



## CHAPTER 6 **Oral History**

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*To speak is to preserve the teller from oblivion.*

—Alessandro Portelli

**S**torytelling is a natural part of the human experience. Human beings communicate meaning through talk. Oral historians have harnessed this tradition of transmitting knowledge and created an important research technique that allows the expression of voice. While storytelling has a deep history, the adaptation of this human process into a legitimated research method is relatively new.

Oral history was established in 1948 as a modern technique for historical documentation when Columbia University historian Allan Nevins began recording the memoirs of persons significant in American Life. (North American Oral History Association, as quoted by Thomson, 1998, p. 581)

Some researchers find it helpful to distinguish between *oral tradition* and *oral history*, the former being the umbrella category in which the oral history method can be placed. Oral tradition among many Native American people refers to stories handed down for multiple generations, which can also involve nonhuman subjects (Wilson, 1996, p. 8). This differs from the more recent academic use of the term **oral history**, in which personal stories are collected from an individual.

### What Is Oral History?

As we will show in this chapter, oral history is a very unique kind of interview situation because of the distinct process of storytelling on which it is based. There are moments of realization, awareness, and, ideally, education and empowerment during the process. When conducting an oral history with a college-age woman struggling in



a serious battle with anorexia nervosa, there was a point, two long sessions into the oral history project, when the interviewee noted the moment in her life that culminated in a turn toward anorexia. It was a significant moment in her life narrative that could have come through only by the autobiographical telling of her story. Not only did this represent a major turning point in the participant's self-awareness, but it also helped elucidate and expand on existing substantive knowledge about eating disorder vulnerability and the onset of such disorders. The clarity with which Claire notes the moment she turned toward body obsession and the way in which it initially occurred could have happened only through the telling of her story from childhood on.

I kind of focused more on my circumstances and the lack of opportunities that had been available to me. Like, all these things that I had, put up waiting, you know, I had waited for, for so long, and everyone was like, "one day, one day," and then that day was here and nothing was happening. You know? And so that was hard. Um, but actually it was at that time when I knew I was staying at school, that I remember thinking, OK, obviously I can handle the academics. You know, the friends, maybe I won't be developing my closest friends at college, but I still have my ones from high school. You know, what am I going to do with this time? I was sitting here looking at a three-year period going, what am I going to do with three years of my life? You know? And I think that was the other disappointing thing, is that with the exception of perspectives, my other classes were like high school. They were very structured, very like, rote memorization, as opposed to: what ideas do you have? Like, do you think this is a good idea? How do you feel about this? And so I was kinda like, what am I gonna do with three years? And I can remember that day, thinking to myself, well, at least I can come out with what I want to look like. Like, part of being successful to me, like, I had a certain image in my head, and that image was not like a woman with baby fat on her face. You know? It was very in-shape; it was funny because I never wanted to be skinny. But I wanted to be strong. I always, I mean, especially growing up with guys, I wanted to be able to take them on in basketball. And I wanted to be able to go skiing, you know? I just wanted to be in really good shape. And I was just like, OK, well at least I can, I can control my health. You know? Even though I don't really have much I can do about this decision, and now looking back I can see that I, you know, that I did have a voice. I could have said forget it, I'm just leaving, you know? But when I weighed the pros and the cons, especially because I was always someone to keep the peace in my house, to disrupt a balance, or to make unnecessary trouble, wasn't something I was willing to do. So I, you know, I remember saying to myself, well, I'll just start exercising, to watch what I eat, you know, I mean it was the first time I wasn't in organized sports, so like, I wasn't going from season to season. *And um, I was just like, ok, that's what I'll do.* [Leavy, 1998, interview two with Claire (pseudonym), emphasis added]

What a powerful moment in the research process—the revelation of when and why what would become a life-threatening body obsession began two years earlier.

As you can already begin to see, oral history is a special kind of intensive biography interview. During an oral history project, a researcher spends an extended amount of time with one participant in order to learn extensively about his or her life or a particular part of that life. The preceding excerpt is taken from a project that used oral history as a way to understand how otherwise successful female college students with eating disorders had become so focused on their bodies—to determine the life experiences that had webbed together in a way that created body image obsession vulnerabilities in Claire and others. But it is not enough to say that researchers learn about the lives of participants, as with other qualitative methods of interview and observation; oral history allows researchers to learn about participants' lives from their own perspective—where they create meaning, what they deem important, their feelings and attitudes (both explicit and implicit), the relationship between different life experiences or different times in their life—their perspective and their voice on their own life experiences. Oral histories allow for the collaborative generation of knowledge between the researcher and the research participant. This reciprocal process presents unique opportunities, continual ethical evaluation (heightened in the electronic age), and a particular set of interpretive challenges. Often used in feminist research, oral history allows us to get at the valuable knowledge and rich life experience of marginalized people and groups that would otherwise remain untapped, and, specifically, offers a way of accessing subjugated voices. Beyond contributing to social scientific knowledge substantively, the oral history process can be a rewarding and empowering experience for both the participant and researcher, as in the case of Claire, who later reported feeling empowered by gaining insight regarding pivotal moments in her life.

## How Is Oral History Distinct From In-Depth Interview?

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What is oral history? As we have already said, oral history is a special method of interview where the researcher and research participants spend extended time together engaged in a process of storytelling and listening. In other words, it is a collaborative process of narrative building. However, this alone does not distinguish oral history from other forms of qualitative interview. So the real question is, What makes oral history special? What is unique about this method, how do qualitative researchers use this method, and what does it add to our knowledge of the social world? To explicate the special qualities of oral history, we must differentiate it from in-depth interviewing, which is the most similar method.

As we saw in the last chapter, in-depth interviews are an excellent way to gather rich qualitative data from the perspective of the people being studied. The same is true in an oral history. However, when using in-depth interviews, an interviewer will typically have a focused topic for the interview and will follow an interview guide, which, as we saw, may be semistructured or relatively unstructured. Interviewees may or may not be asked identical questions, depending on the design and goals of the project. Oral history interviews differ in that while the researcher is studying a specific topic, the organization of the topic is likely to be far less focused. For example, if you are interested in studying the body image issues



women experience while in college, in-depth interviews may be the appropriate method for focusing on that issue while still allowing participants ample room to qualitatively explain what is important in that regard, from their perspective. Now let's say that you want to study body image issues among college-age women as a part of their life process. If you are interested in the life of the participant from childhood on, such as the various life experiences that may have webbed together to create particular body image vulnerabilities once in college, oral history may be appropriate. This was the case in the study in which Claire participated. Oral history allows you to study a long period of a person's life or even their entire life. You can narrow down the topic, such as body image, work experiences, parenting experiences, and so on, but ultimately, you will get a much more in-depth story from each individual participant. This depth may sacrifice some breadth as they start to detail particular experiences at the exclusion of others, an issue we will address later.

It is not enough to say that you are studying a longer period of time with oral history; in fact, in some cases, this may not even be true. What is really underlying the strength of the method is that you can study *process*. If you are studying a woman's life from childhood through college to understand her body image issues at the present time, what you will learn about is not only what she is currently experiencing and her perspective on that but the *process* that led her there. Likewise, historical processes and circumstances will underscore her narrative in ways that help us understand individual agency within the context of social historical environments. So, while oral history focuses on the individual and her narrative, it can be used to link micro- and macro phenomena (in other words, personal life experiences to broader historical circumstances). Accordingly, oral history is a critical method for understanding life experiences in a more holistic way as compared with other methods of interview. This is in accordance with the tenets of qualitative research and can yield not only rich descriptive data but also knowledge about social processes. Some topics simply lend themselves more to one method. History-driven topics are highly congruent with oral history. For example, if you are interested in studying a historical event or a historical time period and how a certain population experienced that event or lived in that period, oral history may be the best method.

Ryan (2009) used oral history to understand the experiences of women who served in the Navy and Coast Guard during World War II. An interesting pattern emerged during the course of her oral history interviews. The participants almost always diminished the importance of their wartime contributions with statements such as "I didn't do anything important." Ryan wondered why these women would agree to participate in the oral history process and thereby place their experiences in the historical record if they really didn't think they were important. She explored this issue and came to find that the participants did not intend to downplay their military service but were rather using phrases that fit in with society's gender expectations. Therefore, their framing of their experiences occurred within the context of societal expectations. There are numerous examples of how experiences that have not yet been researched could begin to be understood from the vantage point of those who have lived them by using oral history in the way that Ryan did. In this

way, previously excluded groups can share their valuable knowledge. In addition to these kinds of expansive experiences, oral history is invaluable in coming to understand how people have experienced historical events of import.

