

## **Oral History: From Fact Finding to History Shaping**

Nicholas Mariner

Oral history can be seen as the earliest form of historical inquiry; it predates even the written word. However, as a specific endeavor of the recognized historical profession, oral history finds its place in a more recent approach to historical methodology, specifically the new social history. Although oral traditions existed long before organized writing methods, oral inquiries did not begin until the twentieth century. While the Progressive historians looked to oral sources as a means of support, their use of those documents was heavily anecdotal and lacked any standardization to guide the use of such sources as a legitimate historical endeavor. Oral history as a historical methodology can generally be traced back to the first oral history center in the United States coming out of Columbia University in 1948. It was in this post-war context that oral history began and evolved into the serious and widely-accepted process that it is today.

Since its inception as a craft, oral history changed its focus several times in order to reapply itself to new criticisms and concerns over its usefulness and effectiveness, changing from a “fact-finding” to a “history-shaping” process. David Dunaway and Willa Baum cite four generations of oral historians. The first generation, pioneered by such historians as Allan Nevins and Louis Starr, “conceived of oral history as a means to collect otherwise unwritten recollections of prominent individuals for future historians, for research, and as a tool for orally based biography.”<sup>1</sup> The second generation emerged after the establishment of basic archives around the mid-1960s. These historians wanted not only to account for the important historical figures, but to “employ oral history techniques to describe and empower the non-literate and the historically disenfranchised.”<sup>2</sup> This generation found its roots in the social history movement, and their work became the basis of many local,

feminist, and educational movements. The third generation, separated from earlier decades rife with extreme conservative movements or liberal countercultures, emerged in the 1980s as a highly educated and craft driven group of oral historians. This group focused on the difference between amateur and professional oral historians, and emphasized the importance of the process of oral inquiries. The third generation was in many ways a reaction to “new technologies such as computerized research aids and personal computers [making] professional oral history collections more capital intensive.”<sup>3</sup>

The fourth generation, a new generation proposed by Dunaway and Baum, marks the shift in the purpose of oral history. Not only do these historians employ the most useful technology (e.g. video or cassette recorders, computer technology, etc.), whereas many of the previous generation had no access to such materials, but they also place a different significance on oral history’s usefulness as an historical inquiry. According to this new generation, “oral interviews – and their construction – *themselves* represent history: compiled within a historical frame negotiated by the interviewer and the narrator, within contemporary trends, within certain definable conventions of language and cultural interaction.”<sup>4</sup> Such is the debate of the field to date and the purpose of this essay. Is the purpose of oral history intended to be a set of primary source documents or a process by which history is constructed from those sources? This question highlights the general debate surrounding the fields’ generational evolution, and to some degree, most of the historians discussed in this essay will address this question. This essay tracks the changing interpretations of this central question. To do so, the early arguments over the effectiveness of the field must first be explored. The early arguments against and in support of oral history will show the manner in which historians initially perceived oral history and its usefulness to the profession. Secondly, this essay will explore the subfields that have established oral history as one of its main outlets to historical inquiry. These fields, such as local and Native American history, have explored oral history with such intensity as to mark another progression in the process’s usefulness and interpretation. The most recent debate concerning historical research, that concerning the use of Institutional Review Boards for oral history, will be discussed. Not only is it the most recent issue

---

<sup>1</sup> David Dunaway and Willa Baum, *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (London: Altamira Press, 1984), 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

---

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

being debated by those in the field, but it also reflects the establishment of oral history as an historical process separate from other forms of inquiry based in other social sciences and even other historical methods. Finally, ethical issues that have not been fully addressed by the Oral History Association guidelines will be discussed in brief.

