

## THE ETHICS OF INTERVIEWING

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**RÉSUMÉ:** L'histoire orale comporte des problèmes d'éthique particuliers. Ainsi, l'interview n'est pas un "droit divin" ou un "droit légitime" devant être accordé sans préambule. A cause de ses implications sociales, à cause du respect dû à l'Histoire et ses travaux variés, le processus de l'interview se doit d'être défini et défendu. Deux domaines controversés requièrent une attention spéciale: 1) les problèmes propres au processus (le pourquoi, le comment et la nature des questions posées); 2) les problèmes propres à la personne impliquée (qui est le témoin ou l'informateur). Cependant, dans la hiérarchie des valeurs éthiques, les droits de l'informateur devraient avoir préséance sur ceux du processus. L'état moral de l'interviewé n'est véritablement garanti que par l'intégrité morale de l'intervieweur, sa sensibilité au manque de courtoisie ou à ce qui peut causer l'inconfort, ainsi que sa capacité à faire usage de discrétion et "d'imagination préventive". Par dévotion à sa discipline, le praticien d'histoire orale pourrait placer l'interviewé en situation désavantageuse". Si donc dans l'échelle des valeurs adoptée la personne a préséance sur le processus, le chercheur a comme devoir moral de réduire le "désavantage" de l'informateur, même si ce faisant il réduit l'efficacité de sa discipline. Si chaque interview était basé sur le principe du remplacement altruiste de la personne ("J'accepterais que ça m'arrive si j'étais vous"), la contribution de l'histoire orale serait certes en accord avec l'éthique.

As weaver of the human saga, the historian intertwines fact and interpretation. The woof of historical fact used depends on recognition (presuming availability). The historian's conscious or unconscious warp of interpretation determines the recognition as well as its pattern of incorporation in his work. Like fabric, the historian's saga is not without bias.

The explanation for this is at the core of the historian's endeavour. What motivates the professional or the rest of us with amateur-historian status? Is it an innate sense of curiosity compelling us to know what can be known? Is it a sense of "tidiness", a "need to fill in the gaps"? Do we seek the past to explain our present, to project our future? Is it because we are anxious to "set the record straight"? The historian's raison d'être can be seen as desire, right, responsibility or multiple thereof. The historian's conscious or unconscious identification with a definite view of the discipline is the source of the bias already mentioned. Whether the historian's work is done orally or by artifact, that bias remains: it is the source of the many ethical problems which accompany social interaction and its historical description.

Setting aside the ethical problems encountered in the pursuit of history by way of artifact (I mean here the attempt to describe the past using examination of written records, monuments, military relics...as sources of information), the pursuit of oral history presents as many, if not more, ethically problematic issues. Further, while your concern is focused on the interview methodology as one of the oral historian's instruments, it is well to recognize that other instruments are at hand for achieving that purpose, and that these, while not at issue here, require ethical scrutiny in

any comprehensive examination of your larger subject (e.g. the use of visual and aural recording techniques where there is no recognition of that interaction on the part of the subject). Your question is no less weighty in its ethical import because of its limitation. Quite the contrary: because of its limitation, and the peculiarly difficult questions arising from it, we are forced to examine certain principles in this immediate application: such principles might otherwise have been glossed over. As it happens, in focusing on problems of ethics for the oral historian in the interview situation, some maxims for the ethical pursuit of history in general may emerge, management of bias not the least in importance.

Simply described, the oral historian's interview is an interaction between researcher-historian and subject, designed to elicit information from the subject which is peculiarly his.

The methodology for the interaction varies, e.g. question and answer, suggestion and response, gauged silences...

An ethical question is one which raises questions of "ought" (as contrasted with can and is) and, strictly speaking, lies outside the realm of law, although responses to legal and ethical "oughts" are often coincidental. All desires are not "oughts", i.e., not every desire entails second-party obligation for its satisfaction. "Rights" and "responsibilities" are part of the "ought-spectrum": they are judged more or less morally-binding in terms of claim made, the rationale for it, the person making it, the person meant to meet it.

Applying these characteristic ethical concerns to the work of the oral historian, two contentious areas require attention:

- 1) problems of process (what is asked, why, by what method)
- 2) problems of person (from whom is the information sought)

The working premise advanced is that personal rights precede process-rights in the hierarchy of ethical values.

#### A. Ethical Problems of Process

##### 1. What is asked?

At first glance, the answer is obvious enough : information. The real question is "What kind of information?" and the real answer goes beyond "fact" for two reasons. One has to do with the definition of history to which an earlier allusion was made. If history is seen as "filling in gaps", then any "fact" may be useful. If history is seen as "setting the record straight", then not all "facts" will be useful: the meaning attached to "straight record" determines that.

