Viewpoint:
Why Call It Oral History?
Some Ruminations From the Field

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Most definitions of oral history are a variant of the definition given by Louis Starr in his 1977 article for the Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences. "Oral History," he wrote, "is primary source material obtained by recording the spoken words—generally by means of planned tape recorded interviews—of persons deemed to harbor hitherto unavailable information worth preserving." As is obvious, this definition is very broad and was meant to encompass almost any formally organized recording of any conversation about what happened in the past. It allowed anyone to claim as oral history any conversation about the past in which they were involved and for which any record of any kind was kept.

For the most part, however, this definition was meant to unite those of us whose task is essentially collection development, or archival interviewing, with community historians and with those who collect interviews for their own immediate research purposes, usually a planned publication or film, categories probably covering ninety-nine percent of those who want to call what they are doing oral history. That same similarity of enterprise was recognized a few years ago when the American Historical Association, in consultation with the Organization of American Historians and the Oral History Association, devised and published a set of guidelines for historians collecting interviews for their own publication projects.¹ These guidelines assumed a community of interest between archival oral history projects, that is those building collections of interviews for the use of others either in academic or community programs, and historians conducting interviews with little thought about their use beyond the immediate project.

Recently I have come to the opinion that these guidelines assume a false community. What we who build collections do and what those who interview for their own projects for their immediate use for publication do are not the same kind of work. The two types of interviewing are not just varieties of apples; they are as different as apples and oranges, or rubies and sapphires for those who desire a more elegant metaphor. I think this is the case for two reasons: the type of interview produced and the role of the intended audience in the final disposition of the interview.
Those of us who have reviewed interviews done by historians or other scholars in preparation of their own publications have long recognized that those interviews are quite different from archivally generated interviews. With only rare exceptions, those who interview for their own research go into the field with a limited set of questions on particular topics. The questions are formulated from the research and flow from the project design of that research. Both time and money are limited, and while other tangential and interesting topics may emerge in an interview session, unless the conversation sheds light upon the issue at hand, they are ignored or dealt with in a summary manner. For instance, a biographer interviewing those who knew or had some experience with the subject of the biography is interested in the direct or face-to-face contacts between the two people: the person being interviewed and the subject of the biography. Extensive discussion of the experiences of the person being interviewed that have little or no connection to the subject of the biography are not encouraged. Either politely or abruptly the interviewee will be informed that this information is not wanted.

I offer the following example from an interview done for the Columbia University Oral History Research Office. An interviewer who is writing a biography of a political activist of the 1960s interviewed an SDS activist as part of that project. The subject of the biography and the interviewee had shared a brief moment so the interview was quite short. It came to a close when the interviewee remarked, "Then I became a Buddhist and left the movement." The interviewer responded, "Thank you." The collector in me screamed in agony at the loss of that bit of autobiographical commentary. A few minutes spent in a follow-up would have given us a wonderful anecdote as well as an interesting insight into one of the trajectories of 1960s radicals. But it was tangential to the project at hand. The immediate research need had been satisfied. In fact, to ask further questions would have been seen by the interviewer as a waste of time and money in pursuit of a vacuum cleaner approach to historical inquiry. To those of us who build collections to be used by others, however, a natural consequence of the interview meeting would have been to ask the called-for follow-up question, to gather the story for other scholars of the movement. To us the interview would have been enriched. In a hermeneutic sense the information about the conversation to Buddhism would have been necessary to explain the later conversation and the interpretation of the life and times under investigation.

Considerations of future use is the real dividing line between the two types of interviewing. Work in archival and community projects is always oriented toward
future use of the interviews by people other than the interviewer. We collect in the hopes that the interviews will be used many times in years to come. We process interviews at great expense so that they will be easily available and accessible to others. We index them and build finding aids so that information can be retrieved more easily. We publish catalogs or shelf guides and publicize our collections because we want them used. They are meant to be public rather than private documents and everything we do is directed at and is an elaboration upon that public function. Part of what makes oral history, history is the fact that the interviews become part of an on-going interpretation and reinterpretation of the past. Therefore, in creating the interview, the wider its range, the better the interview. The good interview pushes memory, language, and ideology to the limits. The longer the interview, the more information it contains; the more explanations and contradictions explored, the better the document.

Despite the fact that the above-mentioned AHA statement urges historians to deposit their interviews with an oral history collection or otherwise make them available, when the interview is being conducted for a scholar's own research, it is still understood as the private property of the interviewer, to be used for this or that publication and, even if deposited, never to be consulted again. In actuality, very few tapes and/or transcripts are ever deposited in a publicly accessible archive. In one or two famous and well documented cases, even promised donations have not been forthcoming. The attitude seems to be that such private property has no public value or interest.

In these privately conducted interviews, the wider historical or general public is not present as an imagined audience during the interview, and the public is never viewed as a potential partner in the interpretation of the interview. The interviews, a set of interpretations upon which the interpretation is based, therefore never become a part of the on-going struggle for interpretation. In this sense the failure to see them as public documents is fundamentally ahistorical. Some might even say that it is an abnegation of the responsibility of the historian.

These differences in scope and disposition mark the boundary between oral history and historical interviewing. Many people interview, not all are doing oral history. When interviewing is done for one's own purposes with no intent to make the interviews public, to share them, and when they are kept from public scrutiny, it is not oral history. Only when the interviews are conducted with the understanding that they will be placed in a proper repository, and that they will be read or listened to by others or otherwise made available to the community at large, is it
oral history. Making the interview available for review and revision, comment and criticism, judgment and reinterpretation, is what makes it oral history.

Notes


2. See, for example, Jon Weiner, "The Alger Hiss Case, the Archives, and Allen Weinstein," AHA Perspectives (February 1992): 10-12.