OHA Principles and Best Practices

Principles and Best Practices for Oral History

Adopted October 2018. These documents replace the OHA's previous Principles and Best Practices, which were revised and adopted in 2009.

A web version of this report is available on the Oral History Association website: https://oralhistory.org/principles-and-best-practices-revised-2018/

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Contents

On the OHA website, see the
Principles and Best Practices Glossary
to learn about oral history terms and technical language

Introduction

The History behind Our Work, 1966-2009

by Sherna Berger Gluck[1]

This 2018 version of the Oral History Association's Principles and Best Practices, like each one before it for the past fifty years, is a product of its time. Since the initial 1968 Goals and Guidelines was issued, the theory and practice of oral history in the US has become more complicated and nuanced, influenced by both the expanding base of its practitioners and shifting intellectual paradigms in a host of disciplines. The trajectory of the theory and practice of oral history itself has moved apace in what Alistair Thomson has identified as four paradigmatic shifts, each of which is reflected in the various revisions of OHA's standards and guidelines.[2]

Despite differences in focus, the early stage of the oral history movement in the Anglophone world focused on oral history as data, what Thomson referenced as "the renaissance of memory as an historical source.[3] Reflecting this thinking, the Goals and Guidelines adopted in 1968 by the academic historians and archivists who founded the OHA displayed an empirical/positivist bent, with underlying assumptions about objectivity.[4] While the basics remained unchanged, in 1979 an Ethical Guidelines document was adopted that basically provided a useful checklist to help those engaged in the various stages of oral history process.[5]

With the increased visibility of a new and more diverse generation of oral history practitioners both inside and outside the academy, and the growing influence of cultural studies and feminist practices, oral history took a new turn in the 1980s. As a coeditor of one of the earliest anthologies noted: "Now a debate emerged in the profession over the purpose of oral history: was it intended to be (1) a set of primary source documents

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[1] Gluck's introduction draws on both Don Ritchie's excellent, earlier "History of the Ethical Guidelines" (https://oralhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/History-of-the-Evaluation-Guidelines.pdf) and her experiences as a 2018 OHA Principles and Best Practices Task Force member.

[2] Alistair Thomson, "Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History," *Oral History Review* 34, no. 1 (Summer/Fall 2006): 49-70. For a longer historical account of oral history, see Rebecca Sharpless, "The History of Oral History," in *Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Thomas Charlton, Lois Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless (Lanham, MD: AltaMira, 2006).

[3] Thomson, "Four Paradigm Transformations," 51.

[4] In reporting on the adoption of Goals and Guidelines in 1969, the leadership of OHA noted "an opportunity and obligation on the part of all concerned to make this type of historical source as authentic and useful as possible," *Oral History Newsletter* 3, no. 1, 1969.

[5] The Ethical Guidelines document came out of a gathering of OHA leadership at Wingspread Conference Ground in Racine, Wisconsin. See Ritchie, "History of the Ethical Guidelines."

or (2) a process for constructing history from oral sources?"[6] These kinds of debates, fueled by the work of a new generation of oral historians in both the US and Europe, flourished during the late 1970s and early 1980s, reflecting what Thomson called "post-positivist approaches to memory and subjectivity."

As early as 1979, then president of OHA Waddy Moore had taken note of the changing nature of oral history, suggesting that a proverbial corner had been turned and that the OHA was ready to enter what he called "the second stage of self analysis."[7] Nevertheless, it was not until 1988-1990 that the next (third) of Thomson's paradigmatic shifts was evidenced in public OHA thinking: "the subjectivity of oral history relationships – interdisciplinary approaches."

Under the stewardship of immediate past president Donald Ritchie, four committees were formed in 1988, charged with revising the 1979 Evaluation Guidelines. In the course of their work, it became apparent that a new statement of principles was needed, and following the adoption of the 1989 Ethical Guidelines, a new committee was convened. The newly crafted Principles and Standards adopted in 1990 broke new ground. For the first time, the interactive and subjective nature of oral history was introduced; sensitivity to the "diversity of social and cultural experiences and to the implications of race, gender, class, ethnicity, age, religion, and sexual orientation" was specifically referenced; and ethical concerns were extended to include concern for the interviewee's community.

By and large, the 1990 Principles and Standards and Ethical Guidelines stood the organization in good stead until the approach of the new millennium, when the vast implications of the digital revolution could no longer be ignored. Responding to the new challenges it posed, and engaging with the fourth paradigm transformation ("the digital revolution in oral history"), a Technology Update Committee drafted new guidelines that were adopted at the 1998 OHA conference and were incorporated into what became the 2000 edition of the OHA Standards and Evaluation Guidelines.[8]

Rather than respond to a paradigmatic shift, a committee was convened in 2008 to work on streamlining the OHA standards and guidelines, which, as Donald Ritchie noted, had

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[6] David Dunaway, "Introduction: The Interdisciplinarity of Oral History," in *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, 2nd ed., ed. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 1996), 8-9.

[7] Waddy Moore, editorial, *Oral History Newsletter*, Spring 1978.

[8] Participants at the Buffalo meeting where the technological update was adopted recall the long, spirited—and sometimes testy—discussion that took place in two separate sessions. After the first lengthy discussion, the committee was sent back to incorporate the changes that had been suggested, and following another long discussion, the new guidelines document was adopted.

become unwieldy and "more of a mini-manual than a statement of core principles."[9] Additionally, the various documents had not yet fully spoken to the changing constituency of the organization. The new revision, which for the first time used the terms narrator and interviewee interchangeably, was adopted at the 2009 Louisville conference.[10]

The regular reassessment of the values/principles and practices of oral history over the past fifty years has demonstrated a responsiveness of OHA to the paradigm shifts in oral history and in the various disciplines from which we draw insights. It has also helped to keep oral history practitioners sensitive to the impact and ethical implications of social and technological changes. For those who have spent countless hours on revising these documents over the past fifty years, it has been a labor of love and a commitment to promote the highest standards of our craft.

2018 Principles and Best Practices Overview

by Troy Reeves and Sarah Milligan

For the development of this iteration of the Oral History Association's Principles and Best Practices, OHA President Todd Moye (2017-2018) convened a task force of twelve members under our stewardship, with an intentional inclusion of backgrounds from historical societies, community organizations, independent scholars, and academic historians from diverse geographical regions, with representation from a variety of age, gender, and racial demographics, and experience.

We worked to blend the large committee work with a combination of video chats, email correspondence, and small group work, initially talking through reactions to the historical documents, bringing inspiration for various logistical and language approaches from related fields, and finally settling on priorities for what could be accomplished over the course of a year. We also grappled with what this document could and should be as a text living on the Web with a multitude of targeted audiences, most with their own specific need for direction. Early in the process, we decided to think of this less as a single statement of Principles and Best Practices, but rather a suite of statements and guides addressing multiple perspectives and needs.

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[9] Ritchie, "History of the Ethical Guidelines."

[10] The question of what to call the person being interviewed had been debated from the inception of the OHA, and although no consensus emerged from the 1967 discussion, the default designation until 2009 became interviewee; *Oral History Newsletter* 1, no. 1, 1967. Because there was insufficient opportunity to reach consensus on the revised document, it was dubbed a beta version—that is, still in process.

We identified four core documents to prioritize from our initial discussions with the task force members:

1. A core values statement defining our foundational beliefs
2. A best practices statement to outline the work of an oral historian
3. An ethics document to define ethical work in our field
4. A decoding document for participants interested in understanding their rights in ethical oral history work

There are definitely more documents that should go into this suite, and as we have worked through this process and received feedback from our task force and other OHA members, we have compiled recommendations for the OHA executive council of work that needs to continue in the coming year(s).

