

AN ORAL HISTORY PRIMER

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Introduction

Oral history is a primary source document based on a face to face, open-ended recorded interview with an individual. The goal of an oral history interview is to document an individual's own life experiences, memories of an event, or even of another person. However, because the lines between these are blurred, we no longer make distinctions between these three forms which, in the past, were referred to as autobiographical, topical and biographical interviews.

The historian might use existing oral histories (see the CSULB Oral History Archive) or might create her/his own. In either case, many of the same basic questions are raised that historians ask about any source. If you record your own oral history interview, you must also pay attention to the standards of the profession, and abide by our ethical principles, as enunciated in the "Principles and Standards and Guidelines of the Oral History Association." These can be found at: http://alpha.dickson.edu/oha/pub_eg.html

The purpose of this primer is to familiarize you with the oral history process, which involves more than simply pushing the "Record" button on a tape recorder. While some of the steps outlined below are relatively detailed and universal, the first two steps (defining your question and conducting background research, Part I) will depend on the particular context in which you are using oral history. It is important to consult with your own instructor as you work on defining your question/project and look for appropriate background research materials. Oral history is work, but it is fun, so don't be intimidated.

In addition to using oral history to work on a specific class project, there are opportunities to pursue this approach as you continue your undergraduate work in history. Every semester a 1 unit Oral History Methods class is offered (402) as well as an opportunity to undertake a research project through Directed Studies in Oral History (4980). In any event, the Oral History Program is part of the department of history and serves as a resource for students and faculty. Should you have any questions, feel free to consult us during our scheduled office hours, or email: aigmen@csulb.edu.

PART I: DESIGNING A PROJECT

I. Defining the Problem/Question

II. Background Research

- A. Secondary sources - Articles, books, dissertations
- B. Primary sources - e.g. census and/or labor force data, popular culture materials, other first person accounts etc.
- C. Other useful tools - e.g. maps, photographs of an era/place

III. Who Should Be Interviewed? How Are They Located?

A. Who?

Sometimes, you start with a research question and then you have to figure out who should be interviewed, how you would find them, etc. Other times, you have someone in mind to interview, and you then have to do some background research to prepare to interview them.

B. Interviewee Selection Process

Where are you likely to find people? How do you widen the search so that you get a fairly broad, “representative” (not in the statistical sense) group?

Oral history, by definition, means that people volunteer. What is the nature of the volunteer?

PART II: THE ORAL HISTORY PROCESS

I. The Interview Process - Preparation

A. Preparing for the interview - the standards of the profession

Before you proceed, familiarize yourself with the Standards and Principles of the Oral History Association (see http://alpha.dickson.edu/oha/pub_eg.html). Pay particular attention to the Ethical Guidelines, which means, among other things, preparing an interview release form. The revised form used by the Oral History Program is appended at the end.

B. Preparing for the interview - the tools

The first step in the oral history process is construction of an interview outline and, if possible, a chronology of events relevant to the topic at hand and to the narrator. (*See Appendix A for sample interview outline*)

Remember, oral history is an open-ended process where the narrator, guided by the interviewer, shapes the narrative in her/his own style. The interview outline should be a general list of topics, which is used to help the interviewer, but should not be adhered to strictly.

In fact, my advice is to construct the outline, using the knowledge you gained in your background research, then burn it!

C. Preparing for the interview - pre-interview contact

Contact the person(s) you plan on interviewing, to make sure you have their cooperation and that they understand what you are going to do. Explain only in the most general terms what you plan to cover in the interview. Try to get some biographical information (without a lot of details, however) so that you can plug this information into your outline and chronology.

People don't necessarily remember things sequentially or by dates, so any advance biographical information you can obtain to give you a hint of personal benchmarks in a person's life is important (e.g. where they were born, when they finished school, if/when they married, had children, worked at various jobs, etc.)

Set up your interview appointment once you have all your interview "tools" ready. Arrange it at a time most convenient for your narrator. This is particularly important for older people, who are usually quite aware of the fluctuations in their body rhythm.

Re-confirm the appointment before setting off.

II. Conducting the interview

A. Setting up your equipment

Test your equipment before setting off for your interview. Insert your tape and record an i.d. This can serve as a way to test your equipment in advance.

Try to use an external microphone for your tape recorder, if at all possible. It is best to place the recorder where you can see it, but where it is out of line of sight of your narrator.

Although sitting across from your narrator is ideal, let them choose a place to sit where they feel the most comfortable.

B. Recording the interview

Keep in mind that each oral history interview is unique and is tailored to the individual narrator. You are creating a new primary source that should become accessible to other researchers. This means getting as complete an interview as possible. In general this means going beyond your own specific focus, though for a class project you might have a more limited focus.

One of the most challenging aspects of conducting an oral history interview is balancing the narrator's agenda and ours. If you're patient, regardless of where they want to go with the interview, you usually can get your questions addressed.

Some general advice:

- ◆ Engage in concentrated, attentive listening.
- ◆ Be patient

Don't jump in to ask another question if the narrator pauses. Give it time; s/he might be collecting her/his thoughts, searching for the memory.

