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FOR ORAL HISTORY



*Oral History Philosophy,
Procedures and Evaluation*



Oral History Philosophy, Procedures and Evaluation

Oral history is a time-honored process of storytelling and historical investigation that has developed as a respected form of interviewing and field of study over the last six decades. Rooted in history, but situated in personal, cultural, institutional and public ways of speaking about the past, oral history is now considered one of the most effective ways to preserve and transmit memory, experience and values. Institutions from the Federal Reserve and the World Bank to community non-profits and foundations regularly use oral history as way to account for actions internally and judge their impact on the larger world. As such, oral history is an intellectual practice that requires extensive research and preparation and results in the creation of archives that can be mined for multiple purposes over time.

Oral historians build, evaluate and disseminate knowledge through oral archives by following rigorous procedures that reflect the serious purposes of oral history to:

- a)** effectively capture the life story and experiences of the narrator;
- b)** illustrate the culture and mission of an organization or institution in which he or she works; and,
- c)** reveal the multiple impacts of the individual and the institution on the larger world, and simultaneously, the external factors that shape the institution's ability to make change over time.

The interview exchange is a matrix of at least these three dimension, or grids. The interviewer invites the narrator to move through this matrix through recounting and telling stories, both about themselves and others.

These are the critical stages of oral history preparation, processing and evaluation:

1) Research

Research happens at the project level, and on the individual session level. General level research is required to produce an effective and comprehensive "project design" that articulates the major historical topics, themes, internal and external developments that characterize an institution, a community's or a family's history. The project design prioritizes areas of content, and shapes the selection of oral history narrators, so that there is a governing logic to the planning for each interview session. This has the value of reducing redundancy and expanding the range of themes that will be developed in the project as a whole. This project design can be revisited throughout the progress of the project, as it develops over time, and serves as a standard by which the interviews are evaluated.

Secondly, interviewers also conduct research at the micro level, for each session that is produced, moving from the general themes that govern the project as a whole to develop specific questions for each narrator. The narrator is also encouraged to bring themes and topics of their own to the conversation, which accounts for the richness of the oral history encounter.



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2) Interviewing:

The interview is a conversational exchange. Oral historians do not prepare a list of questions in order, but have prepared themes and topics that will emerge throughout the conversation. For longer interviews, the interview begins as a life story and follows the development of the narrator's thinking and experience over time and covers the broader historical context as the interview grows in length. The advantage of this approach is that it reveals the mind and vision of the narrator, which is essential to understanding the history under discussion. Often, in institutional histories, multiple sessions are assigned to a leader with the longest tenure and history – as that then provides a context for researching subsequent interviews with others.

The oral history interviewer is well trained to approach the narrator sympathetically and with sensitivity (superb listening skills are essential), and also is able to structure the interview approach by moving chronologically through time, and then stopping at particular periods that are significant in the institution's history to go wider and deeper into the concrete history. The range of qualities that an oral historian must possess include:

- a)** sensitivity to interpersonal communications;
- b)** sensitivity to nuance and context, whether personal or institutional or historical; and,
- c)** an ability to structure the interview coherently, and most importantly,
- d)** an ability to elicit personal and institutional memory in the form of stories. The skilled interviewer can negotiate the movements back and forth through time, across topics and between personal and institutional histories to create a sense of a seamless story in which the narrator is always the focus of the interaction.

This kind of interviewing is what makes it possible to transmit the wisdom of an organization across the generations, as it honors the individuality and strengths of each person who contributes to the whole.



3) Processing and Evaluation:

While the steps of oral history are very concrete — as the event is a recorded conversation that must be transcribed, edited and ingested into a digital repository — they lend themselves to a consistent process of checking and evaluation that results in a high-quality product. These are the steps:

a) The interview: The interview usually runs from 70 minutes to 2 hours in length. Upon the completion of the interview, the interviewer prepares a list of proper names for the transcriber to ensure proper spelling.

b) Transcription: The interview is conducted on a digital recorder (audio or video) and the digital files are sent to a dedicated transcriber, along with the word list prepared by the interviewer.

c) Audit-editing: The project manager or an assigned person listens to each minute of recording to compare it to the transcript to ensure accuracy and also literate transcription of the spoken word, eliminating cross-talk, false starts, etc.

d) Narrator review: Once the assigned sessions for an interview have been completed and audit-edited for minor errors, the transcripts are sent to the narrator for his or her review. He or she can edit the transcript within reason, in order to clarify a point or make an additional point. This process of review is essential to the ethical practice of oral history.

e) Incorporation of narrator changes and the final sewing together of multiple transcripts into one document that can be archived.

There are two forms of evaluation that take place in this process that ensures the quality of the interview and the project. One, the interviewer must listen to her own interview immediately after conducting it, allowing her to reflect on missed opportunities, ideas for next questions, etc. The second form of evaluation, the audit-edit, is performed by the project manager (who is highly familiar with the content) or an assign, and she or he might pick up on nuances and opportunities for deepening the exchange that informs the quality of the project as a whole. The project director is also responsible for reading, and selectively listening to all the interviews conducted for the project by other interviewers, so that she or he can direct the interviewers effectively, and responsibly monitor the project progress.