your own responses to an interviewee's remarks, taking care not to sound judgmental, impatient, or disrespectful. An interview is not the place to show off how much you know, or to take issue with an interviewee's beliefs or opinions. It's not about you! Remember: you are that "safe place" in which the interviewee can be heard and understood. All interviewees are to be treated with unfailing courtesy, respect, and gratitude for the privilege of sharing a part of their lives with you. Even if you come away having learned nothing of material benefit to your project, you can consider any interview a success if you have maintained a positive, polite, professional stance throughout the interview.

One last element of interviewee behavior to keep an eye on, especially with older subjects, is fatigue. Interviewing is a tiring process; it is emotionally and intellectually challenging. If the person is showing signs of weariness, it's better to adjourn and take up the interview another time than to press on with an interviewee who's too tired to think clearly any longer but too polite to tell you enough is enough. You can always reschedule and continue the interview another time.

After the Interview

Unless the interviewee is pressed for time, don't run right out after an interview. Once the recorder is turned off, there is always time to say thank you, to chat about the process you've just undergone together, and often to hear the best stories or most important data the interviewee has said during your entire meeting. That's why it's a good idea not to put the machine away at once; you can always turn it on again (with the interviewee's permission) to get one more story down. This is also where keeping field notes on each interview experience comes in handy. Field notes can cover the major topics of the interview, your impressions of the interviewee, and any special requests you need to follow up for the interviewee. These notes are generally for the researcher's own use. They can be very helpful in providing a quick reference point for the interview context and the data gathered.

Be sure that the interviewee signs the deed of gift, or that you both understand clearly what the interviewee wants to do (hear the recording or edit the transcript, for example) before signing it. The deed of gift is essential for responsible scholarship and can spell the difference between an interview being usable or not. If you intend to submit your interviews to an established archive, use their forms or a close variant thereof. Be sure the interviewee knows where the interview will be deposited, and that this arrangement is acceptable to both interviewee and archive. If you intend to archive the materials yourself, be sure you have made plans for what will happen to the interviews after your death, and be sure the interviewee is aware of that plan as well.

It's very important to label tapes (or your chosen digital recording medium) completely and carefully. In analog terms, that means every side of every tape, and the spine of the box holding that tape, should have the names of the interviewer and interviewee, the interview date, and what tape it is ("tape 1 of 3"). Blank sides should be labeled as blank. In digital terms, that means labeling the CD or digital tape, for example, but it also means creating good identifying data for the digital files stored on your computer.

Collateral materials are documents or photos or material artifacts that accompany or supplement an interview. If these are loaned to you, be sure to copy or scan them, and return them promptly. If they are given to you to keep or to pass on to an archive, be sure to label them as carefully as the recordings, and to keep with them whatever explanatory notes may be needed to explain the significance of the artifact.

Transcription can be full, partial, or a list of keywords or short descriptions accompanied by timing to approximate their location in the interview. Choose the transcription form that best suits your needs. Archives prefer verbatim transcripts, of course; a transcript is simply easier to use than a tape. Be aware it takes four to five hours to do a verbatim transcript of one hour of an audio recording. While there are software programs that can take the place of a transcribing machine for your digital files, and even have a foot pedal that can plug into a USB port, at this writing voice recognition software is not a viable option for transcribing oral history interviews. If you're submitting your interviews to an archive, find out their stylistic requirements for transcripts. Be sure that whatever style you use, you put the names of all participants, the date of the interview, and distinguish the speakers from each other (for example, we use the initials of the last names to identify speakers). Number the pages of your transcript, and use a header with the last name of the interviewee so pages from different interviews cannot easily be mixed up.

Send a thank-you note to your interviewee. If any special arrangements were made between you—for example, for copies of the interview or a follow-up interview—reiterate these in the note, and follow up on your promises.

Bibliography

I have listed here several excellent books that discuss in more detail interview techniques, problems, and ethics. I have also listed the guidelines of the Oral History Association, available online. If you have particular questions about doing oral history, you can also contact our center. Our contact information is at the top of this document.

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