

Ethics and Politics in Oral History Research

By Howard L. Sacks



When conducting oral history, you deliberately enter into another person's life. To say it more colloquially, oral history involves sticking your nose into other people's business. Questions of ethics and politics come into play in any human interaction but all the more so when you undertake a project intended for the general public. Before doing anything to implement a project, you must consider the ethical and political issues surrounding oral history research.

Two anecdotes illustrate the range of dilemmas one is likely to confront. A student of mine visited a local hog farmer to learn about his operation, the changes he's seen in agriculture, and his experiences living in a rural community. The interview went well; the student gathered a great deal of information, and the farmer enjoyed the opportunity to reflect on his daily work in response to the questions posed.

After the interview, the farmer asked the student if he'd like to stay for supper. Since home-cooked meals are a rare treat for college students, the student readily accepted. Not surprisingly, the main dish turned out to be pork. My student, a vegetarian, was faced with a dilemma. He didn't want to offend his

host, who took pride in the food he raised. Indeed, he hoped to build a relationship with this farmer so that he might conduct further interviews. But eating meat violated his personal ethic. What was he to do?

The second story concerns a project on rural diversity. People in rural communities often assume that everyone around them thinks and believes pretty much as they do. Members of minority populations exist in nearly every town, but typically their numbers are small, so they don't challenge this assumption of homogeneity. One reason that rural dwellers find urban sprawl unappealing is its social consequences: New sorts of people enter the community, and this entails learning how to engage diversity.

To address this issue, my students conducted oral histories with individuals from various minority communities in our area. Irish Catholics were part of the region's frontier settlement. Belgians arrived more than a century ago to work in the glass factories. Hispanic migrants are more recent arrivals; some work as agricultural laborers. And several Indian physicians now have thriving practices in a range of specialties.

We approached a county newspaper with the idea of writing a series of essays on each of these communities. The editor was so delighted with the idea that she offered us twenty pages in the special magazine the newspaper publishes annually about the county's past and present. We gave the editor a list of the communities we had in mind, and she approved. Everyone was enthusiastic, and the students began their oral history work.

The essays were delivered to the newspaper on time, but a week before the publication date, we received a phone call from the agitated editor. When the paper's owner stopped by to look at the magazine's layout, she noticed that one of the essays was about the local gay and lesbian community. The owner objected vigorously and issued an ultimatum: Drop the essay or risk having the entire series canceled. This project represented a year's work for my students. In addition, we had told everyone in these

communities that the essays would be published. What should we have done?

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Words embed complex meanings and attitudes, so how we refer to those we interview carries implications for how we treat them. Market researchers and political pollsters usually refer to the people who answer their questions as *respondents*. That's an accurate description. People answering surveys are given limited choices: yes or no, agree or disagree, choose a point on a continuum between not important at all and very important, or choose from a list of product names or presidential primary contenders.

Traditionally, oral historians have called the people they interview *informants*, which acknowledges their primary role in providing information to a researcher. But it also minimizes their active role in shaping the narrative that constitutes the oral history, suggesting that they have little control over the questions asked or the use of the information. *Informant* also has the negative connotation of being associated with an informer—a usually anonymous informant who meets a police contact in a sleazy bar or a dark corner of a parking garage. That's not how we usually meet people who want to talk about quilts.

Then there's the super-sensitive and politically correct term *coresearcher*, a favorite in theses and dissertations. This term adequately captures the notion that the interview is a cooperative venture between two parties and that there is shared authority. But it suggests more. A true coresearcher would contribute to the design of the study, the methodology, and even the literature review. Despite well-intentioned attempts to seek community input in the selection of topics and questions, most researchers find that the people they want to interview lack the time, interest, or course background to really be involved as coresearchers.

We prefer the term *interviewee* (which complements the role of interviewer) or, alternatively, *narrator*. Both capture the spirit of shared authority in the interview and grant an active role to the person being interviewed. Because the term *narrator* carries many meanings and interpretations, for the sake of clarity we will use the term *interviewee* throughout this volume.

This debate over names may seem minor, but it calls attention to the important issue of power relationships in oral history research. In a recent project on farming techniques, my students interviewed an Amish family. The local Amish bishop gave us his permission for the interviews and even allowed us to tape record them. The results of this research were to be included on a Web site about farming and community life. But a few weeks before launching the project, the family members changed their minds and did not want us to use the interview material.

One can argue that as interviewees these individuals were treated ethically. The subject and purpose of the research were explained in detail, and they signed a release form giving the oral historian permission to use the materials in a public project. Thus, they lacked the power to determine what material was used from the interviews or how it was presented.

