

Oral History Interviewing: The Good Interview

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Given the complexities of the oral history interview situation and the variety of aims of oral history interviewing there is probably no sure-fire way to guarantee a good interview, even if one could find a general consensus as to what a good interview would be. Because so much depends upon the intricacies of the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, as well as a host of environmental and social factors no one set of strictures can prepare the novice interviewer for what actually happens in an oral history interview. There are, however, a number of steps that one can take to try to insure the productivity of the interview, and there are guidelines that can help mediate the interview relationships so that both parties are satisfied with the results.

To start, as every commentator in any of the interviewing disciplines has noted, one must know something about the subject at the heart of the interview. You must know what you are talking about. This means you have to do your background research to understand not only the facts – a knowledge of what happened and when – but also a grasp of how those events have been interpreted both at the time when they occurred and since by participants and by subsequent scholars and commentators. To gain this understanding one must not only consult whatever documents from the time that still exist, defined as broadly as possible, but also the secondary literature. This gives one an awareness of the context of the events and experiences under investigation – the conjuncture of processes of change and stasis – and prepares one to explore with the person being interviewed the interpretation, the context, being articulated by that person.

At this point it is useful to keep in mind the distinction between sequence and narration. At one time the oral history interview was viewed as a search to collect recollections of what happened. The people one interviewed were seen as repositories of facts that could be marshaled as a base for the interpretation of the historian/interviewer. The investigator was interested in documenting the sequence of events – finding out what happened next. Any commentary on that sequence was seen as the monopoly of the interviewer. That view no longer holds. Since we are now equally concerned with how historical narratives are structured, we are concerned with how the people we interview put their stories together. Oral history is not only getting the facts, it is the process of pushing memory, language and ideology as far as possible to bring into articulation the horizon of the interviewee, to understand how those facts are understood. Preparation prior to the interview (and during the interview if more than one session is held) is the best way to plan for the ways in which testimony links past and present.

The amassing of data, accumulating information, is, however, only half of the research effort. Prior to interviewing it is also necessary to organize those research findings in some more or less manageable format to insure that one has some control over that data. The easiest way to do this is to organize a topical outline that is essentially a program guiding you on how to conduct the interview. Sometimes called a research design this

outline should lay out the basic issue too be explored in the interview, the components of that issue as revealed in consulting existing documentation, the possible ways those components can be viewed and the sub-categories of both. One partial example would be one's outline in a proposed set of interviews with recent migrants to the United States.

Obviously, one component of that outline would be a set of questions concerning the nature of the community from which the person came. Subsidiary categories would be the sets of push/pull factors that led to migration. Each of these in turn will generate a number of other sub-categories such as, in the first case: family, religion, politics, work, environment, etc. Each sub-category, in turn, offers a variety of possible interpretative avenues (the positive and negative factors of an extended family within the local ecology, for instance) that will call upon your understanding of the secondary literature you have consulted, as well as your own interpretative skills. Outlining each of the categories and sub-categories, and the possible ways to discuss them in some form that is understandable to you and the person you are talking to, allows you to organize your research and provides a logic for the interview. This is, however, your logic. It is derived from your understanding of the problematic of the interview and your research preparation. It is not the logic of the person being interviewed. It is an avenue into the discussion of the question not a template for the discussion.

A good interview is the skilled negotiation between the logic of the historian/interviewer and the logic of the narrator. That logic is derived not from study but through having lived through and experienced the events under investigation. As we will see later, the way in which this tension is negotiated forms the structure of the interview. For now, however, let us note that the topical outline that is developed from one's research can very easily become the basis for the actual fieldwork questions one uses in the interview as each category and sub-category is transformed from a positive statement into a question. As we will note later, it is better to go into the interview without a formal questionnaire, relying solely upon the topical outline, but it is useful to derive a set of questions and practice them before the interview, even if that questionnaire itself is discarded.

Another consideration to be addressed before the interview, one that is crucial to determining the usefulness of the interview, is recording equipment. Time and energy must be devoted to a focused attention to the process of recording. Many an interview has been ruined by poor recording techniques. Given the range of uses of the interview and the equipment available there is no reason why one can't attain very high standards of recording. The field has recently shifted to digital interviewing. Unfortunately, most manuals provided by the equipment makers themselves are not that useful. Most assume that you have a much deeper understanding of the functions of the machines that is usually the case. So they fail to explain all of the functions available to you in a language that is understandable. If you are in touch with an audio-visual department, or office, that is a logical place to seek assistance. If one is not available, it is wise to find someone who is adept at using the recorder you have. A good place to locate such a person is through the oral history list serve. There are a few general rules.

Know your equipment. Experiment with its use. Study the manual, consult. Become comfortable with all of its features.

Use only quality recording stock. Beware of bargains.

A good microphone is the real key to quality recording. Consult with someone familiar with various mikes and their strengths and drawbacks to determine which model best suits your needs and level of competence. Pay particular attention to placement and the ways in which a particular recording machine works to set and limit levels of recording.

Before actually recording in the field, test your equipment. Don't be embarrassed by the fact that you have to spend a few moments setting proper levels for recording. In fact, you will probably have to ask the person you are interviewing to assist you by speaking so that you will be able to set the proper levels for recording their voice.

Try to control the recording environment by limiting excess ambient sounds.

The last consideration prior to interviewing is probably, actually the first step, making the initial contact. For best results in the actual interview situation it is best to be completely open about your project and the processes of the interview. Transparency is the key. I think it is best to put everything in writing with the initial invitation. This includes, the amount of time you might want, the number of sessions you envision, the ways in which you want the person interviewed to prepare, the final use of the material, all the rights and responsibilities of both parties, and what they can expect to receive as a result of the interview. Again, there are a number of manuals, which offer good advice on each step of this process.

