

Study Questions for Margolis's "Video Ethnography: Toward a Reflexive Paradigm for Documentary"

1. Margolis begins by recounting a specific video ethnography he did with coal miners in Colorado, much of which involved doing oral histories. We've spoken in class about the great variety of types of oral histories that can be done. What kind of oral histories did Margolis do? Single or multiple case studies? Structured or less structured interviews? Event-based (such as strikes or disasters) or dealing more with ongoing life in the community? And how did Margolis's choices here fit in relation to his general objectives?
2. What kind of sampling procedures did Margolis use? Did they seem reasonable to you as a way of doing qualitative research? Explain.
3. About a quarter of the way through, Margolis says, "Anyone who has done much interviewing is aware of the ways that questions overdetermine the answers." What does he mean by that? Can you give an example?
4. Margolis does not cover up or gloss over the uncertainties and misgivings that researchers have during their work. In relation to interviews, for example, Margolis says, "Most of us also live with the feeling that the person sitting across from us would tell a good story, if only we knew the right question to bring them out. Not being members of the community, however, we do not know what to ask. We fumble around. Frustrations with the interview process and the notion that oral history was going on all the time led me to try to develop procedures that allowed us to record history-speaking while avoiding some of the pitfalls of interviewing." What did he do and how was what he did advantageous?
5. Some researchers prepare for their research by doing a review of the literature. Margolis avoided that. Why? Did he think in the long run that it was a good idea?
6. Margolis talks about a "public editing" process. What was that? Why did he do it? With what result? Does this have anything to do with what Margolis refers to as "the reflexive method"?
7. Near the end Margolis states, "Sartre's work pointed the way to reconstruct history and social science in a fundamentally different relation to the society which produced it. He suggested that explanation shift from narrow, technical, and manipulative languages of control based on the earlier model of physics, to a reflexive "comprehension," in which historians and social scientists function as translators and communicators rather than law givers." Is that a reasonable description of what Margolis had accomplished? Was it equally descriptive of the TV programs that Bill Moyers had produced from the same material? How would you contrast the two?