Interviewees may have a variety of reasons to limit or otherwise shape the information presented in an oral history project. For example, a farmer being interviewed in the mid-1990s explained his cutting-edge marketing techniques for selling commodities on the Internet; in this way, he avoided the brokers' fees charged for his products and reaped a higher profit. The farmer told the interviewer, "I'm willing to explain this to you, but I don't want you to publish this anywhere that other farmers can see it. It's my competitive advantage."

To what extent should interviewees define the use and presentation of the materials they provide? On the one hand, the information belongs to them; they are sharing their life experiences with you. At the same time, the understanding to be

What we call someone or something is never neutral; all words come with values and connotations. Informants may supply valuable information, but the term suggests that they have little control over the questions asked or the use of the information. We prefer the term *interviewee*, which captures the spirit of shared authority in the interview and grants an active role to the person interviewed.

gained from this project typically transcends the perspective of any one individual you interview. The researcher hopes to create composite knowledge. Thus, participants must have a limited role in shaping the final project.

This issue manifests itself in a variety of decisions throughout the research process. What if an interviewee wants to place restrictions on the use of interview materials? Should individuals whose materials are used in the final project be allowed to review your selections prior to publication? Must interviewees have the opportunity to edit transcriptions of their comments before these documents enter a public archive?

SAFETY FIRST

Ethical issues apply not only to the interviewee but also to the interviewer. You must always be concerned with the well-being of those who conduct your project. Sites where interviews take place (farms or factories, for example) can be dangerous, particularly for individuals unfamiliar with the work routine. Anyone going alone to interview a stranger faces some risk. I always caution interviewers to leave a situation if they ever feel unsafe, regardless of how focused they are on completing their work.

Beyond concern over physical safety, interviewing can pose challenges to your personal integrity or well-being. Recall the vegetarian sitting down to a pork supper—not an unconflicted moment. Interviews also can sometimes involve emotionally troubling material. For example, a project documenting the Kent State University shootings on May 4, 1970, could stimulate the interviewer's own buried memories about traumatic experiences. But he or she might decide that it's worth rekindling painful emotions because the public deserves to learn more about that historical event. It helps to anticipate experiencing powerful emotions; it's not uncommon to lose sleep revisiting the details of another's difficult life story.

When interviewers come from a culture different from that of the community under study, they are apt to encounter values or attitudes that conflict with their own beliefs. This can have difficult repercussions for the interviewer. A Jewish interviewer who encounters anti-Semitism in the course of an interview but says nothing may be deeply troubled by not challenging such an offense.

SPEAKING FOR OTHERS

A few years ago I was dismayed to read an article in a major urban newspaper regarding the origins of the song "Dixie," which was the subject of a book I'd coauthored. Our thesis stated that the song, commonly attributed to Dan Emmett, a white minstrel from Knox County, Ohio, was in fact composed by a family of African American musicians with whom Emmett was acquainted. The columnist had read my book and subsequently called the local historical society museum for a response. The person he reached assured the writer that our thesis was untrue, and the museum staff had evidence to prove it.

Since my reputation as a professional scholar was at stake, I challenged the historical society to produce the evidence. As it turned out, the material was bogus. I chided the person who spoke to the newspaper writer for presenting her limited information as representative of the historical society's position on the matter. "Oh, you have that wrong," she replied. "I don't represent the historical society; I'm just a volunteer." I pointed out that when she answered the historical society's phone, the person on the other end of the line would quite appropriately take her to be an official of that organization.

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in a manner consistent with the image that organization wishes to present. Inappropriate action by a single interviewer can undermine not only the project's success but also the reputation of the organizations associated with it. It takes many achievements to build a positive reputation but just one misstep to ruin it.

Ethical conduct is particularly important to the institutions that fund or otherwise support your research. Funding agencies want to associate themselves with groups that have earned a positive reputation in their communities as well as a track record of successful projects. Taking care to inform everyone of appropriate standards of conduct in the course of the research thus has long-term implications for the groups organizing the effort.

GOING PUBLIC

The project that you fashion from your research—a film, exhibit, or book—presents a public image of those who contributed to it. How should you represent these individuals and the organization or community they represent?

Some of the dilemmas you'll face here are personal. An interviewee may find something he or she said embarrassing when it is shared with the public (it could be as simple as an ungrammatical word choice or a comment about a neighbor) or may think an old photograph is unflattering. Should you allow individuals to edit or veto material you wish to present publicly? Presumably, you explained the purpose of your research and the uses for the materials before conducting your interview. But is it worth the anger or hurt feelings that might be provoked by publicly presenting such material?

As with most ethical dilemmas in oral history research, the decision about what to present involves a judgment call. First and foremost, you must always ask how others are likely to interpret the materials you present. This may be particularly difficult; as a researcher, you may appreciate the nuances with

which something was said, but these may be lost when you present a portion of that material out of context.