Crothers (2002) launched a fascinating project at Indiana University Southeast in which undergraduate students extensively interviewed community residents about historical events. Specifically, World War II and Korean War veterans were interviewed as were people who lived during the Great Depression. The study had an immeasurable positive effect on both the interviewers and interviewees. One dimension of this outcome could be categorized as community-building because the community learned more about its members. In terms of direct educational benefits, students learned about the relationship between individual experience and sociohistorical conditions, allowing the importance of a historical perspective to emerge during the experience of doing qualitative research.

After interviewing World War II and Korean War veterans, students no longer view Pearl Harbor, Normandy, Iwo Jima, Hiroshima, and Inchon as distant locations on a map but as places where young Americans like themselves fought and died in miserable conditions and often without recognition. Students learn that though the veterans invariably remembered their service with pride, most had no desire to repeat the experience. Veterans left permanently disabled, both physically and psychologically, and those who were prisoners of war reinforce the lesson that war, even a “good war,” should be entered only with trepidation. In short, interviews made a profound impression on students. (Crothers, 2002, p. 3)

In addition, research participants were given a voice and the opportunity to tell their story to interested listeners. This, too, is a profound and important part of the oral history experience.

Students also interact directly with some of the community’s most undervalued members, senior citizens, who share the richness of their lives and experiences. As one student noted, “I think the older people [involved in the project] were made to feel important. *They had a story to tell* and I think college students taking the time to investigate their experience made them feel like someone cared about their sacrifice. (Crothers, 2002, p. 3, emphasis added)

When used in these ways, oral history can meet ideals of education and empowerment as well as substantive knowledge-building. There are also examples of using oral history as a way of understanding current events of import from the perspective of those experiencing them while they are still fresh.

Mears (2008) is the mother of a child who was at Columbine High School the day of the 1999 shootings. She struggled to make sense of the tragedy and wanted to help others dealing with the “community-wide trauma.” Using her insider status (shared experience as a Columbine parent), she was able to conduct oral history interviews, as well as other qualitative research, with other Columbine parents about the day of the shootings as well as their experiences in the following years.



Mears notes that an unintended outcome of the research was that the parents gained comfort through reflecting on their experiences. This illustrates the capability of oral history to document people's experiences as well as to "give voice" and at times empower research participants.

Merely days after the terrorist attacks, the September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Project was initiated at Columbia University. Bearman and Marshall Clark were cofounders of this institutionally supported long-term research project. Within 7 weeks after 9/11 the researchers had collected oral history interviews from almost 200 people, and within 6 months, they had collected an additional 200 oral history interviews, including those with volunteers, rescue workers, survivors, and others who lived or worked in the area of Ground Zero. The researchers were interested in understanding the construction of individual and social memory. Specifically, they wanted to understand the role of the mass media and government in the interpretive process of individuals coming to terms with the events that had transpired. Furthermore, as their interviewees were ethnically diverse, they wanted to understand how a heterogeneous group of people who were at the epicenter of the event had interpreted it and filtered the related information and images from the larger culture. How did feelings of patriotism and alienation impact the construction of individual memory during the immediate aftermath? In the minds of those there, does 9/11 qualify as a "turning point" in American history as it has repeatedly been portrayed by media analysts and political leaders? These were among the questions the researchers had as they listened to the stories of those who had experienced the tragedy and were now trying to make sense of it. Oral history became an important way of understanding memory construction as it was actually occurring.

The researchers found that political imagery was an important component in early memory construction. They ended up determining that there were various recurring categories of interpretation that people placed on their experiences to make sense of them. These can also be likened to frames through which people come to interpret their experience of the tragedy. Categories, or frames, included patriotism, flight and refuge, consolation, and solace (Marshall Clark, 2002, p. 7). The frame of interpretation that the researchers were most interested in was the idea of 9/11 as an "apocalypse."

Perhaps the most important for our ultimate considerations of the significance of September 11 as an axis of national as well as international understanding, the attacks were perceived in direct and indirect ways as an apocalypse. It was registered, in that sense, as a moment that stood outside of time and an event that ended history as we had previously understood it. The interviews we conducted with survivors and eyewitnesses were frequently shot through with religious analogies and metaphors and with apocalyptic imagery from films and movies, demonstrating the ways that many wrestled with questions of good and evil, life and death outside the frame of history as they had previously understood it. (Marshall Clark, 2002, p. 7)

The ability of oral history to tap into the intersection of personal experience, historical circumstance, and cultural frame is clear in the 9/11 oral history study. Sloan

(2008) conducted an oral history project about the aftermath of 2005's Hurricane Katrina. His research raises questions about emotional trauma, historical distance, objectivity, and reflection. Oral history projects that deal with trauma, particularly recent trauma, as in the Columbine, 9/11, and Katrina examples, illustrate the importance of constantly reflecting on how you are dealing with ethical practice throughout the oral history research process. Moving away from these specific examples, we can make some comments about the relationship between biography, history, and culture as revealed by oral history practice.

In a general sense, oral history provides a way to invite people to tell their story—of their past, a past time, a past event, and so on. However, their individual story is always intimately connected to historical conditions and thus extends beyond their own experience. Oral history allows for the merging of individual biography and historical processes. An individual's story is narrated through his or her memory. This means that people's recollection of their experiences, and how they give meaning to those experiences, is about more than accuracy; it is also a process of *remembering*—as people remember, they filter and interpret. Having said this, there is a tension between history and memory—between the collective recorded history and the individual experience of that collective history—that can be revealed, exposed, and explicated through oral history. In this vein, Richard Candida Smith (2001) says, "Memory and history confront each other across the tape recorder" (p. 728). As you can see, oral history is becoming increasingly important in the growing interdisciplinary research on collective memory, which we return to in the conclusion of this chapter.

Similar to the study of historical or current events, oral history is also very useful for studying the individual experience of social change and merging social and personal problems. Slater (2000) used oral history to understand how four black South African women experienced urbanization under apartheid. The women, as perhaps would be expected, had both shared experiences and individual experiences, which are brought out during the oral history process. The data show how structural constraints shaped these women's economic realities in profound ways (p. 38). However, these women also show that their own agency ultimately impacts their lives, as does the social reality that they have in common.

Life histories enable development researchers to understand how the impact of social or economic change differs according to the unique qualities of individual men and women. This is because they allow researchers to explore the relationship between individual people's ability to take action (their "agency"), and the economic, social, and political structures that surround them. (p. 38)

Slater makes a case that oral history can be an integral method in development research.

As globalization and our study of it increases, oral history can continue to be used to study political, social, and economic changes. In this time of world change, oral history can help us understand both the shared and the personal impact of social upheaval on the individuals living within it. For example, oral history would be a wonderful method for understanding how individuals within Iraq are experiencing the U.S. occupation, political regime shift, and rebuilding of their country.



How do individuals adapt to these major social changes? What are individual coping strategies? How do individuals filter and respond differently to these changes? How has social change impacted people's personal relationships, including courtship, marriage, and parental relationships?

Oral history is also often used to study the experience of oppression—the personal experience of being a member of an oppressed group. Sparkes (1994) conducted an oral history interview project with a lesbian physical education teacher to examine the ways that discrimination and heterosexism shaped her workplace experiences. Personalizing the shared experience of oppression is a strength of oral history.

When using oral history, researchers may interview fewer people in total but spend more time with each participant, which is likely to occur over several pre-planned interview sessions. Qualitatively inclined researchers who work with human subjects, particularly in fields such as sociology, are likely to be drawn to both in-depth interviews and oral history interviews. A choice between the two should be based on the fit between the research goals and research method. When comparing in-depth interviews with oral history interviews, the appropriateness of the method is related to the topic you are pursuing and the number of participants and depth of data that you are seeking. It is important not to privilege one method over the other but rather to focus on the strengths of each. Likewise, the two methods can be combined in multimethod designs, although this is uncommon due to their similarities and the fact that they are both very time-consuming.

Now that you are getting a better handle on how oral histories are distinct from traditional in-depth interviews, it is important to examine more closely why oral histories are special and why feminists in particular have worked so hard to revive, study, broaden, and legitimate their use.

## What Techniques Facilitate Data Collection in Oral History?

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### Building Rapport and Dealing With Difference

During data collection, oral history relies on recording verbal communication between the researcher and research subject. We can break this down further and say that oral history is dependent on two techniques that foster the emergence of data: talking and listening. Before a story is even told, the interviewer and interviewee can begin to understand how to listen and talk in the context of producing a life narrative. It is important that the interviewer and interviewee begin to create a rapport prior to the first recorded interview session (if possible), a rapport that they must attend to throughout the interview process. While rapport is always give-and-take, the primary responsibility is with the researcher who has initiated the research process. This may mean some preliminary discussions so that both parties feel comfortable with each other and begin to become familiar with each other's "talk style."