As oral history first began its progression from anecdotal support to historical inquiry, it was met with a certain amount of criticism. Though oral history has become firmly accepted as a legitimate historical practice in current scholarship, in the early stages of the field there were voices adamantly opposed to its use, questioning the validity of any such historical inquiry. In the debate to justify oral history, historians commonly respond to Barbara Tuchman's "Distinguishing the Significant from the Insignificant."<sup>5</sup> To Tuchman, the issue of oral history is not the "stuff" that comes out of the interviews, but how the interview is the inherent problem of the process from the beginning. "Taking notes on an interview," according to Tuchman, "is a crystallizing process...distinguishing the significant from the insignificant as you go along."<sup>6</sup> The problem with the interview then is the interviewer's tendency to not write down specifically what is said because the interview (recorder) does not see the significance of what the narrator (speaker) is saying. Such conscious omission affects the historical process in such a way that it questions the legitimacy of the endeavor at its very base. Not only can the interview omit what is not important as he/she sees it, but the interviewer also has the ability to create, from the narrator, a significance that was not intended. Tuchman states that the interview "has the power to create, with words, an image that was once not their in the mind of the reader."<sup>7</sup> That is to say, the interviewer, with sole access to the interviews transcription, can pick and chose the spoken word to fit an argument that may not have been the narrator's intended purpose for such comments. Tuchman, then, locates the fallacy of oral history at the role of the interviewer, or the historian. There are too many factors involved in an oral inquiry that allow the "collecting of trivia and giving what should have been forgotten new life by recording it and passing it to

---

<sup>5</sup> Though Professor Tuchman is a popular historian, her comments on the field were severe enough to warrant serious academic response.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Tuchman, "Distinguishing the Significant from the Insignificant," in *Radcliffe Quarterly* 56 (October 1972): 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

others."<sup>8</sup> Therefore, Tuchman's arguments have created a basis by which all other advocates of oral history would construct their theories of the field and methods for the process. Her work caused oral historians to question the purpose of their research. As a result, many transitioned from a generation that simply collected historical data by oral research to a new group of historians seeking greater significance.

In a similar fashion, William Cutler addresses the issue of oral history as a question of accuracy and reliability. Again, the problem of the inquiry lies directly in the interview process. Making the process most questionable are forgetfulness, self-delusion, reticence of narrators, the biases of interviews, and inaccuracy of human memory.<sup>9</sup> Cutler does not place fault solely in the place of the interviewer, as Tuchman does. Instead, the interview process is fallacious on the part of both the interview and the narrator, as the interview relies, at least in part, on human memory, which can be restructured and manufactured within the mind of the narrator. According to Cutler, "a respondent may deflate his role in an event or even refuse to discuss it to avoid embarrassment should his recollections ever become known to friends or associates."<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the interpretation of an event relies solely on the narrator's recollection, which comes with inherent flaws. On the other side of the issue, inaccuracy can be traced to the interviewer before he/she ever takes out the tape recorder. "The internal sources of error in oral history interviews... [are] foresight in the selection of topics and respondents."<sup>11</sup> That is to say, an interview can negatively affect a study by applying biases in source selection before the interview begins. This source bias can lead to a misrepresenting study, creating yet another outlet for inaccuracy in oral history. Therefore, much like Tuchman, Cutler seeks to address the problem of the interview process as a questionable means of historical inquiry.

In response to the points raised by both Tuchman and Cutler, Alice Hoffman, a labor historian, seeks to place their concerns in context and address their concerns to offer a version of oral history that takes into account their criticisms and refines itself in order to

---

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> William Cutler, "Accuracy in Oral History Interviewing," in *Historical Methods Newsletter* (June 1970): 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

continue its historical process. Reliability and validity are the two concepts addressed by Tuchman and Cutler that Hoffman deems the most important to legitimize an oral inquiry. According to Hoffman, the oral interview must be taken, and then compared to a significant body of evidence. "Without such evidence, an isolated description of an event becomes a bit of esoterica whose worth cannot be properly evaluated."<sup>12</sup> Hoffman, then, is proposing a means by which to address the concerns of Tuchman and Cutler by going beyond the interview to a general historical inquiry that allows a type of "fact checking" to assess the validity and reliability of an interview. For instance, a narrator discussing his experience in the Vietnam War can have the dates and events of his recollections verified by the existing documents. The reliability of the source and the validity of his narration can be assessed by such verification. Having proposed a new research possibility, Hoffman also asserts several advantages of using an oral inquiry: the certainty of source authorship, conversational candor not found in other brands of source inquiry and the preservation of life experiences of those not eloquent enough to express their experiences in personal memoirs.<sup>13</sup> Writing in 1974, Hoffman's statement helped to promote the usefulness of the oral inquiry, yet she clearly places oral history as "a process of collecting...reminiscences, accounts, and interpretations of events from the recent past."<sup>14</sup> Hoffman expresses the earliest opinions of the former generations of oral historians who established oral history as a fact gathering process to contribute to the historical process, but not a historical process in itself.