The first ethical problem, and the fundamental one must be with the definition of what is being done, and on its answer depend resolutions of all other ethical dilemmas of process. History, more particularly, oral history, must be defined so as to give integrity (wholeness) to the undertaking.

##### 2. Why is the interview taking place?

Several levels of response are possible, all related to the matter just considered. The first answer will be, "To fulfill the needs of history". One must look then more

closely at the question and ascertain oral history's claim. Is it imperative that the past be known, and if so, why and by whom? "Imperative" implies "obligation to ask", "obligation to respond": what level of intervention, inconvenience, interference, invasion of person is tolerable in the name of "process-success"? Is oral history sought as a matter of personal-investigator-curiosity? This implies less obligation of the respondent, but is satisfaction of one person's curiosity sufficient grounds for even lesser intervention, inconvenience, interference, invasion of another? Is there validity in the argument that "the respondent does not understand what he knows: his 'facts' are not correctly 'focused' (the interviewer ought to help him in his ignorance)?" Is this sufficient justification for intervention, inconvenience, interference, invasion of his state of mind, presuming he is not actually harming another? Even harming another may not call for his illumination, only his silence. In simplest terms, the rationale for oral "history-taking" and oral "history making" must be examined and measured as one of many human actions with social and ethical implications. On what assumptions do the "rights" of oral history and its practitioners rest? Without wide social acceptance of these, there is no valid reason for the oral historian's interview. The discipline must be justified by its followers: there is no "right" automatically claimed/given in superiority to persons here. Only after this has been achieved with success can valid claims be made, and only then can deviations be so labelled.

3. What method is being used?

Compared with other available methodologies, why this for the purpose? if, e.g. this interview-process takes longer, requires more skill or is more fatiguing for the interviewer, why use it? Courtesy to the interviewee (his time is used) requires methodological justification.

More importantly, what validity has the oral interview method, generally-speaking? Is the point professionally-settled? Is validity established for its use in all situations, in this one - with this researcher and this subject? Is the ability to sift "fact" from "fiction" in the oral interview a "given"? What criteria eliminate "fables" in furthering the researcher's goal?

How competent is this interviewer? What interpersonal skills are entailed and possessed? Has this interviewer the ability to elicit "information" in circumstances of difficulty and ease, the ability to "shift ground" should unforeseen circumstances (e.g. grief reaction) warrant that, and the ability to perform well while still doing justice to "history"? What standard has been met? who says so? How is the standard monitored?

The oral historian's interview is not a "given", a "divine right", to be accepted without comment. Because of its social implications, because of the respect paid "history" and the wide ambit of its work, the oral interview process must be defined and defended. People, more precious than process, are also present.

B. Ethical Problems of Person

Without an interviewee, there is no interview. The researcher's self-interest, if not respect for his discipline, argues appropriate treatment of the information-giver, so that maximum information is given. Surely, that being said, more is involved in appropriate treatment of an interviewee than in appropriate treatment of iron-ore or bacteria, when one seeks information from them? The difference lies in the continuing recognition that the interviewee is a subject (not an object), a person. A person has moral sensitivities, moral claims, moral rights. Without developing the point further, there are moral obligations to be honoured in dealing

with persons, moral obligations which are non-existent when dealing with things. Presuming an "ethical" case can be made for the "process" as described, the higher moral value assigned "persons" dictates a number of considerations in that context.

1. Privacy of person is of primary importance. The interviewee is providing an "inner" view, one that reveals himself as well as the information sought. While some of that "inner" view might be surmised from external action, the interview makes explicit the subject's view of his "inner" vision. Perhaps judged objectively as "faulty", "not worth it", any expressed personal vision still exposes the one who gives it, places him at the mercy of another, at "moral risk". If the researcher can justify the interview, he still retains moral responsibility for the person his work makes vulnerable. He has a duty to provide protection for that person in the imbalance of power the interview engenders. In a real sense, the interviewer knows the person interviewed better than the person knows himself: the onus on the researcher for tact, delicacy, courtesy, respect is greater for the gift of self given in trust by the subject. Researcher-response to that gift via sensitivity and humility must prevail, whether the person be one or a collectivity.

2. For reasons given, the invasion of privacy requires initial and continuing consent (meaning free agreement, with knowledge, to the procedure). In both ethical and legal realms, this is to presume that the case for "process" is acceptable to the interviewee. Much has been written about consent: so far as principle is concerned, reference to the literature without repetition here will suffice.