Prior to the initial meeting, interviewers can discard their own research-oriented time frame in favor of narrators' temporal expectations. Taking time to know another means more than a preliminary interview; it entails meeting for an extended session or more. Congruent with good oral history practice, researchers take the opportunity to solicit narrators' comments and suggestions about the project, including names of potential narrators, other resource persons, and sources for photos, artifacts and written materials. However, the purpose of the initial contact is not just a preliminary interview to obtain data; the meeting is an opportunity to promote collegiality and to engage in mutual self-disclosure. (Minister, 1991, p. 36)

The process of gaining rapport and building collegiality is vital to the successful interview process. Linguistic practices are also a part of this. As we will see later in our section on storytelling, there are various structures people use to tell their stories, and each party must become comfortable with the other's style.

Although we have discussed rapport and reciprocity as critical in the use of all interactive qualitative research methods, these issues are perhaps heightened in the oral history situation—particularly for researchers who envision the process holistically. This is because, as a researcher, you are not simply asking the research participants to allow you to observe naturally occurring behavior that is independent of the research process (as in field research). Likewise, you are not asking a set of questions on a clearly defined topic (such as with in-depth and focus group interviews). When you ask someone to participate in an oral history project, you are asking that person to narrate his or her life story and, through words, to share him- or herself on a deep level. Depending on the nature of the project, you may be asking him or her to revisit difficult times in his or her life without any guarantee that once you have triggered a memory, he or she will be able to “turn it off” at will. Likewise, you may have no idea what directions the person's story will go, once the narrative takes off. Thus, you cannot define all of the topics that will be covered in advance—you simply don't know them yet. Rapport is therefore essential in the oral history process because interviewees place a high level of trust in the researcher and make themselves vulnerable to a range of emotions, feelings, and thoughts that may stretch from very positive and joyous to difficult and painful. When a foundation for trust is established, the collaborative process of oral history can proceed, and research participants will know that the researcher is truly there with them for the ride. As you will see, oral history is an intimate process of two people working together to produce a meaningful biographical narrative.

Given the collaborative nature of oral history, who can do it? Who can be an interviewer? As with all interactive research, issues of difference are an inseparable part of the research process. As such, to what extent can the researcher and narrator differ from one another? For example, some researchers suggest that because different groups within the social order have particular experiences and particular ways of expressing those experiences, “sameness” is integral to a successful oral history interview. Minister (1991) explains that women communicate differently than men, and without supportive communication in return, some women may be muted. As such,

women must interview women because they share in a particular sociocommunication subculture and understand how to talk with other women. Other researchers actively incorporate difference into their research but practice reflexivity throughout the project in order to avoid claiming authority over another. For example, Sparkes (1994) conducted an oral history project with a lesbian despite the fact that he differed in terms of both gender and sexual orientation. As such, he did not share in the experience of oppression (and multiple oppressions) that framed his participant's life. As a part of reflexive practice, Sparkes wrote about the experience of interviewing someone who does not share in the unearned social privileges that he enjoys. By incorporating this difference into the entire research endeavor, including the write-up, Sparkes demonstrates that social privilege can be used to help give voice to those typically silenced within the culture. There is much debate in academia about who can be a knower, who can understand the words of another, and so forth. Ultimately, these are personal choices that the researcher must make. In thinking through some of these issues as you select your topic and design your research project, you'll have to consider your epistemological beliefs regarding the relationship between the researcher and researched. When writing up your results, you'll need to consider to what extent you are able to have authority over the life story of another, particularly if you do not share a vital social status (i.e., the experience of oppression due to race, ethnicity, social class, gender, or sexuality).

### Listening

During the interview process, the researcher assumes the role of active listener. This role is not simply the role of listener we all enact with friends, family, and colleagues. As the interviewer in an oral history situation, the researcher must learn to listen with a completion and attentiveness that is far more rigorous and in tune with nuance than most of us use in daily life. As such, we must train our minds and ears to *hear* the stories of others, not just the words, but also the meaning, the emotion, the silence. We must listen to the narrator and to ourselves. This process may involve the questioning and disavowing of previously held concepts and categories that frame our understanding of social reality, making the process potentially transformational for the researcher as well. Feminist scholar and oral historian Dana Jack explains that the complexity of "listening" experienced in oral history is *the very thing* that makes this method unique. Let's join her behind the scenes.

#### BEHIND THE SCENES WITH DANA JACK

What I think the unique aspects are is that what it does is it allows the researcher to situate herself or himself right in the middle between the culture and the individual. And what I mean by that is as we listen to a person, what we hear is an individual's life story in its full idiosyncrasy, with all of the details and all of the sort of particulars



of that person's life. But as a researcher, you're also listening for the culture, and so you also know that the very words that people use to explain their lives and their situations also come from the culture, and so they're explaining their life through culturally available stories. And yet, when we listen carefully, you can hear how the individual also participates in all those cultural stories but also brings their different experiences and so what you're listening for is how—to me I'm listening for so many things. One is how the person, the individual, the idiosyncratic story relates to the larger cultural story and how the narratives are available and how those cultural narratives can sometimes obliterate a person's meaning, a person's experience, and then they have to sort out what they think and feel in relation to the larger story, and so I guess what I love about the oral history method is that it lets you listen to the individual really carefully while also still understanding the larger cultural narrative and how the person participates in that. And of course there are many larger cultural narratives. . . .

So it lets, let's see how to say this, well, I don't know (*laughs*). It just lets us, it lets us listen to at least two large voices, one is the individual and the other is the cultural narrative that they dip in and out of. And then how, where's the tension? Where are the questions? Where's the person feeling confused by how their own experience relates to these larger narratives? How and why are they trying to distinguish their experiences, or does the larger narrative try to you know, seem to obliterate it, and what happens then? How do they feel? So I'm always listening for not just one voice, not to that subject's voice only, but how it intertwines and distinguishes itself and is in conflict with other narratives, other larger narratives.

As Jack explains, listening is complex and multifaceted in the oral history process. Listening for layers of meaning, intersecting meanings, and conflicts about meaning is what makes oral history a unique method of knowledge-building.

As qualitative researchers engaged in research involving human participants, we are searching for meaning from the perspective of those being studied. To get at this kind of meaning, we must become nonjudgmental and open listeners. The researcher needs to be right there with participants narrating their story. In this way, we need to "immerse ourselves in the interview" (Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 18) to hear meaning from the perspective of the person speaking. But how are we to know if what we are hearing is the person's perspective? How do we know that our own life experiences and categories of understanding are not filtering the meaning we take from the experience? While, of course, as imprinted human subjects ourselves, we can't simply disavow our own understandings of social reality, there are techniques that we can apply to the oral history interview in order to better get at meaning from the participant's perspective.

Jack (Anderson & Jack, 1991) suggests three techniques aimed at helping us become more effective listeners. These are specific things we can *listen for*—places

where meaning, from the narrator's viewpoint, can be heard. First, researchers can listen to a person's "moral language" (p. 19). These kinds of comments tend to be self-evaluative. How a person evaluates him- or herself can tell us a lot about where the person is placing emphasis in his or her life and how that person uses cultural constructs of success, failure, attractiveness, promiscuity, and so on as measures in his or her own life and identity formation. These comments also provide insights into a person's emotional center, the place of self-confidence and self-scrutiny.

Although very different in tone, these moral self-evaluative statements allow us to examine the relationship between self-concept and cultural norms, between what we value and what others value, between how we are told to act and how we feel about ourselves when we do or do not act that way. (Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 20)

For example, if you are conducting an oral history with a woman, and you are talking about some joyous event in her life, such as a special birthday party or other family celebration, and in the midst of her talking, she says, "the cake was really beautiful with ornate decorations, and it was so good, but of course I felt guilty about having so much right there," this would clue you in to several things. This is an example of using moral language—the language of guilt—to impart meaning. This may serve as a signal to the interviewer that there are some body image issues going on or that the participant has concerns about her weight and how she appears to others. Her statement is not, however, occurring in a vacuum, but rather in a cultural context that puts a premium on thinness and self-control, particularly for women. So here you can start to make some links between the participant's self-concept and the larger culture in which she lives. Both what she has said and the way she has said it are important. Such statements may also provide the interviewer with probes to be pursued later or even at a different session with the participant (as to not interrupt the flow of what the narrator wants to say).

The second thing to actively listen for is what Jack terms "meta-statements" (Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 21). These are places in the interview where interviewees will stop and double back to critically reflect on something they have said in order to comment on the statement. This may illustrate a change in their thought process or a moment of self-realization or discomfort with how their statement may have been perceived and thus a desire to support their words.