Ron Grele, in a similar vein, highlights the problems facing oral history, but attempts to place oral history in its historiographical context. Like the aforementioned historians, Grele recognizes data management, interpretation of source usefulness, and source bias as possible problems facing the inquiry. He goes a bit farther to assert the oral sources are a present product, not a past product, and run the risk of making "the subjects"<sup>15</sup> lives anthropologically strange." That is to say, the interview can be perceived as a product of the narrator in his/her current state, which can affect how he/she

---

<sup>12</sup> Alice Hoffman, "Reliability and Validity in Oral History," in *Today's Speech* 22 (Winter 1974): 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Ronald Grele, "Can Anyone Over Thirty Be Trusted," in *Oral History Review* (1978): 43.

recollects the past. Regardless of oral history's possible flaws, it does well to further the progress of the New Social History that was developing at the end of the 1970s. Historians can utilize oral interviews as historical fact, as long as they are verified in a manner promoted by Hoffman. Verification substantiates the historical debate by providing with further evidence.<sup>16</sup> Again, the generation in the late 1970's was still heavily in support of oral "fact finding" to support other historical inquiries.

The promotion of oral history as a beneficial endeavor for specific historical subfields marks the transition for oral "fact finding" to the regard of oral history as a "history-shaping" process. Some fields such as Native American history rely heavily on oral traditions to tell the story of their past, due to the paucity in written Indian records. James Lagrand promotes the use of oral history for Native American history because it allows historians to "discern how twentieth-century Indian peoples have understood themselves and the institutions and forces at work around them."<sup>17</sup> Lagrand concerns his work with oral traditions, which utilize both memory of recent past recollected by the narrator as well as traditions and folklore passed down by word of mouth from previous generations. Therefore, as Lagrand suggests, oral history is vital to understanding Indian history because "it is a culture so rich in oral tradition."<sup>18</sup> Lagrand's proposition for Indian history then places oral history as an active shaper of history, rather than a means of collecting data, as the previous generations of oral historians have suggested. Lagrand's essay also promotes a scientific version of the interview process which will be revisited shortly.

Native American history is not the only field to rely extensively on the use of oral traditions and oral histories to promote the construction of its past. Local history proponents have suggested the use of oral history due to the scarcity in local records to support other traditional types of historical inquiry. Within such tradition, local historians often address the relationship between local history, oral history, and folklore. Larry Danielson writes in an article examining the synthesis created by the three genres, "in literate civilizations the personal sense of history has all but vanished, save

---

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>17</sup> James Lagrand, "Whose Voices Count? Oral Sources and 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Indian History," in *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 21:1 (1997): 23.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

for the local community...It is at this level that folk history plays a paramount role in the historical record."<sup>19</sup> Danielson promotes oral history and its relationship to local folklore as a "history-shaping" process that can construct a physical past of a community by verifying oral accounts with municipal records, as well as create an image of a community's development based on the development of their folklore. That is to say, it should not be disqualified from historical analysis because it is a folk tale. Danielson asserts that "in addition to reminding others that the investigation of subjective reality is an important goal in oral local history research, folklorists need to share their knowledge of traditional patterns of behavior." He then goes on to lament the illegitimacy unfairly placed on folklore accounts. "Sometimes folk arts and actions of the past, although verifiable as realities, are interpreted as much hokum, either grotesque fictions or conscious prevarications."<sup>20</sup> Danielson's arguments reflect the new oral history generation in which oral history actively creates history, which can be applied to local history effectively.