Clearly, those constructing the final presentation of your work must be sensitive to participants' preferences as well as the broader inclinations of the groups they represent. It is easier to discard questionable materials that are relatively peripheral to the central themes as opposed to those that make essential points. But beyond the logistical difficulties of allowing every participant to review a draft of your final project, you should be wary of giving participants too much editorial license. As previously noted, the story you choose to present from your research transcends any one participant's view. Indeed, there will be times when an individual's views stand in contrast to others' views or to your overall understanding of the events studied. When all is said and done, this is your project. You must be sensitive to those who provided you with information, but the responsibility for the final production rests with you.

The implications of what you present involve more than the individuals you interview. For example, a project on an ethnic group's experiences or a violent strike at a factory also reflects on the institutions or communities discussed. In our study of local black history, for example, we were concerned that simply bringing the black community into the public eye might compromise the invisibility that for many years had served as a strategy for avoiding prejudice and discrimination. You must be aware of your project's impact on the image and viability of those groups you represent. It may have been these concerns that motivated the newspaper owner to refrain from publishing an essay on the local gay community, as we discussed earlier. What would be the repercussions of such an essay for the newspaper and for the community's image? The issue this example raises is significant: How do we respect dominant community values while honestly representing a minority view?

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Of course, projects are sometimes most powerful when they stimulate public discussion by challenging persisting attitudes. Glossing over controversies to maintain a harmonious public image dilutes history and is rarely satisfying. Editing out sensitive material often does a disservice to those who granted you interviews in the hope that their story would be told. But when the project is over, everyone involved has to live together. And if you conduct work in a community other than your own, remember that *you* leave, but they stay; the work can have long-term impact on real, ongoing lives.

SOME GUIDELINES

Oral history involves face-to-face interaction, and therefore circumstances will be unique and not perfectly predictable. Discussing the ethics and politics associated with your research at the outset with everyone working on the project will not provide a solution to every imaginable dilemma, but it will sensitize them to this dimension of the work. That way, when a snap judgment is required, project members are less likely to be taken aback by the situation and to make an unreasoned decision.

It's impossible to establish a hard-and-fast set of rules for dealing with all sensitive situations. However, we can establish general guidelines that will help you avoid many problems and deal effectively with those you do confront.

Follow the Golden Rule

Empathy is fundamental to all communication, and it serves you particularly well in anticipating and avoiding ethical problems. Ask yourself how you would feel if someone treated you as you are about to treat another. If the answer is "not so good," then another course of action is probably called for.

When in Rome, Do as the Romans Do

When you conduct oral history research, you enter into the world of others. As a guest in their home, workplace, or com-



munity, you should respect their values and rules of conduct. For example, the rural community surrounding Kenyon College is generally religious and conservative. So I tell my students to dress appropriately and keep politically or sexually provocative apparel at home.

It is crucial to remember that you are there to observe and collect information, not to judge. It is almost never appropriate for you to comment upon or challenge an interviewee's position, even if you find the person's views personally offensive. Sometimes it's not easy. In our project documenting local black history, one of my students began an interview with a local school official by describing the purpose of our research. The official asked, "Why would you be interested in something as insignificant as that?" His comment was doubly offensive. As an educator, he should have been more supportive of a student project. And the student interviewing him was an

A Sunday religious gathering at the home of an Amish family in central Ohio. Mindful of prohibitions against photographing the Amish, the photographer took care to capture collective life without including individuals in the picture. Interviewers and researchers should respect cultural traditions. *Courtesy of Howard L. Sacks*

African American from the local community who had attended his school.

Of course, deciding which community standards to follow can pose its own complexities. Even in a single institution or rural community, diverse viewpoints abound. In Knox County, for example, the values of students at Kenyon College differ significantly from those of students at Mount Vernon Nazarene University, located just a few miles down the road. The world-views of the local black and Amish communities are, in some respects, quite different from those of the dominant community. Kenyon's faculty is largely cosmopolitan in background, while most staff members have lived their entire lives in the immediate locale. Doing fieldwork thus involves repeated acts of cultural translation. Never assume that those you interview necessarily subscribe to your values; when values conflict, keep your opinions to yourself.

Honesty Is the Best Policy

Oral history is valuable and important, but it doesn't rise to the level of undercover intelligence work. Never misrepresent yourself or your project in the hope of getting better material. Transparency is the rule here. If you are clear in stating what you want and why, you're unlikely to find yourself confronted by an ethical dilemma in the course of your research.

