

# **Criminology 321**

## **Interviews & Oral History**



### **Oral History: Characteristics**

- We begin the second part of the course – discussing particular methods/techniques
- Various definitions of oral history
- Overlaps with and sometimes even treated as synonymous with life histories, biographical interviews, personal narratives, recorded memoirs, in-depth interviews

## **Oral History: Characteristics**

- Can be seen as occupying one end of a continuum from *oral history* to *surveys*
- Typically the most
  - Participant-centered; collaborative
  - Flexibly structured: often no more than a list of opening topics or very general structure
- An interactive method with an historical, process, phenomenological focus

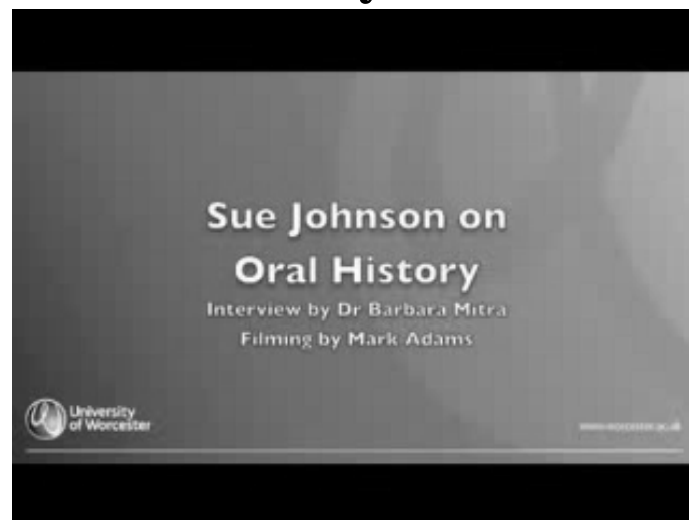
## **Oral History: Objectives**

- Some objectives of oral histories:
- For women's movement, priority has been on the way oral history
  - has helped to draw women out of obscurity
  - repairs the historical record, fills gaps
  - provides opportunities for women to identify with subject

## Oral History: Objectives

- Also allows you to
  - determine patterns (for collective case studies)
  - pay tribute to those we admire
  - understand how people make sense of their experience – emphasis on meaning
  - make connections between biography, history and social structure
  - create archives for future use, research

## Oral History: One View



## Oral History: Advantages

- Addresses problems of selective deposit:
  - “History” is not completely accessible to us
  - All we can consider is what is in the box, which includes artifacts, documents, ...
  - Oral history is a way of getting more into the box
- Selective retrieval also plays a role
- Especially empowering for minorities and other marginalized people/groups

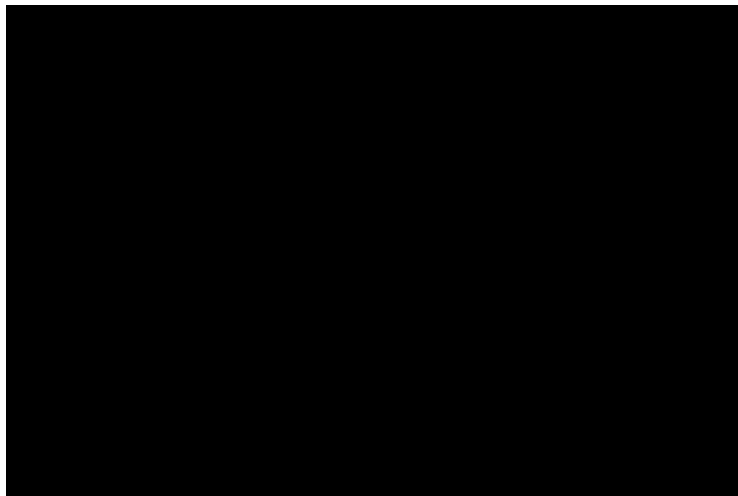
## Oral History: Advantages



## Oral History: Varieties

- Often person-centered
- Can also be event or site-centered
- Case studies can be
  - Intrinsic (e.g., my oral history of Fattah)
  - Instrumental (e.g., Borland's history of her grandmother)
  - Collective (e.g., the collection of Residential School stories featured in *Muffins for Granny*)

**from *Muffins for Granny***



## Oral History: Dilemmas

- The power of oral histories like those in *Muffins for Granny* is that they take something abstract and huge and show its concrete meaning for real, individual people
- The flip side of that advantage, however, is another concern – sometimes individualizing experiences that need to be understood more structurally, systemically

## Oral History: Dilemmas

- As Borland shows, must also be reflexive regarding interpretation
- Diversity of opinion regarding extent to which researcher is simply an instrument for the participant's realization of story or an active interpreter/analyzer
  - “In my view, feminist oral historians need not silence themselves to let other women be heard.” (Reinharz, p137)

## Oral History: Dilemmas

Some other dilemmas

- Oral histories may break the silence and ‘give voice’ but, in doing so, may also individualize social problems
- Power (im)balance: Researcher holds power because she knows how information will be used and has the last word

## Oral History: How To

- Some advice on the physical setup



## To be continued...

- The Sue Johnson video on oral history is on Youtube at
  - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nX1odZDA0gk>
- The “How to” video is at
  - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jTCzxWt1RQk>
- For information about *Muffins for Granny* see
  - <http://www.myspace.com/muffinsforgranny>