In a work entitled *Oral History and the Local Historian*, Stephen Caunce again turns to oral history as a means of exploring local history. His book again follows the most recent generational pattern of oral history, as he asserts "it is not just about reminiscence and description, but is capable of deepening and widening our analytical understanding of the world of the past."<sup>21</sup> His views are common among the new generation of oral historians as highlighted earlier in this essay. However, Caunce strays far from many of his contemporary oral historians when he explores the methodology used in the oral inquiry. According to Caunce, "precisely because oral history is developing all the time, there is no case for setting clear limits to what can be done and no room for dogmatism about methods."<sup>22</sup> Caunce's book supports the amateur practice of oral history, establishing no guidelines for readers and suggesting that one "might surprise [himself/herself] with innate skills for many of them are the inter-personal skills that we all use every day."<sup>23</sup> Such

---

<sup>19</sup> Larry Danielson, "The Folklorist, the Oral Historian, and Local History," in *Oral History Review* (1980): 8.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Stephen Caunce, *Oral History and the Local Historian* (New York: Longman Publishing Group, 1994), 12.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

statements place Caunce at the end of a spectrum of debate over the scientific nature of oral history which can best be discussed now.

Caunce's remarks about the lack of methodological dogma are far from the argument made by many of his contemporaries in the field. Lagrand, although he is largely advocating oral history as a tool to inquire into the history of indigenous peoples, advocates oral history's usefulness in all fields, provided "it is done carefully and scientifically."<sup>24</sup> The debate exists within the field as to the extent to which uniformity should exist in oral history to ensure the reliability and variability of the inquiry. The Oral History Association (OHA) has set for itself a distinct and specific set of guidelines to guide those who seek oral inquiries. The guidelines promote the scientific process in oral history. The guidelines are structured along such topics:

#### Responsibility to Interviewees:

1. Interviewees should be informed of purposes and procedures.
2. Interviewees should sign a legal release.
3. Interviewers should use the best recording equipment possible.

#### Responsibility to the Public:

1. Oral historians must maintain the highest professional standards.
2. Interviewees should be selected based on their relevance to their experiences of the subjects at hand.
3. Interviewers should provide complete documentation of their preparation methods.<sup>25</sup>

The OHA goes on, after describing the responsibilities of the oral historian (those listed are but a few of the most important guidelines) to set clear standards for research material selection, objectives, and ethical guidelines that can be used to justify the legitimacy of an oral interview.<sup>26</sup> By establishing such rigid standards for the proponents of oral history, the OHA has created a scientific set of standards to guide oral inquiries. Such guidelines fall far from Caunce's approach to oral history, which eschews strict dogmatic

---

<sup>24</sup> Lagrand, 25.

<sup>25</sup> OHA guidelines, Oral History Association, Pamphlet 3, 1989.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

methodology. While Caunce's opinions are shared by some oral historians, the guidelines set forth by the OHA have become standard practice in the field for historians hoping to justify their oral history research.

Beyond setting guidelines for the oral inquiry, some historians have begun suggesting the use of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) to regulate and monitor oral inquiries. IRBs are common among many of the social sciences, particularly sociology and psychology. The purpose of the IRB is to establish a council of experts whose purpose is to oversee all research involving human subjects to ensure that no harm comes to the subject by way of irresponsible testing and researching. In 1998, the American Historical Association, the Organization of American Historians, and the OHA corresponded with approximately seven hundred IRBs in an effort to make such IRBs relevant to the historical procedure. They also suggested that oral history be included among those research activities that IRBs can review under an expedited procedure.<sup>27</sup> The promotion of IRBs to legitimize historical research, specifically oral history, was short lived however in the historical community. Linda Shopes points to the "tendency for IRBs to be composed of people unfamiliar with methods of historical research."<sup>28</sup> Historians' research is stifled by IRBs composed of social scientists unfamiliar with historical inquiry, making oral history research restricted by standards arbitrary to the historical process. Some problems were addressed specifically, such as structured, anonymous interviews. Shopes asserts that "while anonymity is an option in oral history, and indeed appropriate in some cases, anonymous sources lack credibility in most historical scholarship."<sup>29</sup> That is to say, oral history interviews rely on the interaction of interviewer and narrator. The questions shape themselves as the interview progresses and a specific script makes such opportunities to explore other ideas difficult to impossible. The reaction against IRBs by historians such as Shopes indicates the concern of modern oral historians in "shaping history" through an active conversation rather than "fact-finding" through a systematized, anonymous questionnaire.