Meta-statements alert us to the individual's awareness of discrepancy within the self—or between what is expected and what is being said. They inform the interviewer about what categories the individual is using to monitor her thoughts, and allow observation of how the person socializes feelings or thoughts according to certain norms. (p. 22)

For example, someone who has just made a comment about race may then double back to clarify, explain, or support the original statement. This kind of cycling back may be a reflection of historically specific societal norms, such as appearing nonracist, and the interviewee's awareness that he or she may have violated those



norms in the eyes of the interviewer. Such statements are then one potential space for understanding how individuals feel about and adjust to societal norms, values, and expectations. Here we can reflect back on Ryan's (2009) study of World War II military women. In that oral history project, the participants made statements that appeared to diminish their wartime contributions. However, through further exploration, Ryan found that the women did in fact value their experiences and were using language that they thought met societal expectations of how women should speak of these experiences.

Finally, we must learn to listen to the "logic of the narrative," paying particular attention to consistencies and contradictions and "recurring" themes (Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 22). More specifically, the way that themes are brought into the person's narrative and their relation to other themes are important data. The placing of emphasis through recurring themes and both consistencies and conflicts within statements can give us insight into the logic the person is using to tell his or her story. For example, what assumptions do people hold to be true that inform how they interpret their own life experiences? What thoughts, beliefs, values, and moral judgments are underlying their interpretive and narrative processes?

Beyond using these listening techniques, Anderson and Jack (1991) also encourage researchers to learn to listen to themselves, and in our experience, this is a critical part of the listening process in oral history. As you listen to the narrator, you must listen to your own internal monitor—your feelings, confusions, questions. These are areas that may require clarification, elaboration, and exploration. You do not want to interrupt the narrator to answer these questions; remember, your primary job is that of listener. However, when pauses and transitions arise, you may want to cycle back and probe based on the various thoughts and feelings you experienced while listening. It is a fine line that through practice you will learn how to navigate. On the one hand, to be an active listener in this collaborative narrative process, you can't just "be in your own head" having an internal conversation; however, you want to be listening to your own gut reactions while you listen to the narrator.

When we choose to practice oral history, we are making a commitment to understanding meaning from the perspective of those being interviewed. We want to know what they think, how they feel, how they filter and interpret. To do so, we become highly engaged listeners. So far, we have been talking about listening to the content of what a participant is saying—the main kinds of statements that emerge as people tell their stories. Equally important to the substantive content of oral history narratives is the form through which people tell their stories; in other words, the narrative style. In this vein, the nuances in the way a person narrates his or her story are also an important data source. We recommend that you come up with a consistent way of transcribing data that allows you to note pauses, laughter, the raising or lowering of voice, tonal changes, the elongation of words, and so forth. All of this can alert you to where a person places meaning and how that person is feeling at a particular point in the interview. Putting such remarks in italics, bold print, parentheses, and so on is an easy way to retain this valuable data in your initial transcript. We will discuss this more later when we talk about transcription and analysis.

In terms of listening, what is missing from a story—silences, absences, feelings for which there are no words—is also a component to the knowledge that emerges. We will talk about narrative style more when we discuss storytelling and “talking” as a method of data building, but for now, we will elaborate on what we mean by listening for silences, bearing in mind that we are meaning seekers.

What is left out of the narrator’s story can give us insight into his or her struggles and conflicts, such as differences between his or her explicit and implicit attitudes, but also the impact of the larger culture on the person’s biography and retelling of that biography. Clear omissions, for example, may indicate a disjuncture between what people think and what they feel is appropriate to say. This may be the result of their perception of social norms and values or their feeling that they are in violation of normative ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving. For many researchers who practice oral history, such as feminist and multicultural researchers, the research project is imbued with an intent to access subjugated voices—the perspectives of people who are forced to the peripheries of a given social order. In this circumstance, listening for silences may also indicate that the categories and concepts we use to interpret and explain our life experiences do not in fact reflect the full range of experiences out there. The silence, therefore, indicates something about the culture at large and a gap between ways of framing experience and the experience of the individual. In other words, culture may not be providing everyone with appropriate tools with which they can fully and freely express what meaning something has for them. For many, this is the very reason why listening to the voices of individuals, particularly those long excluded from the production of culture, is imperative.

At the heart of the collaborative process of data collection is an emphasis on both listening and talking. The form talking takes is that of storytelling and narrative.

## Storytelling and Narrative Styles

During the oral history interview, research participants assume the role of narrator and tell their story. This is a collaborative process of storytelling involving both the narrator and interviewer. The narrator tells his or her story, but the interviewer fosters the narration through the listening and observational techniques described earlier. In addition to the spoken word itself, the way in which a participant tells his or her story is itself recognized as an important knowledge source by oral historians.

Oral historians are interested in attending to the experience and voice of those they study in a comprehensive way, unique to the practice and historical development of the oral history method. Williams (2001) distinguishes between voice and *Voice* within the research process, using the capital “V” to denote a holistic conception of the term *voice*. *Voice* in this sense includes nonverbal gestures, intonation, expressions, bodily movements, speech patterns, and silences (p. 43). These components of the interview are a part of the interviewee’s full expression of him- or herself. In other words, we must attempt to retain and learn from the *performative*



aspects of the storytelling and not allow this to be lost during transcription and analysis (p. 46). Williams encourages researchers to attend to the Voice of the participant more than simply the spoken word provided by an unembellished or “clean” transcript. The researcher can then use his or her listening and observational skills (p. 45) to take fieldnotes or “memo notes” during the interview or transcription process, respectively. Returning more specifically to the role of the participant as narrator and even performer, let’s examine storytelling techniques and speech patterns, central components of data building in oral history.

People have different styles for telling their stories. These varying communicative styles result in different kinds of narratives. In this vein, the researcher needs to focus on the “narratology” or narrative structure (Williams, 2001). As critical scholars have long explained, narrative form and language choice also provide important data about the narrator. In this way, the language and speech style used by the narrator do not merely frame the substantive content of the interview but are also an integral part of it. A holistic approach to oral history emphasizes all aspects of the process. Oral historians, who often work from feminist, critical race, and third world theoretical perspectives, are interested in understanding the experiences of those marginalized within society. How has their position within the culture influenced their life experiences as they interpret them, and how have these experiences in turn impacted their approach to storytelling? Etter-Lewis (1991) discusses these issues:

Language is the invisible force that shapes oral texts and gives meaning to historical events. It is the primary vehicle through which past experiences are recalled and interpreted. Attention to language, its variations and categorical forms, enriches narrative text analysis beyond strictly linguistic concerns. On a most fundamental level, language is the organizing force that molds oral narrative according to a narrator’s distinct style. Styles vary as widely as individuals, but recurring patterns indicate more than speakers’ personal quirks. Speech patterns inherent in oral narrative can reveal status, interpersonal relationships, and perceptions of language, self, and the world. In the case of black women, we must ask what their narrative patterns reveal about their lives. How do their unique experiences influence the manner in which they tell their own life stories? (pp. 44–45)

To be successful at the art of oral history means, for the critical researcher, to understand, accept, and embrace different narrative styles and, moreover, to recognize their importance rather than ignoring the meanings implied by such difference. This is not without its difficulty. First, scholarly oral history developed within a patriarchal context. Second, those whom we wish to hear may themselves be accustomed to the silence. Let’s examine each of these intertwined issues.

In a male-dominated world, male forms of communication are normalized, and communicative expressions that differ from this model are assumed to be less valid. Qualitative interviewing, including oral history, has not been immune to the culture in which it is practiced. The academy is deeply entrenched in male ways of

thinking about knowledge construction. Even nonpositivistic research methods have been influenced by male ways of thinking about language, and this includes qualitative interviewing.

What needs to be altered for women's oral history is the communication frame, not the woman. Oral history interviewing, influenced by its ties to academic history and by the practice of interviewing in general, has developed in the context of the male sociocommunication system. Because in an androcentric world male speaking is the norm, any other kind of speaking is subnormal. (Minister, 1991, p. 31)

Given our immersion in our culture, we are accustomed to male forms of communication (this could, of course, be broadened to include the privileging of all dominant ideals including white and middle- or upper-class styles of communication). So, to perform our role of enabling others to tell their stories, we must be attentive to diversity in communicative styles and narrative forms, which includes being reflexive about how our culture has already influenced our assumptions about "the right way to tell one's story." As such, the researcher must understand the participant's storytelling process and legitimate it.