Don't interrupt or change the topic until you are sure the narrator is finished

- ◆ Start with the most general question and see where that takes you before asking more detailed questions e.g. "Can you tell me about..." "Can you describe..."

Try not to ask questions that will yield a yes or no answer.

- ◆ Ask follow-up questions, trying to get as much detail as possible. If the narrator's line seems to be going in a different direction, follow it, don't simply go to the next topic on your outline.

Remember, the beauty of oral history is that it can capture the unexpected - as long as we're patient and willing to see where digressions go.

- ◆ Be flexible. Each oral history interview is tailored to the individual narrator, even if you are covering the same general topics with a group of people. You want to get the most complete information you can. If a line of inquiry takes you in a direction for which you are not prepared, you might have to defer the discussion so that you can first do more background research.
- ◆ Be polite, but be searching, i.e. if something seems to fly in the face of what we know about a period/an event, inquire more deeply to understand why your narrator's experience doesn't seem to fit, or why there are internal contradictions in their narrative. This line of inquiry will help you later in assessing the evidentiary value of your interview.
- ◆ Respect the narrators wishes. For instance, if they ask you to turn off the tape recorder, you must comply. If they tell you something off the record and you think it is important to have on the record, try to negotiate with them. Explain why it is important and see if you can agree on a way to record the information that simultaneously honors the narrator's wishes but is at least somewhat revealing. If you cannot reach an agreement on this, remember that you should not reveal anything told to you in confidence.

Sometimes, it is possible to obtain a full, candid interview if the narrator remains anonymous. Although anonymity, including the use of a pseudonym, is sometimes the best or only way to get a full story, it is preferable to have the narrator use their name.

B. Watching for non-verbal cues

In addition to the various behaviors that might be captured on tape, e.g. long pauses, laughter, sighs, etc. you should keep track of non-verbal behavior that might help you in your analysis. For example, if the narrator seems to become particularly nervous, or distracted at specific points in the interview, you might want to take this into consideration as you listen back.

C. Obtaining a release

When you have completed the interview, thank your narrator and obtain permission to use the interview (*see sample Agreement Form in Appendix B*). If you are using it only for a class project and will not be making it public, you can record a simple statement at the end of tape. Make certain that they assent to your stated use, on tape.

D. Post-interview notes

As soon after the interview as possible, write field notes. Describe the setting of the interview, any unusual behavior (see B, above), and discuss the ease or difficulty you had in establishing rapport with your narrator, as well as your assessment of how candid and forthright s/he was. This is where your observation of her/his non-verbal behavior is helpful.

III. Processing the interview

Within oral history circles, there is some disagreement on how to process the interview. Many of us believe that the audio recording is the basic document and that a researcher should listen to the oral history interview, not merely read a transcript. Obviously, in order to quote from an interview, the relevant passage(s) must eventually be transcribed. In addition to a basic question about what is the primary source document (the transcript or the audio recording) there is a resource issue. Each hour of interview takes 6-8 hours to transcribe.

A. Summarizing the tapes in time segments

This is the simplest, least time consuming manner of processing an interview. The time segment summaries are then the basis for locating the portions of the interview from which you might want to quote. In addition to being the simplest and least time consuming method of processing the interview, the process of making a tape summary familiarizes you with the content and also enables you to evaluate your interviewing skills and continually improve them.

B. Transcribing the interview

In transcribing the interview a lot of basic editing decisions are made, e.g. how to punctuate, how much of the hesitations and word crutches (uhs, you knows etc) should be kept, etc. In other words, the transcript is a mediated record of the interview.

To try to capture the flavor of the narrator's language, syntax and performance, some people have experimented with free verse transcription. This means that a grammatical structure is not imposed on the narrative, i.e. periods, commas, paragraphs etc. (*See Appendix C.*)

Ultimately, if you are going to quote from an interview, even if you use the audio recording as the basic document, you will have to decide how to transcribe the excerpt you want to use.

PART III: USING THE ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

I. Using the interview as evidence

A. Holistic analysis

Although you might select only excerpts to use in your analysis, it is important not to take them out of context. Consider what the interview as a whole communicates and how these excerpts fit into that whole.

B. Evidentiary value

◆ How reliable is retrospective memory?

For the most part, research on memory shows that the greatest loss occurs very quickly after the occurrence. And, as we all know, long term memory is not as problematic as short term memory. In any event, various devices can be used to help someone retrieve memory, including photographs, memorabilia etc.

More problematic is the issue of the lens through which an experience is recalled. Is the narrator's account more a representation of their present thinking than of their past?

The more details of behavior you can get, the easier it is to assess this.

Much like the kind of studied reconsideration that goes into writing an autobiography, if someone has thought about or talked about the topic a great deal, it has become memorialized. On the other hand, if you are exploring events or ideas that have not been discussed, you are more likely to get a "fresh" take. In other words, the more spontaneous the account is, the better.

◆ Issues of bias

What kinds of bias are most likely to mark the oral history interview?