Moreover, this version of our principles and practices, among other things, reaffirms not only respect for narrators and their communities, but also the importance of being attentive to those who are especially vulnerable; it reemphasizes the dynamic, collaborative relationship between interviewer and narrator, with a commitment to ongoing participation and engagement and sensitivity to differences in power, constraints, interests and expectations. These principles have been incorporated into four documents listed above (Core, Ethics, Best Practices, and Participant's Rights), as well as a glossary to help define more deeply some of our terms.

Two final things to conclude: First, as noted above, there is more that could and should be done. During one phone call, we referred to this work as "scaffolding." While we will take pride in, and responsibility for, our efforts, we understand, even relish, seeing the additions that our work will inspire and bring forth. Last, we feel the best idea in these documents comes from the Ethics piece, which asserts that the ideas in it "represent the beginning of the path toward becoming an ethical oral historian, rather than its culmination." So, too, all the thoughts and ideas in all the other documents serve as the starting points to becoming an oral historian.

We are more than grateful to the task force members—Ryan Barland, Doug Boyd, Adrienne Cain, Sherna Berger Gluck, Erin Jessee, Calinda Lee, Rachel Mears, Martin Meeker, Tomas Summers-Sandoval, Liz Strong, Sady Sullivan, and Anne Valk—who remained engaged throughout the year of this work and who volunteered their time and expertise to ensure these documents represent who we strive to be as oral historians.

OHA Core Principles

The Core Principles of the Oral History Association

1. The Oral History Association, in both its national and regional professional organizations, brings together practitioners from a variety of communities, backgrounds, and academic and professional fields, including many who might not label themselves oral historians. Nevertheless, whether motivated by scholarly research questions, political or social change goals, efforts to preserve history, pedagogical aims, or any other purpose, oral history practice shares common principles. This document lays out some of those guiding principles, keeping in mind the diverse practices of those involved in the collection, interpretation, use, and preservation of oral history.

What Is Oral History?

2. Oral history refers to both the interview process and the products that result from a recorded spoken interview (whether audio, video, or other formats). In order to gather and preserve meaningful information about the past, oral historians might record interviews focused on narrators' life histories or topical interviews in which narrators are selected for their knowledge of a particular historical subject or event. Once completed, an interview, if it is placed in an archive, can be used beyond its initial purpose with the permission of both the interviewer and narrator.
3. The value of oral history lies largely in the way it helps to place people's experiences within a larger social and historical context. The interview becomes a record useful for documenting past events, individual or collective experiences, and understandings of the ways that history is constructed. Because it relies on memory, oral history captures recollections about the past filtered through the lens of a changing personal and social context.[1]
4. The hallmark of an oral history interview is a dynamic, collaborative relationship between the interviewer and the narrator. While interviewers pose questions based on research and careful preparation, narrators shape the interview based on what they deem to be relevant, meaningful, or appropriate to share. Despite the fluid nature of the interview process, an oral history is grounded in thoughtful planning and careful follow-through of the agreed-upon process.

[1] The intersection of oral history and memory is well documented. To explore this concept more, please see the *Oral History Review* (https://academic.oup.com/ohr).

Guiding Principles

5. The oral history process, from the interview stage through preservation, use, and access, must be guided by respect for narrators and the communities from which they come. This means a commitment to an ethical process and to honoring diverse cultural values, ways of knowing, and perspectives.
6. The interview process must be transparent, with ongoing participation, consent, and engagement among all parties from the first encounter between interviewer and narrator to the creation of end products.
7. Oral history practitioners must be sensitive to differences in power between the interviewer and the narrator as well as divergent interests and expectations inherent in any social relationship. These dynamics shape all aspects of the oral history process, including the selection of people to interview, research questions, personal interactions during the interview, interpretations, decisions on preservation and access, and the various ways that the oral history might be used.
8. To the greatest extent possible, both the narrator and the interviewer must be protected from harm, particularly those who are vulnerable communities. This means that certain lines of inquiry or public access to completed interviews might be precluded. Any stipulations should be considered before the beginning of the oral history process with the understanding that they can be renegotiated as the project proceeds.
9. Whenever possible, an oral history interview and its accompanying documentation should be preserved and made accessible to other users. Oral history practitioners must be clear on the various ways the interview might be preserved, made available, and used. Likewise, narrators must grant explicit permission to make their interview public, and when possible, should be given an opportunity to establish parameters for preservation, access, and use.
10. While oral historians are bound by laws covering copyright, and in some institutions might be bound by regulations governing research involving living human subjects, their responsibilities also go beyond these official rules. They should conduct themselves ethically and thoughtfully and be vigilant about the possible consequences to narrators and their communities of both the interview process and the access/use of completed interviews.

OHA Statement on Ethics

Oral historians have ethical obligations that are both specific to oral history methodology and shared with other methodologies and practices, ranging from anthropology to archival work. Ethics encompasses the principles that should govern the multiple relationships inherent in oral history. Everyone involved in oral history work, from interviewers and narrators to archivists and researchers, becomes part of a web of mutual responsibility working to ensure that the narrator's perspective, dignity, privacy, and safety are respected. This statement draws upon the decades of thoughtful work concerning the appropriate way to engage with humans as participants in research projects.

Here we offer general principles for practicing oral history in an ethical way. These points represent the beginning of the path toward becoming an ethical oral historian, rather than its culmination.

Preparation and Communication

Oral historians strive to become fully informed about oral history theory, methodology, and ethics. They work to become informed of oral history practices, including how narrators and interviewers should be treated equitably, with care and respect. One way to help ensure fair treatment is to create a beginning-to-end process that works for everyone involved. This process should entail, at minimum, four points:[1]

1. Prior to beginning the interview, the interviewer obtains the narrator's informed consent, which means, most generally, documenting the knowing agreement of the narrator to participate in the process and overall project, as described in "The Core Principles of the Oral History Association."
2. The interviewer clearly communicates the goals of the project, the potential risks of participating in it, and the proviso that, once accessible,[2] the oral history can

[1] We recommend that this process be fully documented in writing and that signatures of all participating parties be obtained and preserved in project records. However, we recognize that limitations of time, language, literacy, and other factors may make this recommendation unfeasible; in those cases, we recommend both the communication of the goals and risks associated with the project along with interviewee informed consent be recorded prior to the beginning of the interview.

[2] The ultimate plan for what happens with the interview once it is completed should start before a narrator is approached about participation, and well-before an interview is conducted. For full transparency and strong project planning, the process for care and access of the recorded interview should be mapped out in the early stages of the process.

be used[3] in any number of ways, by any number of potential users. While oral historians strive to protect the narrator, they are careful, at every point in the process, not to make promises that they cannot keep.

3. The interviewer provides the narrator, whenever possible, with the opportunity to review and approve the interview (recording and/or transcript) prior to using the interview, depositing it in an archive, or otherwise making it accessible to the public.
4. While developing this process, oral historians should conduct preliminary research about the topics they intend to study and be comfortable with the recording technology they intend to utilize.

Collaboration: The Oral History Interview

The interview is at the heart of the oral historian's work and thus requires extra attention to ensure that the encounter meets ethical standards.

Oral historians should consider the goals of the research project and seek narrators who are able, collectively, to present a variety of points of view. When contacting potential narrators, interviewers should clearly and plainly share the project goals, explain the interview process, and describe what will happen to the interview after it is completed.

Power operates in every human engagement, and no less so in oral history interviewing. Ethical oral historians take care to give serious reflection to power differentials, implicit bias, potential areas of disagreement, and other instances in which their positions do not align with the narrator. Choice of interview strategy, such as possible topics covered, the language in which the interview is conducted, or question phrasing, should be part of the consideration. Oral historians recognize the differences that might exist between themselves and the narrator; they consider how these differences might impact the way a narrator shares memories; and they strive to treat each narrator equitably and do their best to listen with empathy.