When working within the assumptions of standpoint epistemology, this idea of communication subcultures is heightened. Standpoint acknowledges different perspectives based on differential positions within a hierarchical social order. One's experiences, visions, and voice are thus earned through being located at a particular point in the social order. Communication strategies may differ based on the intersection of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and nationality. In the context of a large oral history project involving the collection of oral history interviews from multiple participants, it is important to bear in mind that there may be differences across and within genders. Take this into account as you prepare to meet with each participant. You cannot assume that based on one characteristic alone a person will mirror the storytelling practices of a previous interviewee. Having said this, despite these differences, there are patterns by which people tend to tell their own life history. We refer to these patterns as **narrative structures**.

Etter-Lewis (1991) identifies three major narrative styles encountered in the oral history interview process: (1) unified, (2) segmented, and (3) conversational. To this, we would add a fourth category, which Kohler-Riessman calls *episodic storytelling*. As with all narrative forms, the way your participant tells her or his story may largely be influenced by factors such as race, class, and gender. Related to these characteristics are education, work, and geographic location.

Often, researchers may have the expectation that participants will hear a topic or guiding question and respond by chronologically explaining their experience regarding the topic, providing in-depth examples to illustrate their experience, and remaining focused on the topic or question. This is the unified narrative style.

Contiguous parts of the narrative fit together as a whole, usually in the form of an answer to a particular question. Words and phrases all are related to a



central idea . . . the narrator supports her answer as completely as possible by providing several relevant examples. The result is a stretch of discourse unified by its focus on a particular topic. (Etter-Lewis, 1991, p. 45)

People who use such a style of talk may also be telling us something about how they see themselves and how they interpret their life experiences. For instance, a unified approach may indicate that a participant sees the topic clearly and has a cohesive response to it. Beyond the topic at hand, a unified approach may indicate that on a more general level, the narrator experiences life as cohesive and clearly defined. This differs in significant ways from the segmented narrative form, in which

continuous parts of a narrative [are] characterized by a diverse assortment of seemingly unrelated utterances. (Etter-Lewis, 1991, p. 46)

This form of storytelling may be counterintuitive to some researchers who are not used to this form of talk. As such, the initial meetings between the researcher and participant, where listening and talking skills are worked out and rapport is built, become critically important for the researcher to become comfortable with the narrator's speech (and vice versa).

A segmented approach to oral narrative can also reveal meaning from the perspective of the person sharing her or his story. For example, narrators may feel fragmented or believe that the various components of themselves or their experiences are disconnected. This may be true for people who have experienced multiple oppressions due to race, class, gender, and sexuality, which frame their life experiences. In this situation a discussion of female body image disturbances may result in a black narrator talking about how her female mentors taught her coping strategies for dealing with racism, which in effect helped give her the high self-esteem also needed to combat a sexist culture. Her experience of female body pressures brings her to a discussion of race because in her experience, these are interlinked. Her narrative may move around, but in ways that are inextricably linked to her experience of the topic being discussed. There are alternative reasons a narrative may be segmented. If narrators have never been given the opportunity to reflect on the many experiences that comprise their lives, the process of sharing their story may also be an intimate process of self-discovery. Thus, their narrative style may reflect "a putting together of the pieces" for themselves as well as the researcher. What may initially appear as off the subject may actually be quite connected to the primary issue. This is intimately tied to our earlier contention that many of those we ask to speak may in fact be used to being muted due to their marginalization within society. Those denied access to the social tools by which to tell their stories due to their race, ethnicity, social class, gender, or sexuality may simply not have previous experience telling their story. In this vein, Armitage suggests, "We will learn what we want to know only by listening to people who are accustomed to talking" (as quoted by Minister, 1991, p. 32). We can see this in pop culture forms as well, such as Eve Ensler's play *The Vagina Monologues*, in which some interviewed

women stated that they had difficulty talking about their sexual experiences simply because no one had ever asked before. They didn't know what to say and were surprised that someone was interested. A segmented approach to narration may in these cases be the result of unearthing thoughts and feelings that had previously been untapped. A process of making the internal orally available for external use may involve a negotiation expressed through words.

Narrators may also recount past conversations as a means of providing an answer to questions. Such an approach may result in an indirect but very important and descriptive answer to a question posed by the researcher. Etter-Lewis (1991) identifies this as a conversational approach to narration which she defines as

a contiguous part of a narrative identified by the reconstruction of conversations as they probably occurred in the past. Conversational elements are used to illustrate an idea or event. The narrator modifies voice, tone, and pitch in order to represent different speakers and different emotions (e.g., high pitch for anger or surprise). (Etter-Lewis, 1991, p. 47)

Etter-Lewis (1991) asserts that narrators may choose to recount a past conversation instead of directly answering a question as a way of mediating painful or otherwise difficult feelings that come to the surface as a past experience is recalled. In this way, it is a defense mechanism for mediating uncomfortable or particularly strong emotions. It is vitally important to enable this kind of self-protection because, as discussed earlier, neither the researcher nor the research participant can know the extent to which the oral history interview process will bring any given emotion to the surface. Participants need the freedom to deal with unexpected emotions in a way that works for them. The performative repetition of conversations may provide the details and descriptions the researcher is most interested in. Etter-Lewis explains that these recollections may actually serve as a "magnifying glass through which details can be highlighted" (p. 47).

Drawing similarities to segmented and conversational styles of storytelling, some people may use an episodic frame through which they share their story. Kohler-Riessman (1987) contrasted the episodic and linear ways women narrated their marriage life histories. Episodic narrative differs from a unified approach where a teller uses a linear (temporally ordered) model of storytelling. In episodic narration, participants speak by telling stories as episodes within their life. Their speech pattern relies on recounting experiences as episodes that are not chronologically ordered but are rather thematically driven.

Research participants may use more than one of these storytelling techniques as they share their stories with you. Shifts in narrative frames may be important indicators of a narrator's feelings or where they place importance. In keeping with the goals of understanding social meaning from the perspective of those creating it, truly developing one's craft as an oral historian involves understanding the various frames through which people communicate ideas and paying attention to nuance, such as a shift in narrative form. In this regard, the interview process results in more than the flat words on the transcript page, but rather a complex understanding of the person's story as it was told to you.



## What Are the Issues of Collaboration and Authority in Oral History?

In 1990, Michael Frisch coined the term *shared authority*, which put a name to an issue of particular salience in the oral history process: the extent to which oral history is collaborative. Frisch used the term *shared authority* to denote the collaboration of the researcher and narrator during interpretation and representation (Thomson, 2003, p. 23). While Part III of this book details the broad issues of interpretation, analysis, and representation that are central to qualitative research, given the particulars of the oral history method, it warrants its own discussion of interpretation.

When using the oral history method, the data collection component of the research process is collaborative. The researcher and research participant create knowledge together through the production of a life narrative. Researchers initiate the process and facilitate the narrator's telling of his or her story. Typically, researchers then transcribe the interview(s) and may add their memo notes to the transcript to account for the performative aspects of the narration and/or add their own feelings, thoughts, questions, and so forth. So in the end, put simply, researchers and narrators work together to produce the raw data: the oral history transcript (and any additional material). But what happens once the interview data has been collected?

Does the collaborative process that shapes data collection continue during analysis and representation? Who gets to put their mark on the story that emerges out of this process? Who has authority over the narrative? What does shared authority mean in practice? Is it always possible or even desirable? What are the ethical considerations involved when determining the degree to which a project will be collaborative? What impact does collaboration have on the researcher, the narrator, and the research? Generally speaking, how do we think about interpreting oral history data? These are just some of the questions the oral historian must consider. Thinking about the qualitative research process holistically requires the researcher to consider issues of interpretation during research design and continue to revisit these questions throughout the research process because qualitative research often involves an openness to change.

At their core, questions regarding collaboration beyond the data collection stage are really questions regarding authority and what we refer to as *the oral history matrix*: the intersection of method, ethic, and politic. Who has authority over the data? Is this authority shared between the researcher and narrator(s)? The complex question of authority is where the oral history matrix of method, ethic, and politic is most clearly seen. Due to its historical development and current uses within the social sciences and humanities, oral history is a research tool merging with a particular set of ethical considerations and social justice politics. When writing about *shared authority*, Shopes (2003) says this:

This resonant phrase neatly captures that which lies at the heart of both the method and the ethic—or perhaps one should say the politics—of the oral history enterprise: the dialogue that defines the interview process itself and the potential for this dialogue to extend outward—in public forums, radio programs, dramatic productions, publications, and other forms—toward a more broadly democratic cultural practice. (p. 103)

This raises important questions about the extent to which oral history knowledge is collaborative in terms of development as well as subsequent availability and use. The collaborative potential of oral history is not simply a choice about methodology; it also carries with it a set of politics and a host of ethical considerations. Central to these issues is the question posed by Frisch (2003): “Who is the author of an oral history?” (p. 113). In fact Frisch goes on to call our attention to the connection between the words *author* and *authority* demonstrating how representation is imbued with power (p. 113). The person who interprets, formats, and presents the narrative has a certain authority over the data—this person controls the construction of knowledge. So what does it mean for a researcher to “author” another person’s story? How involved can the narrator be in this process? What options do qualitative researchers have?