---

<sup>27</sup> Protecting Human Beings: Institutional Review Boards and Social Science Research, prepared by the American Association of University Professors, *Academic Freedom and Tenure*, May 2000, 4.

<sup>28</sup> Linda Shopes, "Institutional Review Boards Have a Chilling Effect on Oral History," in *Viewpoints*, (September 2000): 3.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

Along with the debate over the scientific process and the establishment of interview guidelines by the OHA, other concerns have been raised regarding the ethical issues still apparent in oral interviews. Valerie Yow, in 1995, proposed several ethical issues to be considered when engaging in an oral inquiry. In her essay, she identifies the relationship between the interviewer and narrator as the crux of the ethical issue in an oral interview. According to Yow, there is "an interpersonal relationship between interviewer and narrator that does not exist in the written sources."<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the narrator commonly does not understand everything established in the release forms by the interviewer, "creating confidence in the interviewer that causes the narrator to say something they did not want to admit."<sup>31</sup> Yow brings to the forefront several ethical issues that the OHA guidelines do not specifically address, but should still be present in the mind of the interviewer. Her concern with these ethical issues points to the influence of a generation of historians concerned with "history-shaping" based on reliable evidence free of bias, where the oral interview is an important device to research and create a historical picture.

The debate over oral history methodology has progressed by stages from its inception as an historical inquiry in the late 1940s. Dunaway and Baum establish four distinct generations of oral historians, where the progression of the debate goes from active defense of a method of history to refining the method once widely accepted. That is to say, early oral historians saw the use of the method as one useful in "fact-finding," though they were willing to defend it against its critics. As the generations evolved and oral history became accepted as a legitimate methodology, new generations of oral historians began refining the purpose of the oral inquiry into a "history-shaping" exercise. For these historians, oral interviews are used to create a stand-alone history, not merely as factual support. The secondary debates to come from that, such as ethical issues and IRB usage, largely reflect the transition from "fact-finding" to "history-shaping" concerns among those employing oral studies.

Concerning the debates surrounding the oral methodology, I find Linda Shopes response to IRB regulations and Valerie Yow's proposal of the unaddressed ethical issues to be the most engaging

---

<sup>30</sup> Valerie Yow, "Ethics and Interpersonal Relationships in Oral History," in *Oral History Review* (1995), 57.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

arguments made. IRBs, due to their nature of regulating biological and social science research, are often restrictive to the unique historical inquiries involved in oral interviews. Shopes' article speaks specifically and effectively to these issues. Yow's ethical issues are also important for consideration because they address those issues that are ambiguously mentioned in the OHA standards. These two articles have done the best to advocate oral history research that can flourish to promote the field, but is not abused to fit the biases of the study.

Because Tuchman and Cutler have mostly become widely discredited in the debate over oral history, the most ineffective argument mentioned in this essay was Caunce's arguments for the removal of dogmatic methodology in oral history. Because oral history has come so far against critics to establish its own legitimacy as a field, removing any efforts to standardize the field would again call into question the effectiveness of the inquiry by removing any validating standards that have been created. Such standards were created in response to the questioning of oral history's reliability, and what Caunce proposes fundamentally rescinds the structures that have been so effective in promoting oral history as a historical method. Oral history has now become an accepted and popular method for historical endeavor, specifically in some historical subfields, and as the contemporary generation uses such inquiry to shape history, it is obvious that issues remain to be addressed to ensure the field continues its effectiveness and reliability.