



OXFORD JOURNALS

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oral History Association

Ethics and Interpersonal Relationships in Oral History Research

Author(s): Valerie Yow

Source: *The Oral History Review*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Summer, 1995), pp. 51-66

Published by: [Oxford University Press](#) on behalf of the [Oral History Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4495356>

Accessed: 01/03/2011 21:6

Ethics and Interpersonal Relationships in Oral History Research

Valerie Yow

subjects. Indeed, the stance has become pro-active, admonishing researchers to protect subjects.³

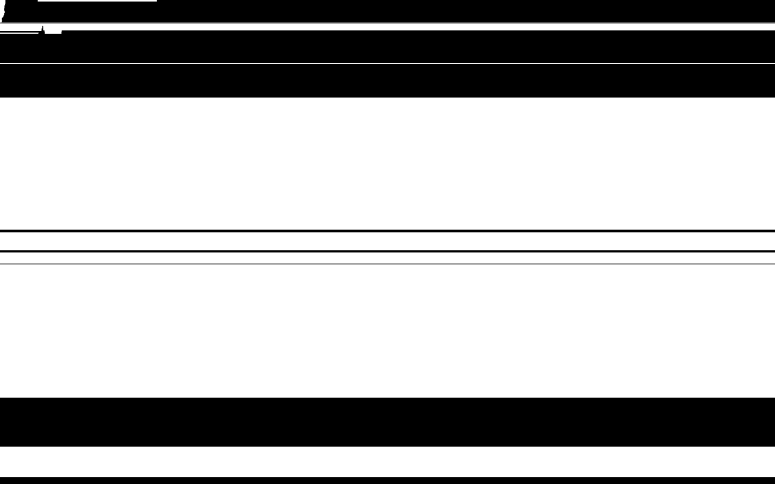
At the same time, social scientists are commanded by the guidelines of their professions not to distort or suppress research findings. As historians, we are aware that evasiveness and omissions of documented evidence destroy the credibility of the history we

historical phenomenon under scrutiny.


Because of the nature of oral history research, specifically the

plexity of context in this kind of interviewing. Humanists in the social sciences have been very much concerned with relationships between researcher and the researched.⁴ Feminist scholars across

the history of a hospital, I encountered a situation involving a negative presentation of personalities that I thought I could solve in a way at once ethical and compassionate. The institution had a dual board with a medical director and administrative director. There were



personality clashes between the two as I soon found out in a



of the history by presenting him in what might be an unnecessari-

individuals who had worked at the hospital for thirty years or more.

unconsciously slanted their accounts because they had such strong identification with the place. And some probably refrained from discussing negative incidents because they thought their loyalty might be questioned and their jobs placed in jeopardy.

My concern here, however, centers on my own behavior as

the relationship, and therefore this is not a disinterested friendship. I believe that we are obligated to indicate that this is a professional relationship which will end when the project is completed

Often, for example, in interviewing professionals, I find myself saying something like, "When we end our work together as this project nears completion, I will send you a copy of the tape. And I want you to know that I appreciate your contribution and value the time you are giving me, even though we may not always keep

in touch." And I often sense by the narrator's behavior that such a ~~clear distinction~~ between friend and researcher is clearly un

relationship, I have gone back to visit the narrators whose company I enjoyed especially, and told them I had missed them. This expression of feeling when the research was finished put the relationship in a different category—friendship. I hope. Again, the only way I know to correct for this is to be aware of some markers in

herent and unavoidable tensions, and to maintain a constantly reflexive stance about their influence on the research.

Trust in the Interview: Newman DeLoe's

the recording to inform her that faculty sometimes come into the

[REDACTED]

that in these cases there were other indications of narrator personality remaining in the text. The other crucial question was, “Is

indiscreet remarks directed against individuals seemed personal asides and not important historical information, Hughes concluded that she could delete them from the publicly available transcript—while advising the reader of her editing—without damaging the historical record.²²

The Potentially Painful Question

In trying to get the “whole truth,” we often realize we need to ask questions in an oral history interview that may cause the narrator some emotional pain. If the information is needed and can be gleaned in no other way, we have to consider ways to diminish the narrator’s discomfort as much as possible. Sociologist Jack Douglas has advised waiting until the narrator is at ease in the interview situation and “circling” around the painful question. He points out that a comfortable narrator will often refer to the topic without being asked.²³ The interviewer can take this as a cue that

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

implied audience of generations that it offers. As long as we are researching individuals and communities we love, or movements we approve of, this makes oral history a very satisfying endeavor. The ethical issue arises in interviewing people with values you hate.

Kathleen Blac, drawing lessons from her oral history research

with Ku Klux Klan members, emphasizes the importance of not letting disgust blind you to a questioning process that would permit systematic and deep analysis. She regarded the study of the

of information. Furthermore, as historians, we present the consequences of our narrator's actions as we see them, regardless of how the narrator sees them.

Misrepresentation of the Research to the Narrator

Blee listened, accepted the situation in which her narrators assumed that she felt as they did about race, and on the basis of this rapport obtained useful information. This is a grey area: she

the Holocaust place it beyond our attempts to comply with our profession's standards for interview behavior? George Steiner ar-

gues that the Holocaust is "unbearable because it is outside of the

domain of rational discourse and presumably even our moral universe: "It may be that the Auschwitz-universe, for it was that, precisely marks that realm of potential—now realized— human bestiality, or rather, abandonment of the human and regression to bestiality."

of course, the consideration of certain harm for individuals outside of the interviewer/narrator relationship who have been named and discussed in the oral history.

In the interviewing situation, the interviewer must define the nature of the interviewer/narrator relationship and act according to that definition, while being sensitive to the narrator's feelings.

cannot be omitted, but damage to the narrator can be kept to a minimum. The questions can be asked at a point at which the narrator realizes the main purpose is to set the historical record straight. They can be phrased in such a way that the narrator does not feel