As with all research projects, we recommend that the particular goals of the research project dictate the extent to which the interpretive phase is collaborative. Some projects will lend themselves more to sharing authority during all phases, while other projects will make this impossible or undesirable. Your epistemological beliefs about the relationship between the researcher and research participant will help frame these decisions, as will your ethical and political motivations, but ultimately, the research process must mesh with your goals and resources. All oral history interviews contain collaborative dimensions; however, interpretive strategies can employ a variety of perspectives. It may be helpful to think of oral history as existing on a collaboration continuum—projects can vary from being collaborative exclusively during data collection to being thoroughly collaborative from initial research design through representation. In this regard, Frisch (2003) makes an important point:

Sharing authority is an approach to doing oral history, while a shared authority is something we need to recognize in it. (p. 113)

Let’s examine some of the pros and cons of using a shared authority approach to oral history by looking at various oral history research projects and how researchers have theorized and negotiated collaboration and authority in diverse ways.

### **Decentering Authority and Democratic Practice**

Holistic collaboration, that which engages the researcher and narrator during all phases of knowledge production, is often appealing to those working from critical theoretical perspectives. Likewise, this approach may be appropriate for research projects with the objective of creating social change or prompting social activism. Accordingly, as critical perspectives and social movement research are both on the rise, we are seeing an increase in collaborative research. This raises the question: Why are these folks particularly attracted to sharing authority?

Oral history is unique because it has the potential for decentering authority (Frisch, 1989; Shopes, 2003). As discussed in Chapter 1, historically, researchers have been privileged as the knowing party, and they have had control over the research process and resulting knowledge. The researcher’s authority over the data



included analysis, representation or writing, and the dissemination of the resulting knowledge. For example, will the results be published? Where? How will they be used? Oral history assumes that the research participant has life experiences, thoughts, and feelings that can help us to better understand social reality or some aspect of it. In other words, the research participant has unique and valuable knowledge. The participants alone have access to their own stories and accordingly assume the role of narrator. This method thus allows research participants to maintain authority over their knowledge during data collection. The oral history method inherently challenges positivist and postpositivist conceptualizations of the researcher-researched relationship and, moreover, necessarily shifts at least some authority to the research subject. Scholars working from critical theoretical perspectives are committed to destabilizing relations of oppression and repositioning those historically at the peripheries of the social order to the center of the knowledge-building process. Feminist and critical race scholars are interested in decentering authority as well, so that women and people of color are given a central and authoritative position within the knowledge-building process. By changing the locus of knowledge and creating engaged researchers and narrators, oral history lends itself to collaboration and the oppositional possibilities inherent in a collaborative knowledge-building process. The resistive dimension of sharing authority is also inextricably linked to ideas regarding democratic knowledge production, which may be particularly resonant for social movement and social action researchers.

The use of collaborative approaches to oral history bears traces of the earlier paradigm shift that prompted the development of qualitative research and wide-ranging changes in our conceptualizations of knowledge and the knowledge-building process. Some oral historians working in the area of social movements, public policy, and social activism advocate sharing authority during all phases of the research project in order to create democratic knowledge production, which can most effectively benefit those groups for whom we often conduct our research. This is because collaboration allows researchers to speak *with* their participants instead of *for* them. This democratic approach to knowledge construction relieves some of the questions of social power that permeate traditional research while allowing those we wish to empower to teach us how to accomplish our goals. Kerr (2003) argues that sharing authority “can play a significant role in movement building” (p. 31). Referring to Frisch’s work, Kerr writes:

He argues for “a more profound sharing of knowledges, an implicit and sometimes explicit dialogue from very different vantages about the shape, meaning and implications of history.” He argues that this dialogue will “promote a more democratized and widely shared historical consciousness, consequently encouraging broader participation in debates about history, debates that will be informed by a more deeply representative range of experiences, perspectives and values.” I would add that the dialogue built on this basis needs to go beyond the way we view history, but also influence the way we design public policy and more importantly, the way we reproduce the social organization of the communities we live in. (p. 31)

In this vein, a collaborative approach to oral history analysis and representation extends beyond incorporating multiple voices and perspectives into our writing of history and can help shape the organization of our communities and the formulation of public policy. In this way, oral history can promote multidirectional change. It is not surprising that social movement scholars have embraced this approach.

Kerr (2003) designed an oral history research project using collaborative analysis to study homelessness. As a part of his dissertation research, Kerr spent years working on the Cleveland Homeless Oral History Project. This research, which involved multimedia interviews, is an excellent example of applying a shared authority approach holistically because it effectively enables particular research objectives. Kerr wanted to conduct research that could create meaningful dialogue among homeless people in Cleveland, which could foster the development and *implementation* of public policy changes aimed at reducing homelessness in U.S. urban centers. Kerr argues that traditionally the research on homelessness has failed to create conversations on a street level and, thus, without substantive input from the homeless themselves, resulting data hasn't garnered the support needed to both create and execute effective social policy.

Advocates and academics studying homelessness in the United States have primarily sought an audience of public officials, civic leaders, and middle and upper class progressives, who they believe have the power to create change. In part this focus has been structured by the public officials themselves who have encouraged this approach, seeking advice on the homeless problem almost exclusively from social service providers and academic experts. There is little incentive for academics to work collaboratively with the homeless. Those who have had the most success having their voice heard at the national policy level . . . have devised solutions without the input and oversight of the homeless and have done little to generate support for their solutions among the homeless. (p. 28)

The failure to produce knowledge that has successfully been used to alleviate homelessness is largely a result of two factors: (1) researchers cannot study misery from a neutral and detached position of authority and (2) homelessness has a structural dimension supported by powerful interests who benefit from maintaining the system (Kerr, 2003, p. 30). Accordingly, Kerr had to give up the traditional privileged position of the "researcher as knower" and work collaboratively with the homeless in order to reveal trends, generate theory, advocate sensible policy changes, and effectively implement them.

By broadening the scientific community through the process of sharing authority with the homeless, one does not give up objectivity; rather one produces more objective and effective research. Theories and solutions that garner support are effectively implemented, and successfully address common problems [that] are objectively better than those that do not. (p. 32)



In this circumstance, sharing authority was clearly the logical approach to the oral history process and promoted the integration of the researcher's ontological, epistemological, theoretical, and methodological choices, creating a robust and layered body of applicable knowledge. This knowledge cannot be separated from its democratic process of production and, thus, in every way signifies the issues it implicitly raises about who gets to participate in the construction of our communities.

In addition, Kerr reported that the research participants were empowered through their participation. The process helped the homeless to become agents for social change in an arena that is directly relevant to their daily lives rather than remain victims of a failed system.

### **Empowerment, Ethics, and Conflict Within Collaboration**

It is not difficult to understand how sharing authority has the effect of narrator empowerment. Certainly, people are more likely to feel empowered when they are fully included and valued and when they are operating on an even playing field. Rickard (2003) writes that the research participants in her collaborative study of British sex workers also felt empowered by the oral history process. Rickard's work is important because it raises key ethical questions about empowerment, advocacy, and sharing authority.

Is it always ethical to empower our research participants? What if they are engaged in illegal activity or an activity that we find morally or politically troublesome? As engaged researchers, where is the line between empowerment and advocacy? If we feel an obligation to benefit our research participants by empowering them (if possible), do we necessarily endorse their behavior? These are questions Rickard had to face when she shared authority with British sex workers, including using one as an interviewer. Rickard (2003) adopts a "sex positive" perspective, which has opened her scholarship up to scrutiny. Some likened her collaborative research design to promoting prostitution (p. 53).

Hence, by undertaking oral history in this area, I had to align myself with the "pro-sex work" political lobby and to become involved with the activities of national and international activist groups who support sex workers' rights. The activist involvement also came from the deep concern with sharing authority. To ensure people's stories were recorded and collected I had to be prepared to use a position of academic privilege to offer political and practical support to interviewees, to facilitate communication through international networks, and to use oral history material for political and educational purposes. For me, this has led to a number of offshoot projects, such as the organization of a U.K. conference for sex workers, and the initiation of a health education project using extracts of OHP tapes as the basic resource. It has also involved me in local and national activist meetings and the use of oral history material as an educational resource for health workers. Over time, I have

slowly realized that other sex work oral history has always tended to be carried out from a similar “sex positive” perspective to my own and nearly always in a context of personal and political advocacy. (p. 54)

Rickard is reflexive about her personal political alignment with her narrators and discloses how this impacts data analysis and her resulting scholarship. While we do not think it is necessary to comment on Rickard’s research choices per se, we think it provides a valuable example from which we can contemplate our own research. By engaging in a thorough discussion of both the context of discovery and the context of justification, readers of Rickard’s work are given enough information about the research process and the researcher’s relationship to the work that they can interpret her work as they deem fit. In this way, she has done her job and also provided a robust case study for examining how we all engage in the oral history matrix of method, ethics, and politics. This brings us to a host of additional issues surrounding collaborative interpretation.