During the course of the interview itself, oral historians attempt to minimize potential harm to the narrator, communicate the narrator's right to refuse to answer questions, and honestly describe their institutional, professional, political, and other affiliations, as well as obligations and demands. They continue to safeguard the trust implied by the oral history process and to work through competing interests in fair and impartial ways.

[3] For example, in printed publications (monographs, pamphlets, journals), text in museum and web-based exhibits, examples used in pedagogy (both K-12 and higher ed), performances (plays, ballet, opera, monologues), and others.

After the interview, oral history ethics strongly recommends that the narrator be given the opportunity to review the interview (recording and/or transcript) and approve what was said for public release or other use. This step sets oral history apart[4] from other methodologies[5] in that it ensures that the narrator's account enters the public record[6] and that future researchers who wish to draw upon these accounts can access them in their entirety—not just excerpts that may lack important context. The interview should not be made public until the narrator, as the original recording's copyright holder, has provided formal authorization to do so.

Stewardship: Preservation and Access

Oral history is unique, in part because the collaboration between interviewer and narrator results in a historical document for posterity. In most instances, the interview and supporting material[7] is made available to the broader public through deposit in an archive, distribution online, and/or any number of other methods for providing public access. Because of this, ethics calls for narrator review and approval.

There are many valid options for managing the review process; thus, ethical oral historians plan ahead and develop a process that works in their specific context, while adhering to the principles outlined here. Options for narrator review include the right to delete, restrict, and/or redact portions of an interview; the ability to add clarifications and correct mistakes; and the choice to keep the interview closed to the public until a set date or to decline to release it to the public in the first place.

Oral historians should establish a clear procedure[8] (including dates or a timeline) for finalizing, archiving, and releasing the interview to the public. This step communicates to the narrator that the process has been completed and that the interview is (or will be) preserved and made accessible to the public.

Oral historians should promote equitable access to the final interview (recording and/or transcript) and attempt to make these materials accessible in a timely manner. Oral historians and their archivist partners clearly document relevant metadata so that future users will know easily who was interviewed, when and where the interview was

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[4] What also sets it apart: The oral historian's unique responsibility and skill in co-creating, co-representing, and co-interpreting.
[5] Such as interviewing methodologies that are journalistic, anthropological, folkloristic, sociological, or linguistic.
[6] Whether the plan is to share within a family group or with the public at large, it is important to have a plan there is a plan for long-term care of, and access to, (whatever that means for the project) the recorded interview.
[7] Transcript, images, artifacts, indexes, etc.
[8] We recommend reviewing the Society of American Archivists' Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics (https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics).

conducted, and other key pieces of data about the interview. As the interview is prepared for preservation, decisions about description, categorization, and access should respect the personhood and desired privacy of the narrator. Moreover, oral historians should educate themselves about legal concerns such as libel, invasion of privacy, and other issues that might endanger the narrator.

One goal of the agreed-upon oral history process is that it allows the narrator to make an informed decision about whether to participate in a project and to make the interview public. An ethical oral history process assures that the narrator is fully informed about the many possible uses of the oral history once it is publicly available.

Using Oral Sources[9]

The core of the oral history process concludes once the narrator has approved the interview and, in most instances, plans have been made for it to be preserved and made available to the public. Still, scholars and other users of oral sources, including oral history interviews, should educate themselves about discipline-based resources and ethical guidelines that detail issues in more depth. Oral historians who intend to use the oral sources that they create or oral sources created by others should endeavor to use the oral histories honestly and respectfully. This means users of oral sources should provide analyses, including when edited or excerpted, that remain true to the words and meanings offered by the narrator and take care to not quote words out of context or otherwise contort the original meaning. Users may arrive at conclusions that diverge from those offered by a narrator, but conclusions should be derived from evidence properly cited.

[9] We recommend users of oral sources consult various discipline-based ethical guidelines. For example: the American Historical Association's Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct; the American Anthropological Association's Principles of Professional Responsibility; the American Sociological Association's Code of Ethics; and the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics; the Society of American Archivists' Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics; the American Folklore Society 's Statement on Ethics.

Oral History Best Practices

Four key elements of oral history work are preparation, interviewing, preservation, and access. Oral historians should give careful consideration to each at the start of any oral history project, regardless of whether it is comprised of one or many interviews.

This brief document presents the Oral History Association's guidelines for how to conduct a high-quality oral history interview.[1] It highlights some standard practices that should help produce historically valuable and ethically conducted interviews.

Preparation

1. First-time interviewers and others involved in oral history projects should seek training, whether they are conducting individual research or developing a community or an institutional project.[2]
2. During initial preparation, oral historians should locate an appropriate repository to house the project's finished oral histories and other documentation.[3] Oral historians should take care to select a repository that aligns with the project's goals, has the capacity to preserve the oral histories, can enforce any signed agreements,[4] and will make them accessible to the public.
3. Oral historians should outline an oral history process appropriate for their projects and their narrators. They should consult the complete suite of Oral History Association Principles and Best Practices documents for guidance, but whenever possible, the process should include the following: obtaining and documenting the informed consent of the narrator; when possible providing the narrator an opportunity to approve the oral history prior to public release; and sharing expectations about the overall project timeline. At this stage, the oral historian also should develop forms appropriate for documenting the process and related agreements.

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[1] Before reviewing this document, please note: Many published and online sources offer further in-depth information about how to conduct an oral history interview. For more on finding the right guide for oral history see: Linda Shopes' list to online web guides and Barb Sommer's bibliography [reprinted from *The Oral History Manual*, 3rd edition, with publisher's permission].
[2] OHA list of centers and collections and OHA list of regional and international organizations.
[3] Whether an institutional archive or a personal family archive. See the OHA glossary term for archive.
[4] For more on legal issues in oral history, see Oral History in the Digital Age (OHDA), https://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/gettingstarted/playlists/legal-issues/

4. Oral historians should choose potential narrators based on the relevance of their experiences to the subject at hand, while striving to identify and incorporate as many diverse voices as possible.

Narrators, find out more about
what to expect in the next section:
For Participants in Oral History Interviews

5. The process of engaging with potential narrators can be relatively simple and brief or involve multiple conversations.[5] The process typically entails two facets: first, describing the project and process and securing the informed consent of the narrator and second, holding a pre-interview discussion to assist in the interviewer's preparation. These meetings, regardless of their formality, are important in establishing rapport between interviewer and narrator and allowing for clear communication of the following elements:
    a. The oral history's purposes in terms of topics to be covered and general research questions under study, and reasons for conducting the interview
    b. The full oral history procedure, including when and how the interview will be recorded, a description of any review process, the plans for preservation and access, the potential uses of the oral history, and the need for informed consent and other legal forms to be signed
    c. The narrator's expectations for the oral history—what they want to get out of the process, what topics are meaningful to them, and what questions they should be asked
    d. When an understanding on how to proceed is reached, a formal record of that agreement should be completed prior to the beginning of recording.[6]
6. In preparing to ask informed questions, interviewers should become familiar with the person, topic, and historical context by doing research in primary and

[5] Or involve multiple layers of gatekeepers or proxies before reaching direct contact with a potential narrator.
[6] Although many oral historians prefer to request signatures for any legal release forms assigning rights to the interview after it is completed in order to better address any sensitive issues that may have come up during the course of the interview.

secondary sources, as well as through social engagement with individuals and communities and informal one-on-one interactions.