Turning to application of principle in the interview situation, one could envision a number of ethical dilemmas.

a) It is quite possible that the subject will refuse cooperation so that the attempted interview will fail. Perhaps the researcher's rationale for invasion of privacy has not been sufficiently convincing. But the researcher is equally certain that the subject should give the information he possesses. Is investigator-manipulation, deception, coercion justifiable? Not if protection of person is the guideline. Unless it can be demonstrated that this person or society will suffer greatly by silence - unless, in other words, the process becomes more important, or perhaps, a higher human value is served - the individual's negative response is sufficient to preclude or conclude the interview. Coerced consent is inadmissible. If the case be other, who shall be sufficiently impartial to judge its necessity? The root of any tendency to justification of personal coercion here lies with the definition and justification of history's domain.

b) Will the individual's positive response be sufficient permission for the investigator to initiate and continue an interview? Will passivity constitute consent for its continuance?

Consent rests on competence as well as non-coercion. If the project "attracts" subject-consent, the researcher in accepting it must verify that the subject knows what he does, that he is aware of his dual role, revealing "fact" and self. The question of child-subjects, uncomprehending subjects is an issue in itself.

3. So closely related to consent that consent is impossible without it, assessment of benefit-risk in the oral interview situation is a third consideration when "person" is the predominant ethical concern.

a) Benefit to interviewer is easily-established ("History" benefits, the book is published, the academic promotion assured...). But the interviewee is the primary

person, and the interviewee's benefits must be weighed and found to exceed any risks incurred in the inequity of status created by the interview. The standard of risk used for measurement is that of interviewee, not interviewer: the choice remains his. It may well be that the subject shares the interviewer's joy in publication or advancement: he must be given the option of knowing that this is the reason his participation is sought, and this will be its result. It may be that this is not sufficient benefit in his view: he can only know that if he is told, and gives it personal consideration. It may be that the interviewee is pleased to participate for his own reasons, quite different from those of the interviewer: this must be established, not assumed.

b) The risks must be weighed as well. Will publication of the interview (presuming that risk is acceptable in itself) enhance or endanger the interests of the subject or collectivity? The subject must be decided.

Can anonymity be guaranteed? Should it be? Should the interview proceed if that is impossible? The subject must be acquainted with that risk and decide for himself.

Risk to the subject's relatives (embarassment, e.g.) must be brought to his attention if the subject does not himself perceive them, and the researcher bears the responsibility for the subject's knowledgeable consideration and action in their regard.

Behavioural change in the subject, or in those about him may be wrought by the interview (will he be seen as "traitor", as "powerful"? Will his community be invaded by curio-seekers?) This must be examined and accepted prior to subject-participation.

In summary, the long and short range benefits must be balanced against risk, presuming the subject wishes to consent to the interview-process: the responsibility for ensuring "fair and adequate" presentation and necessary consideration rests with researcher.

In each case, the moral standard for assessment of risk/benefit to interviewee is the interviewee's (not the interviewer's): the principle proposed makes that clear. This applies with particular force in any ethnic or cultural environment not native to the oral historian. Knowledge of customs, courtesies, laws, and assimilation of them for adequate protection of the subject, at the subject's desired level, is the rule.

In all of this, the moral integrity of the interviewer, his sensitivity to discourtesy or discomfort, his ability to employ discretion and "protective imagination" on the subject's behalf, are the only real guarantee of the interviewee's moral status. In devotion to his discipline, the oral historian may put others at "disadvantage". Reducing such "disadvantage" to his subject, at the expense of potential "disadvantage" to his discipline, remains the researcher's moral duty (not his option) if person precedes process in the scale of values adopted. As guarantor of the ethical interview, the historian remains ready to terminate it at his or the subject's initiative, for reasons directly ethical or other. If this is not the case, the principle is not observed.

All human actions form part of the fabric of the human saga. The oral historian's work is to trace part of that fabric's pattern, to choose and arrange the elements according to his motif or specification. As the motif chosen depends on his

interpretation of history, so his use of others in his work depends on the ranking he gives to the demands of the historical process when compared to the persons (including himself) who make the process possible. If the addition of each new element (each interview) rests on the principle of priority of person to process or altruistic personal replacement ("I'd agree to have that done to me if I were you"), I believe the oral historian's contribution cannot be less than ethical.

May I add to my original statement? Ethical considerations also alter the weaver-historian's warp. Recognition that this is so, accompanied by a knowledgeable choice and profession of principle regarding the use of persons in your work is a compelling disciplinary imperative. It is fundamental to the progress of your process.