While some research projects necessitate heightened collaboration, others may be impeded by attempts to share authority. Likewise, collaborative interpretation may alter the research in ways with which the researcher is uncomfortable. As interpretation is a fundamental component of sense making or meaning construction, collaboration deeply impacts knowledge-building and is not necessarily desirable.

Collaboration is a responsible, challenging and deeply humane ideal for some oral history work, but in certain kinds of projects, beyond a basic respect for the dignity of all persons, it seems not an appropriate goal. . . . Taking the full measures of views other than your own is one thing; failing to subject them to critical scrutiny is yet another. Is presenting differing views in point/counterpoint fashion itself a form of critical inquiry? Is it enough? We need to think more about the limits and possibilities of oral history work with those with whom we do not share a fundamental sympathy. (Shopes, 2003, p. 109)

Shopes raises several important points while reaffirming that a holistic application of shared authority is only one approach to oral history. It is perfectly reasonable and often appropriate for the researcher to retain authority over the interpretive process. As researchers we can maintain critical theoretical (and other human rights) perspectives without placing the interpretive views of our narrators at the same level on which we place our own analysis. We need not invite the narrator to participate in the research process beyond the interview sessions if our project doesn’t warrant it. Our scholarship and our emotional well-being may require that we do maintain strict intellectual authority over the process of representation.

For example, the body image oral history project that opened this chapter necessitated a separation between the researcher and narrator during data analysis. “Claire” was still deeply in the throes of anorexia nervosa, and her health was rapidly declining at the time of the project. Despite her obvious ongoing battle, Claire repeatedly insisted that she was now healthy and had “clarity” over her “former” disorder. In the case of anorexia, it is clear that this kind of mind-set is common among women in the thick of an eating disorder. Her ability to judge the



situation in a useful way was seriously hampered by her illness. In addition to her deep-seated denial, she was physically failing (which also had an apparent impact on her mental faculties). All of this made a collaborative analysis impossible and undesirable. In this type of situation, the researcher has to maintain intellectual authority over the data in order to generate meaning that is true to the story told by the narrator. This can be hard if you have a strong connection to your narrator; however, as the researcher you need to think of the overall process and the eventual knowledge, which may mean making a difficult decision. In our example, at the time, Claire did not have the ability to effectively help interpret the web of pressures that culminated in her body image disturbance. Even in situations where a narrator is “able” to participate in the interpretive process, it simply may not be something that interests the researcher. This is fine, too.

At a basic level, I do think that the interview dynamic is collaborative. But I also think we need to think carefully where we wish to share intellectual control over our work and where we don't. We do need to be clear where and how we want to differ with narrators, perhaps in the interview itself, more likely in what we write based on interviews. We need to be clear when we wish to be critical of narrators, when there is no room for a shared perspective. (Shopes, 2002, cited in Shopes, 2003, p. 109)

For example, what if your narrator is racist, sexist, or homophobic? If we are committed to the spirit of social justice, then there are times when shared authority simply isn't an option. Regardless of whether or not we share a “fundamental sympathy” (Shopes, 2003, p. 109) with those we interview, we need to seriously consider the place of our own intellectual voice within our work. This requires us to construct, question, negotiate, and renegotiate the boundaries of collaboration within any particular project—always reflecting on the fit between our choices and our research objectives. Likewise, we think it is important for qualitative researchers to write openly about this process to assist others in thinking through the complexity of collaborative research and make informed decisions about where on the continuum any given project will fall. Let's look at an example that illustrates the importance of staying true to one's voice and the potential pitfalls of ill-defined collaboration.

Sitzia (2003) wrote a case study about the relationship she had with her oral history narrator as they tried to share authority while producing his autobiography over a 6-year period. Her experience illuminates the rewards and dangers inherent in collaboration.

Sitzia (2003) shared important insider traits with her narrator, Arthur, particularly a working-class background, and common interests, which together facilitated a wonderful data-building rapport between the two.

This constant dialogue between me and Arthur enriched the process of working on another's life story. I quickly moved from being an interviewer to a facilitator in helping Arthur uncover his past. The development of the dialogue within the process was only possible through our relationship. (p. 94)

The kind of mutual engagement with, and shared ownership of, the project produces data that may otherwise remain hidden. However, the engagement required for collaboration has an emotional price and can at times be overwhelming. Likewise, while some scholars feel their work is enriched through shared interpretation, others may experience an unwanted loss of intellectual authority over their research, as Sitzia (2003) explains.

When our work began . . . I felt very pleased with the way the project was progressing . . . [but] as . . . we drew closer to the publication of a book, Arthur began behaving aggressively; putting substantial pressure on me to work more quickly, threatening to complete the work with another editor, and most importantly, raising issues of ownership: “our” book became only “Arthur’s” book. This situation was made worse by the fact that Arthur was going through a severe emotional and mental health crisis, which also meant that he became very dependent on me, calling in varying states of distress at all times of the day and night. I felt—and still do feel—a huge responsibility for Arthur and felt I should help him resolve his crisis, but did not feel equipped to do this. On reflection, these complications partly arose because of the experimental nature of the project: neither I nor Arthur had worked in such a collaborative way before. My approach to the project was an informal learning experience. . . . I now believe that it is crucial to define clear boundaries and guidelines when embarking on a project of this nature. At the beginning of this collaboration I directed the work to a large extent and certainly had a “voice;” one consequence of this lack of clarity is that as the project progressed I felt that I gradually lost authority, that Arthur became more and more dominant—and in fact bullying—and my own voice seemed to be lost. (p. 97)

This illustrates the tensions a researcher may face when trying to determine where to place a project on the continuum of shared authority. In the end, Sitzia (2003) came to understand that, in the case of her project, both she and Arthur could “own” it by being open to multiple outcomes from the one study. She and her narrator are thus free to draw on the work in various ways and, through those unexpected avenues, they can each make their own mark on the knowledge they have created. Sitzia uses aspects of the project in her writing while Arthur is able to use it in his performance pieces. This required them to let go of the idea that “one book” would be the outcome of this process and consider multiple outcomes. We think it is important to remain open to the data being used in multiple ways, as was the resolution here; however, we caution that this is not always appropriate and must be carefully contemplated by the researcher. Make choices and find resolutions that make sense in a particular circumstance.

Despite the difficulties that can arise, collaboration can be a worthwhile or necessary practice. It is therefore helpful to be proactive, design your study well, and remain open to modifications as practice dictates. If you decide to share authority with your narrators, we suggest the following strategies for dealing with the specific challenges you may encounter.



- Create clear boundaries regarding the relationship between the researcher and narrator. In other words, devote some substantial time to defining your relationship. Talk this through together so there is mutual clarity. Continue to have these conversations throughout the various phases of the process so you are constantly reinforcing your definitions and expectations (while modifying them as appropriate to growth in the relationship). This relationship must be tended to holistically.
- Set up precise expectations regarding each person's role(s) in the collaborative process. Issues to discuss and come to an agreement on include the following:
  - The transcription process
  - Fieldnotes and theoretical memo writing
  - Analysis procedures
  - Interpretation and theory-building
  - Writing and/or representation
  - The use of the results (including how many possible outcomes are expected)
- Construct practical ideas for how to deal with potential interpretive conflicts.
  - What degree of difference does each party expect to have included in the final write-up?

By thinking these things through, you can avoid many potential pitfalls—this is time well spent. You can thus be open to less traditional approaches to oral history that may allow the asking and answering of new social scientific questions. Don't be afraid to create new methodologies as long as you remember that experimentation necessitates both openness and rigor.

### Archiving Oral Histories

As you have already seen, qualitative research in general, and oral history in particular, demand a high degree of ethics in practice. The archiving of oral history transcripts or projects is an important part of the oral history process. The American Historical Association has determined that arranging to deposit oral history interviews in an archival repository is a part of ethical research. The archiving of oral history materials, which makes them available for a host of future uses, may influence the research process in many ways. If a participant is well informed about the research and its outcomes, as they should be through informed consent, then the knowledge the interview will be archived may influence their storytelling. This is particularly salient when unedited interviews will be archived as narrators understand their initial telling of their story will be documented and made available forever.