Did the interviewer ask leading questions?

What biases did the interviewer bring to the process? Were these evident?

Was the narrator trying to please the interviewer, giving her/him what the narrator thought s/he wanted?

In assessing bias in a group of interviews, the selection process has to be analyzed.

Were narrators selected who, by their nature, supported a particular position/stance?

How representative were the narrators?

◆ Issues re validity,

What do we do if the narrator's account doesn't "fit" with what we know about the subject? Rather than simply dismiss it, it is important to assess why it doesn't fit. Is there some reason that this particular narrator's experience, perspective might be different? This is one of the reasons that some biographical material must be recorded and that we explore these contradictions in greater depth during the interview (both apparent contradictions in the narrative and between the narrator's account and other data).

Remember, you are plying the historical trade and making sense of what you are hearing. You have a unique opportunity in the oral history situation to interrogate your sources and to explore these contradictions and inconsistencies.

C. Evaluating sources

What can we get from an oral history interview that we cannot get from other kinds of sources?

What can we learn from a single interview?

Remember, oral history is like an autobiography, which is also a retrospective and reconsidered account. The same kind of questions can be applied to both sources, as well as a diary, though diaries are written contemporaneously.

Appendices

A. Sample Outline

B. Sample transcript

C. CSULB Oral History Agreement Form

SAMPLE TOPICAL OUTLINE

TOPIC: A Samoan Immigrant's Story

Family Background

1. Tell me about growing up in Samoa.
 - Where were you born/raised?
 - How many were in your family?
 - What did your family do for a living?
 - What do you remember about growing up there?
 - What was your schooling there?
 - What were your plans for the future when you were going to school?

Leaving Samoa

2. Tell me when and how you left Samoa.
 - How old were you at the time?
 - Why did you/your family leave?
 - What were your plans?
3. Tell me what you expected life to be like in the U.S.

Settling in the U.S.

4. What were your first impressions of the U.S.?
 - Did you know anyone here?
 - Where did you first settle? Why there?
 - Did you know or meet other Samoans here?

Life in the U.S.

5. Tell me about your life in the US.
 - How did you go about finding a job?
 - housing?
 - making friends?
 - What was the most adjustment for you?
 - How did your life here compare to your life in Samoa?
6. Were you able to maintain Samoan customs? Language?
 - What difficulties did you face maintaining your culture?
 - Did you maintain ties with Samoa? Visit?

Reflections

7. Looking back on your experience, what you have done differently?
 - Would you have stayed in Samoa?
 - What would you do differently in the U.S.?

TINA HILL - Exercise in transcription

Excerpt from original, conventional transcript:

Hill: I had to cook breakfast, serve. They had a man and a wife and four kids, but the kids was little, too. The smallest ones was twins and they wasn't too old. They had a nurese that took care of the twins. So I had to wash and iron, clean the house, cook. That was my job. So it was all day or practically, you know, and I had very little time for myself.

They weren't very nice people. They were just plain white people that had finally got them some money or something like that, but they weren't nice. They really was not nice; they was just -- somebody...

Experimental free verse version:

I had to cook breakfast, serve -
 They had a man and a wife and four kids. But the kids -
 the little - the two- the smallest ones - was twins and they -
 Oh, they had a nurse that took care of the twins.
 So I had to wash and iron,
 clean the house
 and cook.
 That wqas my - my - job.
 So I - er all day I practically, and I have very little time for myself.

They weren't very **nice** people.
 They were just plain white people
 that had finally got `em some money or something like that.
 But they were not nice
 they **really was not nice**
 They just SOMB O D Y.

AGREEMENT FORM

Your story (oral history) is valuable for people doing research on the topic of _____, and we would like to incorporate it into the Oral History Archives of California State University, Long Beach. If you are in agreement, please complete/sign the form below.

I hereby give to the ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM and/or the UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES for such scholarly and educational uses and purposes as the Director(s) shall determine, the following tapes of the interviews recorded on (dates):_____.

Unless otherwise specified below, I place no restrictions on non-commercial access to and use of the interviews:

Name: _____
(Please print) Phone/email

Address: _____ City: _____ Zip: _____

Signature of interviewee Date

Name of interviewer (Please Print) Phone/email

Address: _____ City: _____ Zip: _____

Signature of interviewer: _____ Date: _____

=====
I wish to place the following restrictions on the use of the recorded interviews: Please check and initial those restrictions you wish to place on the use of your interview(s):

- _____ I wish to be identified by the pseudonym _____
- _____ I wish to restrict access to the materials until (date): _____
- _____ I wish to close specified portions of the interview, as noted on the attached document
- _____ I wish to restrict access to the materials to on-site use (i.e. exclude electronic distribution)
- _____ Other (specify): _____

I/we agree to abide by these restrictions:

Signed by: _____ Date: _____

Position _____ Phone/email: _____

If you should wish to make inquiries at any future date about the disposition of your interview, feel free to contact the Director of the Oral History Program (562-985-8765) or the Archive staff (562-985-1580).