7. Interviewers should create, when possible, a high-quality recording of the interview(audio or video format) to capture the narrator's interview accurately with consideration of future audiences and long-term preservation.
8. Interviewers should prepare an open-ended guide[7] or outline of the themes to be covered and general questions to be asked before conducting the interview. Interviewers should educate themselves about different interviewing strategies with the goal of encouraging the narrator provide the fullest responses to the questions as possible. (See interviewing section below for more details.)
9. Oral historians should recognize that their narrators are not just isolated individuals; they are members of communities, some of whom have historically complex relationships with researchers. When planning an oral history project, interviewers are advised to think about whether they want to engage with those communities in a formal, organized way. Oral historians may decide to develop a plan for community engagement that benefits both the project and the community. These plans for bringing communities into the oral history process might include the creation of a community advisory board, hosting events for sharing research findings, providing oral history training, and more.

Interviewing

1. The interview should be conducted, whenever possible, in a quiet location with minimal background noises and possible distractions, unless part of the oral history process includes gathering soundscapes or ambient sounds.
2. The interviewer should record a lead-in at the beginning of each session. It should consist of contextual information,[8] such as:
    a. names, or when appropriate, pseudonyms, of narrator and interviewer;
    b. full date (day, month, year) of recording session;
    c. location of the interview (being mindful to not list personal residence address, but rather generic "narrator's home"); and
    d. proposed subject of the recording.

[7] Linda Shopes' list to online web guides and Barb Sommer's bibliography.
[8] This is with an understanding that in some cases, such as interviews with vulnerable communities, particularly those with surveillance concerns, there will be a need to gather only the very basic contextual information.

3. Both parties should agree in advance to the approximate length of each interview session. Given the unpredictability of the setting, however, the interviewer should be flexible and prepared for the session to be cut short, interrupted, or possibly to run long, if both parties agree.
4. Along with asking open-ended questions and actively listening to the answers, interviewers should ask follow-up questions, seeking additional clarification, elaboration, and reflection. When asking questions, the interviewer should keep the following in mind:
    a. Interviews should be conducted in accord with any prior agreements made with narrator, and interviewers must respect the rights of interviewees to refuse to discuss certain subjects, to restrict access to the interview, or, under certain circumstances, to choose a pseudonym. Interviewers should clearly explain these options and how they would be carried out to all narrators during the pre-interview.
    b. Interviewers should work to achieve a balance between the objectives of the project and the perspectives of their narrators. Interviewers should provide challenging and perceptive inquiry, fully and respectfully exploring appropriate subjects, and not being satisfied with superficial responses. At the same time, they should encourage narrators to respond to questions in their own style and language and to address issues that reflect their concerns.
    c. Interviewers should be prepared to extend the inquiry beyond the specific focus of the project to allow the narrator to freely define what is most relevant.
    d. In recognition of not only the importance of oral history to an understanding of the past but also of the cost and effort involved,[9] interviewers and narrators should mutually strive to record candid information of lasting value to future audiences.
5. The interviewer should secure a signed legal release form,[10] ideally when the interview is completed. It is important to follow the guidelines of the partnering repository's policy on this, if relevant.

[9] In this sense, the "cost" of a project is more than just financial, for example, good relationship building with the community will involve the "cost" of the emotional labor involved for the interviewer, project manager, and/or team members, in creating understanding and trust.
[10] For more on legal issues in oral history, see ODHA, https://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/gettingstarted/playlists/legal-issues

Preservation

1. Oral historians, sponsoring institutions, and archival repositories should understand that planning for appropriate care and storage of original recordings begins with project conception.
2. Whenever possible and/or practical, oral histories–either individual or many within a project–should be deposited in a repository such as a library or archive that has the capacity to ensure long-term and professionally managed preservation and access. Regardless of where the oral histories ultimately reside
    a. the recordings of the interviews should be stored, processed, refreshed, and accessed according to established archival standards designated for the media format used;
    b. whenever possible, all efforts should be made to preserve electronic files in formats that are cross platform and nonproprietary;
    c. the obsolescence of all media formats should be assumed and planned for.
3. In the interim before deposit, oral historians should
    a. transfer the original recording from whatever device was used, make an appropriate number of redundant digital copies,[11] and store those in different physical locations, as soon as possible after any interview is completed;
    b. document their preparation and methods, including the project's context and goals, for their own, the project's, and the repository's files;[12]
    c. organize and preserve related material for each interview—photographs, documents, or other records such as technical or descriptive metadata—in corresponding interview files.

Access and Use

1. In order to enhance accessibility of the audio or audio/video files, an archive should provide, when possible, written documentation such as transcripts, indexes with time tags linking to the recording, detailed descriptions of interview content, or other guides to the contents.

[11] See ODHA definition of redundancy.
[12] See ODHA definition of metadata.

2. Whatever type of repository is charged with the preservation and access[13] of oral history interviews, it should
    a. honor the stipulations of prior agreements made with the interviewers or sponsoring institutions, to the greatest extent possible, including restrictions on access and methods of distribution;
    b. evaluate documentation, such as consent and/or release forms, and if they do not exist, make a good faith effort to obtain them;
    c. take all steps practicable to abide by any restrictions set forth by the narrator, while also making clear that certain legal challenges—such as subpoenas or open-record requests—may make some restrictions unenforceable;
    d. be prepared to provide timely access to material with considerations for expectations of narrators or project partners;
    e. when possible, consult project participants on how best to describe materials for public access and use.
3. All those who use oral history interviews after they are made accessible should strive for intellectual honesty and the best application of the skills of their discipline. This includes
    a. avoiding stereotypes, misrepresentations, and manipulations of the narrator's words;
    b. striving to retain the integrity of the narrator's perspective;
    c. recognizing the subjectivity of the interview, including, when possible, verification of information presented as factual;
    d. interpreting and contextualizing the narrative according to the professional standards of the applicable scholarly disciplines;
    e. contextualizing oral history excerpts;
    f. providing a citation to the location of the full oral history.

[13] See ODHA definition of access.

For Participants in Oral History Interviews

Oral history interviews are conducted by people from a diversity of fields and professions. They may be academic researchers, community organizers, artists, documentarians, and more. How they approach their work and communicate with you may be very different. However, there are several key ethical responsibilities which oral historians of any background share.

We have summarized these here to help you, the participant, make an informed decision about whether to contribute to an oral history project.

Before the Interview

The following information should be made available to you in a language that you can read or speak fluently, or with the assistance of a trusted translator:

1. The project background

The oral historian should talk with you about the motivations for initiating the project and conducting your oral history interview, as well as what they hope you might be able to contribute to the project. The oral historian may ask you to make a formal declaration, which could either be recorded or in writing, of your agreement to participate in the project and your knowledge of the process. Make sure you understand and are comfortable with what the oral history project seeks to achieve.

2. Contact information

You should receive contact information for your interviewer; someone responsible for the archive, website, or other repository where your oral history materials will be housed and/or made available for public access; and (if applicable) a project director and/or ethics committee contact.

3. The process for participation

The oral historian will explain to you the full oral history process, from how it begins to when it should be considered finished. This explanation should include:

a. how long the interview will take;

b. how it will be recorded;

c. whether you will have the opportunity to review the recording, transcript, or other related materials before they are shared in any format;

d. any other details that may be relevant to the experience of being interviewed

e. what your rights are;

f. any other details that may be relevant to the experience of being interviewed.

4. The benefits of participation

Each oral history project is different, and the value of certain benefits may be different for you than for another contributor. As a participant, feel free to discuss and negotiate possibilities with your oral historian. Potential benefits may include the following:

a. The project may align with your personal interests or goals.

b. You may be given copies of the interview and related materials to use or share.

c. Your community may be given special access to the records produced.

d. The oral history project may provide some other service to your community, such as workshops or events.

e. There can be personal or intangible benefits, such as the possibility of contributing to the historic record.