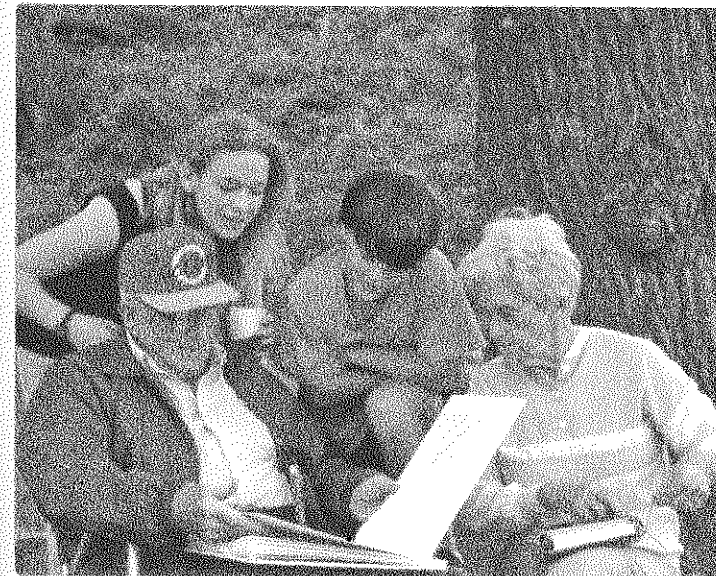
Bear in mind, however, that being honest about what you're doing can go too far. In introducing their work, for example, graduate students often burden their would-be interviewees with overly complex explanations of the thesis underlying their research, the theoretical underpinnings of their ideas, and the empirical model that will guide the effort. In the same vein, don't offer your potential interviewees more information than is needed to explain the project and their role in it. Instead, provide them with sufficient information about the project to make an informed decision about whether or not to participate. A release form, which we'll discuss further on in

chapter 4, can be valuable by providing a clear and concise statement of the purpose and uses of your research. Of course, you should allow participants to ask additional questions about your project.

Do What You Promise to Do

Like many of these guidelines, doing what you promise to do is easier said than done. For example, it would be inconsiderate to arrive late for a scheduled interview. But arriving on time, particularly in a strange neighborhood, requires planning and effort. Obtain clear directions, allow extra time for traffic or parking, and make sure you have change for the meter. Acting responsibly often means paying close attention to seemingly insignificant details; that's something not everyone does by nature.

It's not uncommon or unreasonable for interviewees to make requests of you during your visit. They may ask you for a copy of the interview tape to share with family members. If you obtain an old photograph to reproduce, they may ask for a copy



An interviewer gives her interviewees an album of family photos she took as part of her research. An interview is always a transaction, and this is one way of giving something back to individuals who have shared their time and memories. *Courtesy of the Rural Life Center, Kenyon College*

These guidelines will enable you to avoid many problems and deal effectively with those you do confront.

- ✦ Empathy is fundamental to all communications, and it serves you particularly well in anticipating and avoiding ethical problems.
- ✦ You are there to observe and collect information, not to judge.
- ✦ Never misrepresent yourself or the project in the hope of getting better material.
- ✦ Always do what you promise to do.
- ✦ Focus interviews on what you want to know; avoid straying from the subject of the project.
- ✦ Involve individuals from the community under study in every phase of your project.

of that, too. Because you want to establish good rapport and believe that it's morally right to reciprocate in this way for their time, you're likely to readily agree to such requests. But it takes time and effort to reproduce and deliver materials, and too often these promises go unfulfilled in the rush of a public research project. Breaking your promise casts an unflattering light on you, your project, and the organizations associated with it. And the next researcher to come along will certainly receive a chilly reception.

Focus Your Interviews on What You Want to Know

The less your interview strays from the subject of the project, the more likely you are to avoid subject areas that may make interviewees uncomfortable or pose ethical dilemmas. In chapter 5, we'll discuss the crucial importance of follow-up questions that enable you to explore something an interviewee says more deeply. The point here is that it may be best not to follow up on something said in passing that isn't germane to your primary interest. For example, in an interview on a local glassblowing industry, your subject may tell you that he got a job at a local plant following his service in World War II. The relevance of his military duty to your subject is not readily apparent, and asking about it could bring back painful memories that would only hamper your interview or bog it down in detail you don't truly wish to explore.

At the same time, sometimes the best material in an interview arises from a train of thought that initially appears to be tangential to the subject at hand. Perhaps this veteran saw action in Italy and took up glassblowing because of a chance encounter with a local artisan he met while on leave. That would be a wonderful story—one you would have missed had you decided that the war was too sensitive or too peripheral to pursue. Oral history involves a series of decisions, often between competing goods.

Democratize Your Research

The importance of this cannot be overstated. By involving individuals from the community under study in every phase of your project, you can avoid many of the problems that otherwise can besiege oral history work. People familiar with the community can tell you if certain topics are taboo, whether it's inappropriate to call people's homes at certain times, or how to conduct yourself in particular ways when visiting a church or fraternal organization. Getting feedback from insiders who understand your project can also help you avoid making gaffes in your public presentation that might cause hurt feelings or conflicts. Beyond the value of democratization in avoiding ethical and political dilemmas, involving community members will contribute to a richer research effort and an enthusiastic public reception.