The deliberate consideration of what can and should be said, and how it should be said, is pronounced when interview transcripts are specifically prepared for archival purposes because narrators will seek to prepare their narratives for an undetermined public audience. This has a double-edged effect.

On the one hand, it can produce more accurate recollections and fuller accounts if narrators take the time to refresh their memories by consulting old documents, and/or other people who experienced the same events. On the other hand, however, it may produce more of a “canned speech,” or a more carefully crafted statement that is sensitive to wider implications of what is said. (Wilmsen, 2001, p. 72)

Edited interviews, intended for archival deposit, present their own set of challenges.

Analyzing, interpreting, and writing up your data is always a part of meaning making. Producing a version of the work can be equated with producing meaning itself—creating knowledge. Editing is therefore tied up with the construction of meaning (Wilmsen, 2001). As the researcher, how are you going to edit the transcript? Will you “clean it up” in terms of pauses, “ums,” “likes,” and the other informal ways people speak? Will you fix grammar? Will you change the particulars of the narrator’s way of speaking, and, if so, what implications does this have in terms of meaning construction? Will you delete or add emphasis to convey meaning? And, if so, meaning from whose perspective: yours, the narrator’s, or your interpretation of the narrator’s meaning? How is all of this influenced by social class, race, gender, and other characteristics? In other words, what are the implications in changing the grammar of a narrator from a lower socioeconomic background? What are the implications of changing, or adding your own explanations for slang words, which may be the product of ethnic background and other social characteristics? These are all considerations when determining how to edit the transcript. Wilmsen (2001) cautions that these choices are interlinked with social power—the power to construct and disseminate what is deemed “knowledge.”

A significant feature of the social relations of oral history interviews is the power relations between the interviewer and the narrator. Gender, class, race, and other social considerations enter into every interview situation to a greater or lesser extent. They affect editing through narrator and interviewer/editor perceptions of the social status similarities or differences between them, which in turn shape their understandings of their respective roles. The importance this has for editing is the way in which power relations are interwoven with differing experience with the written word. The fact that narrators have varying experience with the written word, the world of publishing, research archives, libraries, et cetera, affects what editing decisions are made, who makes them, and why. (p. 75)

As with all of the choices a researcher makes when thinking about interpretation and representation, editing is an important arena in which meaning production occurs. Reflexive researchers must consider issues of difference and research power relations as a part of ethical practice.

The extent to which the research process is collaborative will also impact the editing process. If narrators are involved in the interpretive process, they will likely have input on reflection. In other words, when reviewing the raw transcript, it is



very likely that narrators will recall things that were forgotten at the time of the interview, which they may want to add. Likewise, they may want to elaborate or edit parts of the transcript. As a part of ethical practice, we encourage you to share your transcripts with your narrators for their approval and input; however, we caution that this, of course, raises many possible responses. Ultimately, the degree of influence the narrator will have on the editing process is linked to the issues of authority previously discussed.

Technological advancements have also impacted the practice of oral history with respect to editing and archiving. In addition to audiotaping, some researchers now videotape their interviews. Audio or video interviews can be turned into digital data. Frisch (2008) has been at the forefront of discussing the role of these emerging technologies on the practice of oral history. He suggests there are two major impacts of digitization. First, in digital form, there is no difference between text, photos, music, visuals, and so on. Data in all of these forms “can be expressed as digital information that can be organized, searched, extracted, and integrated with equal facility” (p. 226). Second, in digital form, any point in the data can be accessed immediately. A researcher or reader can move to any point in the data in a nonlinear manner to code, search, and so forth. For example, one can move to any scene on a DVD or any point on a CD. These technological changes impact data analysis considerably. Software programs make it possible for researchers to tag, annotate, or link pieces of data in a variety of ways. Whereas in the past software could assist only with textual data, now software can perform these functions for “nonlexical content or qualities” such as tone, voice, body language, and so forth (Frisch, 2008, p. 226). Digitization also means that oral history interviews that are archived in digital form can be accessed and used with ease in comparison with the “old” ways of searching through transcripts for the data in which one is interested. As researchers and archivists continue to take advantage of these technological possibilities, the ethical implications of digitization will need sustained reevaluation.

## Conclusion

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As you have seen, oral history is an intense, rewarding, and flexible research method. It is particularly useful for gathering rich data from the perspective of those who have traditionally been marginalized within the culture and excluded from their own documented representation. In this way, oral history allows narrators to use their voice and reclaim authority in an empowering context where their valuable life experiences are recognized as an important knowledge source. Oral history is also an excellent tool for situating life experience within a cultural context. In other words, personal stories can be interlinked with collective memory, political culture, social power, and so forth, showing the interplay between the individual and the society in which he or she lives.

Oral history is a collaborative process that must be conceptualized holistically. Special attention must be paid to the relationship between the researcher

and narrator, and clear guidelines should be employed through a rapport-building dialogue that is revisited throughout the project. As we have outlined, a researcher needs to consider the oral history matrix: the interplay between the method, ethical considerations, and politics.

## Glossary

**Narrative structures:** There are three major narrative styles encountered in the oral history storytelling process: (1) unified, (2) segmented, and (3) conversational. To this, we would add a fourth category, which Kohler-Riessman calls *episodic storytelling*. As with all narrative forms, the way participants tell their stories may largely be influenced by factors such as race, class, gender, education, work, and geographic location.

**Oral history:** A method of open-ended interview, usually occurring in multiple sessions, where a researcher aims at interviewing a person about her or his life or a significant aspect of it. This is a highly collaborative interview method resulting in a co-created narrative.

## Discussion Questions

1. Discuss some of the differences between oral history and in-depth interviews.
2. In what ways does oral history benefit the researcher and participant?
3. What is the significance or importance of building rapport with your research participant? How does the establishment of a good relationship between the researcher and research participant contribute to a successful oral history?
4. What is shared authority, and how is it distinct in oral history? We note a few instances in which a shared authority would not be beneficial to the research process. Can you think of any other instances? What are some of the problems that can arise?
5. What are some things a researcher should consider when deciding whether to use a collaborative strategy? What are some of the ethical considerations a researcher must keep in mind when determining the degree to which an oral history project will be collaborative? What kind of guidelines can help collaborative research work effectively?
6. How does oral history help us to bring about social change and aid in social activist efforts?
7. Do you believe the collaborative process that shapes data collection should continue on during the analysis and representations phases of the research project?
8. In what ways can society impact the ways in which a person tells his or her story, and why is it critical for the researcher to cue into this?
9. Oral history can be an empowering experience for both the researcher and the research subject. In what ways can this be true?



10. If, for example, you were interested in how teenage females internalize images of female beauty in American society, how would the use of oral history be beneficial as opposed to an in-depth interview method?

## Resources

### Suggested Web Sites

#### *The General Commission on Archives and History*

<http://www.gcah.org/oral.html>

This Web site is a clear-cut, easy-to-understand guide to oral history interviewing. It gives the steps of interviewing as well as useful tips and a reference list of books and articles.

#### *How to Collect Oral Histories*

[http://www.usu.edu/oralhist/oh\\_howto.html](http://www.usu.edu/oralhist/oh_howto.html)

This Web site explains what recording oral histories entails. It also has a link to other useful Web sites dealing with collecting oral histories.

#### *Oral History Interviewing*

[http://www.cps.unt.edu/natla/web/oral\\_history\\_interviewing.htm](http://www.cps.unt.edu/natla/web/oral_history_interviewing.htm)

This Web site gives a step-by-step easy guide to understanding and conducting oral histories. It also has a link to a sample release form and sample interview questions.

#### *Center for the Study of History and Memory*

[http://www.indiana.edu/~cshh/oral\\_history.html](http://www.indiana.edu/~cshh/oral_history.html)

This site has links to techniques for oral history interviewing, resources, newsletters, and forms. The most useful link at this site is the techniques link, which provides a lengthy description of techniques for oral history.

#### *Center for Oral History*

<http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special/williams/index.html>

This Web site offers a list of publications including some online publications. It also has links to projects, forms, other sites, and its newsletter. The mission of the Williams Center is to collect and preserve, through the use of tape-recorded interviews, unique and valuable information about Louisiana history that exists only in people's memories and would otherwise be lost.

*American Sociological Association*

[http://www.asanet.org/public/IRBs\\_history.html](http://www.asanet.org/public/IRBs_history.html)

This link contains information about oral history interviews and protection provisions.

### **Relevant Journals**

*History & Memory*

*Memory Studies*

*Oral History Review*

*The Journal of American History*