5. The potential risks of participation

In addition to the potential benefits, you may have concerns related to your participation. You should feel free to discuss your concerns in detail with your interviewer so that you can come to an informed decision before the interview begins. You are within your rights to ask questions, including what steps have been made to minimize the risk of physical, psychological, social, or economic harm to you. Standard oral history practice calls for making the interviews accessible to researchers and the general public, but you are free to request confidentiality or even to withdraw from the project at any point prior to its completion, or the time at which the material is made available (See "Altering or Withdrawing Your Oral History Interview" below). Understanding the following key subjects will be helpful to you in such conversations: privacy, private information, pseudonym, identifiable information, confidential, anonymous.[1]

During the Oral History Interview

6. The interview

The actual process of being interviewed can feel like a conversation, but there are important differences. Most interviewers will limit their own speaking so as to focus the interview on your experiences and memories. Keep in mind that at all times you are free to not answer questions, to take a break from recording, or to end the interview. You are not required to discuss any topics that make you uncomfortable or cause you

[1] See the OHA Glossary.

distress. The interviewer should not pressure you to change your mind, although they may ask you why you would prefer to not to speak about a particular subject in order to understand why you are choosing to avoid it. If the questions you are asked are not clear or seem irrelevant, you may ask for clarification. You should feel free to think about how you want to respond and take the time necessary to answer the question fully.

7. The recording process

The interview is recorded, sometimes with a simple audio recorder or perhaps with professional video recording equipment. Your interviewer will place the equipment to get the best possible recording. Work with them to make certain you are comfortable throughout the process. While you might be distracted by the recording equipment when the interview begins, most participants are able to easily focus on answering questions and sharing stories as the interview proceeds.

After the Oral History Interview

8. The intended use of the interview

The oral history interview may result in certain materials such as an audio or video recording, a written transcript of the recording, detailed notes on the information you provided, pictures of you, or other related records. These materials may be given to an archive or other repository to be housed long term and/or made available for public access. They may also be used in publications, websites, events, exhibits, and other public resources. The interviewer should explain to you the intended use of these materials, how they will be cared for, and how they may be accessed by others. Understand that these intentions are not a guarantee. The oral history interview and related materials may never be used at all. Additionally, over the long term, there may be changes to how such materials can be made accessible to the public, preserved, or cared for as technologies and institutions change. In such cases, those responsible for the long-term care of your oral history materials should respect your initial intent for their use as much as possible. If the oral historian is aware in advance that such changes could take place, they should let you know.

9. Altering or withdrawing your oral history interview

When the interview finishes, you are welcome to raise questions or concerns about the interview or the oral history project. Know that you can restrict an interview from the public, make changes before it is shared, or withdraw your interview even after you have recorded your oral history interview and/or, in many cases, signed a formal agreement. Depending on the plan for long-term storage and access, this may be handled in a variety of ways. The oral historian should be able to share any information related to withdrawing your interview.

Once an oral history is shared with the public, or entered into an archive, it may not be possible to fully remove it. Once an oral history is available to the public, a third party may quote, use, and reference it in another way that the oral historian has no control over. The oral historian should, when possible, specify a date by which it would become difficult or impossible for you to withdraw your oral history.

Be aware that even if an oral history is closed to the public for a period of time, certain legal challenges—such as subpoenas or open-record requests—may make some restrictions unenforceable.

10. Formal agreement[2]

At the conclusion of your interview, the interviewer should request a written or verbal declaration to formalize the agreed upon terms of use for the recorded interview. This process is often referred to as legal release. In recognition of the fact that you, the narrator, own the words you speak in the interview, the formal agreement is your opportunity to provide permission for others to have access to and use your interview. On this legal release, you may provide a blanket permission for the public to access and use your oral history, or you may decide to place certain restrictions on its use. Speak with your oral historian about the options.[3] After consenting, you should receive a copy of the legal release terms. If you or your interviewer prefer not to use a written agreement, this should be discussed in advance.

11. Copyright

When you sign a legal release, you might also be asked to assign your copyright of the interview to the oral historian or to an archive, as part of, or in addition to, the release document. You may also be given the option of assigning your interview to the public domain or of signing a Creative Commons license. All of these options are in place so that others may quote from your interview in books, on radio, in films, or other media. Libraries and archives often wish to hold copyright so that they can protect the materials now and long into the future. Ask your interviewer to explain the document you are signing and, if you wish, other options that exist for planning public access to, and use of, your interview. Note that any time you sign a document, you should request

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[2] We recommend that this process be fully documented in writing and that signatures of all participating parties be obtained and preserved in project records. However, we recognize that limitations of time, language, literacy, and other factors may make this recommendation unfeasible; in those cases, we recommend both the communication of the goals and risks associated with the project along with interviewee informed consent be recorded prior to the beginning of the interview.

[3] While "legal release" is the often referred-to term, there are other terms that might be used. See the OHA Glossary: informed consent, formal agreement, permission to use, copyright, deed of gift, non-exclusive license, creative commons, public domain.

a copy of that document to refer to later if needed. Understanding the terminology is important; always feel free to ask questions when in doubt.

Archiving Oral History

Adopted October 2019

Introduction: Notes on Using this Document and Developing an Archival Plan

This document is intended to be viewed in context as an addendum to the Oral History Association's *Principles and Best Practices*. It is important to note that this document is not just meant for professionally trained archivists or practitioners working with a traditional repository. Oral history is both created and cared for by a broad and diverse set of practitioners, including community organizers, independent researchers, affiliated faculty, storytellers, policymakers, journalists, writers, librarians, and families. While professionally-trained archivists who work with oral history are encouraged to engage with these guiding concepts and best practices, this document was created with all practitioners in mind. As a primer, we recommend reading the Society of American Archivists Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics, as this document serves to "guide archivists, as well as to inform those who work with archivists, in shaping expectations for professional engagement."

While considering an archival plan for oral history interviews, it will be helpful to consider the multifaceted nature of oral history. Oral history interviews are: primary sources that are meant to be accessible, discoverable, and understood; evidence for historical and anthropological understandings, as well as other disciplines; cultural objects; and archival objects requiring long-term preservation. Therefore, the archiving of oral history interviews has its own set of principles and best practices that need to be acknowledged and addressed in a centralized resource. This document applies well-established best practices from professional organizations and institutions to oral history interviews and collections.

This guide cannot be a one-size-fits-all resource. Practitioners may need to pick and choose from these best practices based on the needs and resources of their organization or community. Every oral history project should have a plan for archiving its oral histories that aligns with the project's goals and works within the capacity of the project's partners. Practitioners who are not affiliated with a formal archive should consider that capacity may be extended or re-envisioned through resource-sharing with repositories that can offer archival support or guidance. A plan for archiving interviews should take a form that is uniquely customized for the project, weighing the needs, concerns, and strengths of the individuals involved in the project, as well as the narrators.

Some archiving plans may eschew traditional repositories, particularly when working with vulnerable communities, or when inclusion in a repository carries the potential for legal or personal danger.[1] When considering whether to donate to or work with a repository, it is critical to identify the priorities of the project. Some important questions to ask include: Who will have access to the materials and how will access be provided? How does a project align with the overall mission of potential partner organizations? How will privacy and confidentiality be handled? Plans may also require prioritization of immediate needs and uses of the oral histories over the future life of the materials — for example, in instances where projects emerge from political or environmental crises.

Considering all of the above, clear documentation of the archival plan is immensely important. This documentation will provide the means for understanding the context of the project in the future, including how and why the oral histories were conducted, how the project evolved over time, and how the archival plan was created. It will help future archivists and users understand the singularities of a project or collection, and it will serve to protect narrators and communities from any future misuse due to a lack of documentation.