In the interview itself it is important to establish the pace and style of the interview in the first few minutes. This will signal to the person being interviewed what to expect. If you start with many questions that demand short answers that will set the form of the interview and it will be very difficult to break through this format. It is better to start with broad questions that require longer answers, that allow for a more extended discussion. Many times you will find that the person being interviewed will, in the first minutes of the interview, ask you if that is what you want as a response. Remember, you want to push memory, language and ideology as far as possible. In order to do so you need as many words as possible in the responses to your questions.

An important aspect of pace is waiting for a response and then listening carefully in order to understand when the person you are interviewing has finished composing that response. Don't rush. If you feel you don't have enough time, you have either misjudged the interview or are unprepared for the detail you are getting in the interview. It is quite proper to ask to come again for another interview session. Many times we have the natural inclination to get on with the story. It must be curbed. Allow silences to be ended by the person being interviewed. Later when you listen to the interview you will realize that that silence rarely lasts more than four seconds. Nature hates a conversational vacuum. Let it be filled by the interviewee. Relax.

To a large extent a good interview is for the most part follow up. This follow up can emerge in the interview in a number of ways. It can come through your questions as you explore in detail the various sub-categories of your topical list. It can also come through a careful listening to the testimony of the person being interviewed and picking upon what is being said. In many cases you will find that the testimony has introduced topics that are not on your outline. You will have to make a snap decision as to whether or not you wish to follow that new train of thought or to revert to your outline. This is one of the reasons that many oral historians try to conduct a number of sessions so that one has time to review one particular session to make a more considered decision. A general rule of thumb, in light of the previous paragraph about relaxing, is that it is wiser to follow up on what is being said before switching to the next question.

This tension between your drive to construct an interview that will bear the analysis you seek to develop and the drive of the person being interviewed to construct a narrative is but one example of the negotiation that must be undertaken in the interview situation. On the one hand you must be careful not to dismiss what is being said as a mere tangent and on the other you must somehow offer your thoughts for consideration by the narrator.

A good interview is also a combination of anecdote and interpretation. One way to collect anecdotes is to ask, "Can you give me an example?" If you find that the testimony is to general, ask for a specific event or experience. If the interview is too specific ask if the situation being described was typical, "Was that typical of young Italian American girls in your neighborhood?" This will allow the person being interviewed to offer his or her interpretations through a more generalized stance.

One of the most awkward negotiations in an interview is the request for comment on embarrassing, difficult to discuss or disturbing events. The general advice is to embed such questions within a series of more or less pleasant or easy questions, but it is also necessary to forewarn your interviewee that you will be asking such questions. You can tell the person being interviewed that you feel it necessary to get their story on the record, or that it is simply too important to allow such issues to pass without comment. In many cases the story you wish to record is widely known anyway and it is useful to preface the question with a reference to a citation such as, "A 1968 article in Harper's said that you . . .", or by a reference to what you have already been told by someone else. If you choose the later tactic be prepared for the question, "Who?" A perfectly legitimate response is to say that just as you would never reveal what the person you are talking to has said until the interview has been opened, you wouldn't reveal who told you about this particular event. But, in an extreme case you must be prepared to simply demure and agree to let some issues lie dormant.

You must be prepared for the emotional responses that can be engendered, in some cases, by your questions, and the retelling of the story. This is particularly the case with traumatic memories. The best one can do, aside from offering sympathy, is to refer the person being interviewed to an agency or to someone who is trained to assist them. If you plan to conduct interviews in areas of great stress, it is wise to collect the names and

addresses of service agencies such as women's centers, counseling services etc. prior to the interview. Sometimes, however, all that is necessary is to be a sympathetic listener. In such cases it is important that you are aware of the special relationship into which you have entered and to make sure that you honor that specialness. There is a wide literature on such interviewing that should be consulted if you feel that your particular project will involve such a situation.

Charles Morrissey has developed an interesting set of fieldwork hints that he calls "The two sentence format." Emphasizing the point of keeping one's questions brief, he points to the usefulness of a two-sentence question. The first sentence is a statement of fact or introduction, the second is the actual question. For example, "President Kirk said on May 30 that the gym should be built. What was the response of the SDS executive committee?" Or: "You said earlier that the faculty was active. Can you give me an example?" While there are many instances where a one or two-word question or comment is in order ("Who else?"), and other instances where longer statements are needed, it is useful to use the two sentence format as a starting tool. It is very useful to beginners who have a tendency to nervously ask too many questions rolled up in one. A useful rule is, if it is done on television or radio, don't do it. You do not have an audience to bring up to date.

The transcript of a good interview will reveal a pattern starting with a nice, to the point question and then ten or so pages of response, and then another short question picking up on some aspect of what was said and another ten or so pages of testimony. The point is to be brief and to allow the person you are interviewing to talk. Don't interrupt. If you have a question on what is being said, make a note, and then when a natural pause occurs, ask the question.

In all cases politeness should rule the day. Remember the person to whom you are talking is extending you an enormous courtesy as well as his or her time and thought. It is important that you respond accordingly. It is possible to gather testimony on very sensitive topics when the questioning is done with respect. In fact, there is an argument to be made that the greatest respect you can show someone you are interviewing is to treat the testimony offered with the seriousness it deserves.

Again, there is no guarantee that any set of strictures will result in an interview that is satisfying to you and to the person you interview. However, one's chances are greatly increased by observing a few very simple rules of engagement. Good luck!