Below you will find an overview of the topics that have been identified as crucial components to developing an archival plan. To read more about each topic, visit the corresponding sections of OHA's Archiving Oral History: Manual of Best Practices online.

Archives Principles and Best Practices

Appraisal and Accessioning

The arrival of interviews at a repository is one of the most critical junctures in an interview's life cycle. There are two steps in this process: appraisal (the process of determining which interviews should be accepted by a repository) and accessioning (the actions that archivists take to acquire legal and physical custody of the interviews). A clear appraisal and accessioning process allows repositories to handle the intake of oral histories and makes it easier for potential donors or partners to understand how the repository approaches the intake. Responsible accessioning is foundational to good archival practice. It protects materials and collects the necessary information to

[1] Examples include interviews conducted with undocumented immigrants who would be at risk of deportation or survivors of domestic violence or stalking who risk being located and harmed by former abusers. For an in-depth exploration of the limits of repositories to protect narrators, see a statement, discussion, and resources on Boston College's Belfast Project: Oral History Association, "Oral History Association Response to Developments in Boston College Case," May 5, 2014; Society of American Archivists, "SAA Oral History Section Live Web Chat: Lessons Learned from Boston College and the Belfast Case," July 17, 2013; Society of American Archivists, "The Belfast Case: Information for SAA Members," March 2013.

subsequently create metadata for discovery and provide access consistent with the intentions of the narrator. (See Manual, Appraisal and Accessioning)

Metadata and Description

Metadata and description include specific fields of collected information which help place oral history interviews in context and enable discovery and access in a variety of ways. Devoting attention to description and metadata at all stages of the process is an essential part of any oral history project. It is important to collect the following types of information or metadata categories: administrative, descriptive, technical, preservation, and rights and access. All stages in the lifecycle of the interview should be considered as opportunities to engage in descriptive practices: pre-interview, interview, processing, preservation, and dissemination. Practitioners should also keep in mind that metadata may need to be monitored over time and changes or updates to metadata may be required after the interview lifecycle.[2] (See Manual, Metadata and Description)

Preservation

It is important for oral historians and archivists to understand the responsibility for ensuring the long-term preservation of an oral history interview. Oral history as a field of practice prioritizes preserving the original recording of the interview as well as related documentation. Therefore, the inherent use of audiovisual materials in oral history practice, whether analog or digital,[3] requires an appropriate and robust preservation plan. The obsolescence of media formats should be considered and planned for.[4] Preservation of other documentation could also include fieldnotes or context statements, photographs or moving images, and any publications or documents created using the recording as the primary resource.

Every effort should be made to ensure oral history materials are adequately stored, processed, maintained, and made accessible according to archival standards and best practices.[5] Continued maintenance of the interviews and related materials ensures continued access to, and viability of, the materials for long-term preservation. Oral

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[2] The Oral History Association Metadata Task Force has produced detailed guidelines for those working with oral history metadata and description and has worked to develop specific tools for metadata and description decision-making, which are based on earlier best practices work (see ODHA, https://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/category/metadata/).

[3] A more detailed discussion of digital preservation concepts, including visualizations of systems, can be found in Douglas A. Boyd, "The Digital Mortgage: Digital Preservation of Oral History," in Oral History in the Digital Age, edited by Doug Boyd, Steve Cohen, Brad Rakerd, and Dean Rehberger. Washington, D.C.: Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2012, https://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/06/the-digital-mortgage/.

[4] A resource on media stability and format longevity/obsolescence can be found at https://obsoletemedia.org/media-preservation/.

[5] A primer on digital preservation can be found at https://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/gettingstarted/playlists/digital-preservation/.

history practitioners and archival institutions should carefully review their infrastructure and resources to determine whether they are able to effectively undertake or intake an oral history project/collection. Individuals and organizations should determine if it's necessary to deposit materials into more experienced or better-supported repositories. (See Manual, Preservation)

Access

One objective of most oral history projects is to create an opportunity for the public to interact with the interviews. There are several key components when considering how oral history interviews will be accessed and used:

1. *Permissions and ethical use:* Who can (and should) do what with an interview.
2. *Transcription:* Transcripts and video captions aid the discoverability and accessibility of interviews by allowing users to fully text-search an interview.
3. *Public access and discoverability:* Cataloging and providing access to oral histories should follow the standards of the collecting institution and/or be based on the capacity of the participants involved.

(See Manual, Access)

Collaboration

In any collaborative partnership dealing with archiving oral history projects/collections, stakeholders should discuss and come to agreements on the following:

1. *Scope:* Ascertain that the subject matter of the interviews addresses the needs and interests of each stakeholder.
2. *Format:* Ensure that the recording(s) will be made in a format and standard suitable for accession, preservation, and any specific uses identified by stakeholders.
3. *Rights and permissions:* Ensure that a proper legal release is obtained and adheres to each stakeholder's needs and requests.
4. *Long-term preservation plan:* Ensure that any partnering repository has the capacity to accept the interview materials and is capable of long-term preservation of the objects.
5. *Metadata requirements:* Ensure that required metadata is defined at the outset of the project and is collected throughout the life cycle of the interview.
6. *Access:* Determine who can access the interview, how it is made accessible, and create policies dictating future duplication and dissemination of the interview material.

7. *Restrictions on use:* Determine any restrictions, and establish how they are handled by project stakeholders.
8. *Additional considerations:* Discuss any unique or specific wishes relevant to the needs of the narrator, community, repository, or other collaborating partner.

Partners may consider creating a Memorandum of Agreement/Understanding (often referred to as an MOA or an MOU) to document the agreed-upon plan to handle the above important issues. (See Manual, Collaboration)

Ownership and Rights Management

Oral historians, archivists, and narrators alike must understand the complexity of ownership and rights management of oral history interviews. It is important to define ownership before a project starts and document any changes throughout the lifecycle of an oral history. This includes preserving narrator rights through an ongoing relationship with an archive. It is also important to consider the temporal aspects of administration and how practices change over time. Aspects that could impact ownership include changes in administrative best practice, in legislation, in societal understanding of ownership, and in technology. (See Manual, Ownership and Rights Management)

About the Document

The establishment of the Oral History Association (OHA) Archives Principles and Best Practices Task Force grew out of a direct recommendation from the OHA Principles and Best Practices Task Force after revision work was completed in 2018. The objective of the task force was to create a document addressing issues of best practices regarding the archiving of oral history, not only for archival management of oral history material, but also in terms of working with oral historians, narrators, and the public for access and care of oral history material. In January 2019 the OHA Council asked the OHA Archives Interest Group to form a small task force to take on this duty, with a suggested completion date to coincide with the 2019 OHA Annual Meeting in October. The task force reached out to the Society of American Archivists Oral History Section for support and recruitment of additional task force members. In late-January 2019 the task force convened twelve members with an intentional inclusion of backgrounds from large and small institutions, academic institutions, non-archivists working with archival collections, non-traditional archives, and independent practitioners.

The co-chairs identified six sections for this document: Appraisal and Accessioning; Metadata and Description; Preservation; Access; Collaboration; and Ownership and Rights Management. Ideas for a number of these sections came directly from discussions and feedback given by OHA members during the review of OHA's general Principles and Best Practices document in 2018.

The co-chairs, Ellen Brooks and Jennifer Snyder, are more than grateful to the task force members—Patrick Daglaris, Sarah Dziedzic, Heather Fox, Lauren Kata, Kristin Leaman, Leslie McCartney, Caitlyn Oiye Coon, David Olson, Nicholas Pavlik, Anna Robinson-Sweet, Teague Schneiter, and Steven Sielaff. Special thanks to Mary Larson for copy editing.

Guidelines for Social Justice Oral History Work

Adopted 2022

In 2019, the Oral History Association's Council commissioned a Social Justice Task Force (SJTF) to develop a document of practice, which better serves vulnerable communities and assists practitioners seeking to center the narrator utilizing ethical and procedural standards. These guidelines will add to the organization's *Principles and Best Practices* suite. This report, sample templates, and glossary serve as a framework to clarify the meaning of social-justice-centered oral history and its practice from start to finish.

This document serves as a mosaic of collective experiences from oral historians who work on the ground with vulnerable communities. These oral historians learned from their narrators who deeply inspired the creation of new methodologies that interrogated standard OHA best practices. This occurred in four areas: project development, permission process, ownership, and protective and access measures. These distinctions became central to developing a social justice practice that took a narrator-centric focus that allowed for flexibility in project creation and completion. It also reshaped oral history into a perspective that welcomes extended timelines to reflect stronger trust relations and power sharing praxis. In short, social justice praxis "moves at the speed of trust," empowering the narrator at every step. This document condenses these experiences into a holistic piece that helps practitioners learn from this shared experience. It is also a directive that secures power and protection for narrators.

The SJTF composited a committee of oral historians who reflected diversity in race, gender, sexuality, age, region, and institutional/non-institutional affiliation. These participants translated their professional experience into a set of principles that embodied a more nuanced and complex outline of models for ethical practice. Although this outline appears to focus on a "social justice" format, it is important to acknowledge that it reflects the central nature of oral history work.

The Social Justice Task Force was guided by several essential questions which helped support its exploration of social justice oral history.

- What does it mean to conform oral history to those we learn from?
- How might our procedures, methodology, and intent change if we operate in conversation with the guiding principles of vulnerable communities and activists' ideals and missions?
- What does it mean to accept that oral history work is political, particularly with regard to social justice groups and vulnerable communities?

- How can we embrace this reality and operate accordingly?
- What are oral history ethics without accountability?

The SJTF answered these questions in two ways. First, it defined Social Justice Oral History by ethical and procedural focus on the narrator (concerns, vulnerabilities, and desires). Second, it centered on a consistent effort to co-create and share power. This approach challenged previous authority that heavily weighted the interviewers and future researchers over the narrator. This recentering process requires a flexible approach which may alter project course. This flexibility is guided by 1) action steps that move listening beyond the audio to listening with an ear toward power sharing before, during, and after interview, 2) redirection away from institutionalized ideological methods, 3) expanded community definition, and 4) extended accountability. Specifically, SJTF defines listening as project co-creation. If desired, community members are included within structure, preservation, access, usage, text production, and multiple other areas of hidden and not hidden processes in oral history creation.

First, these action steps nullify academic monopoly. SJTF centers the beliefs and/or needs of vulnerable communities over institutional practices, which historically normalize the institution's own standards as the only standard. Academic validation, institutionally-driven oral history projects, funding fixation, preservation expectations, and researcher interest must be subordinate to community stipulations. Ethically-centered oral history projects avoid extraction, exploitation, and entrenched power structures.

Second, extraction includes methods that are preconceived and preconstructed toward interviewer/researcher-centric interests. For example, researcher-centric approaches create permission forms that define narrator stories as secured contracts of ownership. Instead, social justice praxis sees community collaboration as a continuing relationship with an expectation of lifetime respect, active partnership, and free access. For extended conversation on these ideas, see the SJTF reference page.

Third, these contentious power dynamics also directed SJTF's considerations in defining communities by circumstances that demand greater power sharing and protection community as a group of individuals who share a collective geographic space, experience, or level of ownership of the content being shared. SJTF recognizes the essential need to intentionally address vulnerable communities within these definitions to acknowledge both the insecure circumstances of many narrators and the rights of persons impacted, connected, or referenced by oral history participants.

Fourth, Black Lives Matter surveillance, the *Sabaya* and *The Infiltrators* documentaries, and the Boston College Belfast Project cases demonstrate the obvious and pernicious perils of ignoring potential risks to narrators or narrowly defining community to active

project participants. The *Sabaya* documentary controversy reveals how filmmakers ignored the dangers posed by public exposure for Yazidi women brutalized by sexual exploitation, and issues around language differences. Black Lives Matter surveillance, *The Infiltrators* documentary, and the Belfast Project all illustrate how the state can use oral history to overpower institutions or target individuals. The Belfast case also demonstrates how the individual narrator is not the only consideration. All persons who knew, worked, and lived with the narrator may also face threat. In this case, and reflected in much social-justice-centered work, vulnerability is collective as much as it is individual. Oral historians who power share must actively raise questions about third-party interference as well as potentially respond to factors that may affect narrators and their communities.

SJTF sees accountability as a protective pre-measure for vulnerable communities or cases that may involve state or societal harassment and violence. Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQ communities are example groups which grapple with issues of protection around identity and activism. Some storytelling can make groups further susceptible to surveillance, harassment, and other forms of violence. As oral historians, we must enter this work with that consideration and understand the potential consequences. Having transparent conversations with narrators and community members will help center on their safety and well-being. Finally, this decision-making occurs within the context of an evolving relationship and recognizes how changing social and political contexts may invite a revisiting of these decisions.

Fundamentally, we believe that oral history must not only center the narrator, but that oral history work itself must be transformed and guided by the most vulnerable. Social-justice-based oral history reminds us to enact ethical oral history. As asserted by task force member Sherrie Tucker,

“We seek narrators not from the idea that their stories must be included in the historical record, but that the paradigms that excluded them in the first place are challenged and reshaped as a result.”

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE ORAL HISTORY

Introduction

Recommendations follow a similar structure to Oral History Association’s *Principles and Best Practices* documents. The SJTF is not fanatically attached to this formula but utilized the most familiar framework to the institution’s online instruction and arrangement. It is important to note that SJTF views social justice oral history as much a process as an ideological standpoint. This process starts before a project idea and inculcates within project outcomes space for fluidity, flexibility, and timelessness. To

that end, these categories are not hard boundaries. We also provided supporting documents that model social justice practice.

Project Planning

Self-Reflection and Self-Interrogation

Positionality is more than an individual background. There are fundamental questions regarding an interviewer's status in relation to the narrator, which may include issues around sensitivity, power, and intent. Each project coordinator must ask the essential question, "Are we the best people for this project?"

Other issues to consider: what harm might emanate from doing this project; what are the interviewer/institutional limitations within this project; how does this project empower, improve, or preserve community participants; have we crafted a mutually beneficial relationship with the community before starting the project; and in what ways do community participants support this project?

Pre-Permission

Interviewers should confer with potential participants to receive feedback on planned oral history projects and try to incorporate narrator ideas on methodology, timeline, and output. Consider how the narrator might need or require labor compensation, public acknowledgment, and/or other forms of support. Finally, review with participants how they conceptualize final presentation form, distribution of information, oral history as a form of advocacy, and archival preservation.

Outreach/Relationship Building

Outreach may take many forms, but interviewers should avoid moving from idea to implementation with little attention to relationship cultivation. Interviewers should also formulate and sustain consistent relationships. Interviewers can build relationships with community members over an extended period or share tools and strategies for community members to be their own oral historians. If interviewers lack such extended relationships, it is incumbent upon each person to immerse themselves in the literature, community, history, and/or culture of the designated narrators.

The outreach and relationship building process must address community concerns that oral historians authentically collaborate and work for mutual benefit, and it must clearly communicate to interviewees and other participants that oral history is not a transactional experience in which an interviewee gives and an interviewer receives.

Pre-Protection Planning

Interviewers must consider the possible elements of conflict, danger, or harassment associated with both the narrator and narration. Does the narrator's story potentially

cause physical or mental harm or trauma to the interviewer, the narrator's network, or the narrator? We must review risks with the narrator and consider potential availability of individual and/or institutional support. Along with evaluating protection needs, the interviewer should construct or review procedures on narrator anonymity safeguards.

Additionally, interviewers should recognize that trauma is not only situated in the present but follows from the past. It is important to read and process historical context to understand the powerful ways history informs the lived experiences of communities. This awareness helps to avoid assumptions that misconstrue historical trauma as failures of individuals or the community. Otherwise, the lack of awareness can act to recreate trauma and cause harm.

Language and Translation

Interviewers should work with participants to determine interview and translation language format and discuss how to ensure accessibility of interviews in the language of participants. Additionally, interviewers should consult with participants about translator choices and the final linguistic form(s) of the transcript.

Before the Interview

Informed Consent

Informed consent plays a key role in ensuring transparency. Here we suggest a more full-bodied approach to informed consent, which includes mutual understanding, review of privacy/access, shared power, and rolling consent, all of which are detailed below. However, it's also important to recognize that not all communities view the consent process, particularly the utilization of forms, as an acceptable format for establishing agreement or partnership. In these circumstances, oral historians and institutions must work with vulnerable communities to determine how to formalize oral history usage and preservation.

Mutual Understanding

Narrators may not share similar notions about oral history, terminology, and/or the processes around its creation, usage, and preservation. This ALL must be explained, including but not limited to verbal description or written glossary of terms. (See attached for example template.)

Project Background Information

Funding: Corporate, academic, and philanthropic funding shape oral history projects. These funding sources can direct narrator focus, geographical location, political impact, and they bring up many other issues that create power conflict between funder, institution, narrator, and interviewer. Narrators and oral history project participants should be informed of participating funding entities involved in projects.

Project: Interviewers should provide professional, experiential, and project background and should inform narrators of intended and potential usage.

Outcomes: Interviewers should review with narrators possible unintended third-party outcomes, dangers, or complications. They should also discuss preservation processes and detail short- to long-term access options for interviewees.

Privacy and Access

Narrators need a precise understanding of what access to their interview will look like, as well as consideration given to any third parties discussed within the recording. Anyone conducting or storing oral history interviews should take practical steps to guard interviews from unauthorized uses. Interviewers should also provide explanations on the security and preservation protection measures in place for interviews.

Shared Power

The standard Deed of Gift both inherently assumes that the item should be given away rather than being a shared enterprise and presupposes a shared definition of "gift," dictated by the receiver versus the giver. A narrator-centered oral history agreement shares power. Additionally, it follows a praxis of "giving" that is neither fixed nor an instrument that obviates the interviewer or institution from further responsibility to the narrator. SJTF recommends incorporating a higher degree of shared power along with what SJTF member Amaka Okechukwu termed "rolling consent."

Rolling Consent

Rolling consent restructures the fixed nature of the permission form by inserting checks and balances that reestablish or change consent as requested by the narrator. These circumstances might occur, for example, due to technological and exhibition decisions not referenced or explained in the earlier mutual understanding. A changing social and political context may also influence a decision to limit or expand interview access. Outreach is repeated and reconfirmed. See sample alternative form here.

Participatory Power

Shared power introduces a thorough partnership, highly focused on narrator decision-making and concerns. This full-bodied agreement might exercise participatory power in multiple areas, including:

- Co-constructed consent and preservation form
- Automatic shared copyright
- Co-determined interview usage (rolling consent requires reconfirmation for interviews utilized outside mutual understanding)

- Co-created access levels centered on narrator, narrator family and associates, community, and then researchers
- Co-admittance (no firewalls) to all interview forms/outcomes for narrators, heirs, and other designated parties

Translations

All documents, particularly permission forms and other key documents, should be translated into the participant's language.

During the Interview

Interviewers should reiterate mutual understanding expectations and avoid jargon or academic rhetoric. If needed, provide a copy of glossary terms related to the shared consent for the narrator's records (see SJTF glossary as template). Interviewers should also provide primary and secondary contact information to the narrator should they have immediate or future questions.

The narrator may share information which they initially intended to exclude. Interviewers should always remind narrators that aspects of the recording can be withheld temporarily or permanently, along with the process for opening or closing private information.

After the Interview

Interview Notes, Time Log, Transcripts

Interviewer notes contain both the reflections of the narrator and the presumptions and/or assertions of how the interviewer understands the conversation. Though these materials are normally considered confidential and the possession of the interviewer, they ignore how the interviewer might act to usurp or ignore the narrator's own understanding of themselves and what they say. Narrators should receive a copy of audio, transcript, associated notes, time log, and proposed index to allow for clarification, challenge, and alteration to incorrect or unclear information or perspectives. While interviewers may wish to highlight or focus on a particular subject matter, the incorrect structuring of the log outline might mislead the researcher about the narrator's point, focus, or intent. Translate these documents as necessary.

Preservation

Decisions regarding preservation and archiving practices occur before the interview. Follow-up after the interview involves confirmation of these choices and a review of access policies both long-term and on a revolving basis. Considering that circumstances change for both parties (oral historians and institutions), a framework should be created which allows for free accessibility despite changes among persons or spaces.

Digital preservation is another tool for communities and organizations to maintain oral history interviews. Preservation will require long-term planning for the physical and financial maintenance of digital collections. Independent, community-based preservation will also require plans for sustainability. One way to address the issue is to have collective ownership of the material with requirements for each person holding the collection. In all cases, flexibility and creativity will be key for long-term independent preservation. Plan preservation of oral history interviews with an eye toward maintaining your collection well into the future.

Interpretation

Other considerations include community stakeholder collaboration on interpretation, dissemination, and presentation of oral history interviews. Work to create exhibit locations, types of media, and final projects that best suit access for narrator communities.

Considerations should also include how oral history projects operate not only to preserve history but also as a working tool for aiding community efforts for social justice.

Protective Considerations

State and institutional surveillance and harassment present complicated legal and ethical challenges to interviewers, organizations, and narrators. After narrators are informed of these possible implications, the interviewer and institution should address the issues of access, record keeping, potential disposal of sensitive materials, anonymity and protection protocols, confidentiality, etc. These considerations should be addressed within the context of mutual understanding and participatory consent. Protective methods might include:

1. Collection Restriction – limiting or closing collections for a specified period of time.
2. Deploying digital firewalls – This may require specific data security procedures to ensure that the information cannot be accessed, except by the oral historian or other authorized parties. Narrators should be assured about security measures that will be employed during and after the oral history project.
3. No Protective Consideration – Oral historians and archives must communicate that they have no special legal privileges or protections. These parties may be legally required to provide narrator information. In the event of a subpoena, the institution must turn over any records in its possession.
4. Using pseudonyms – In such cases, the oral historian should use only the fictitious name when referring to the narrator during the interview or in any related materials, such as transcripts, notes, finding aids, or publications.

5. Reviewing project release dates and considering embargo time frames to reduce potential harm.
6. Discussing protections for potential impact on family members, references, associates.
7. Limiting public marketing.
8. Providing legal assistance/consultation for individual participants left open to political harassment.

Sustained Relationships

The interviewer should consider sustaining relationships with narrators. This can include inviting narrators to future events sponsored by the interviewer or group, interviewer engagement with events that are narrator-driven, participation in educational outreach related to the project, consultations, or other mutually beneficial endeavors.

Conclusion

The SJTF does not presume to offer a comprehensive approach to Social Justice Oral History. Instead, we reframe oral history to embody the spirit of resistance reflected in/by those whose story we presume to preserve. We think about what it means to not only do oral history on social justice but also to do oral history in the spirit of social justice, in shared power and accountability. For continued learning on this approach, see the SJTF short list of references.

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