

COHA Code of Ethics and Responsibilities, 1975

Introduction

Since its inception in 1974, the COHA has striven to provide the necessary leadership for the development of oral history in Canada, both in terms of theory and practice. This has taken the form of annual conferences, workshops and publications. The Directory represents a further embellishment of the latter medium and, as a part of this volume, the code of ethics and responsibilities printed below embodies the Association's attempt to formalize the interaction of individuals and groups involved in the oral history process through responsible guidelines. The rapid growth of oral history during the past decade has created a definite need for a code of ethical behaviour governing the conduct of the interviewer. Without a proper degree of adherence to such guidelines, the practices of oral history becomes exploitative, inefficient and, ultimately, self-defeating. It is hoped that the publication of this code will help to counteract such tendencies, where they exist, and contribute to the strength of oral history research in Canada.

1. Ethical Conduct and Responsibilities for the Interviewer

- a. After background research and a careful selection amongst potential interviewees, the interviewer should inform the chosen respondent(s) of the nature, expectations and institutional affiliation (if any) of his or her research before entering the interview situation. The interviewer should also conduct a pre-interview session with the interviewee or respondent for the mutual benefit of both parties in preparation for the interview.
- b. The interviewer should explain the function and rationale of the tape recorder in advance and should also, within reason, be amenable to the interviewee's time schedule, domestic customs and interests.
- c. The interviewer should inform the interviewee of the ultimate disposition of the recorded material together with the possible uses of that material including scholarly, educational and literary uses as well as media dissemination.
- d. A written contract between the interviewer and the interviewee donating the latter's words (and any performances such as folksongs) to the former or the institution which he or she represents, should be signed by both parties at the conclusion of the interview. This contract or release form should also govern the

use of the tape(s) and any restrictions thereof and these should be scrupulously followed by the interviewer or institution.

- e. If the interviewer plans to donate the tape(s) to an institution or archive (a recommended course of action in most instances) then another written contract or release form similar to the first should be prepared and signed by the interviewer and a representative of the institution. In this case a contract should also be signed between the institution and the interviewee to complete the transfer.
- f. During the interview, the interviewer should not force desired responses through leading questions or repetitive enquiry but should conduct the session(s) in a spirit of objectivity, candour and integrity together with a respect for human dignity in order to avoid possible social injury to or exploitation of the interviewee. The interviewer should also know when to conclude a session if the interview cannot be completed in a single visit and should, in that event, schedule another session or sessions.
- g. The interviewer, if working independently, should attempt to extend enquiry beyond immediate needs in the eventuality that the recorded material is donated to an institution or archive. While the material is in the custody of the interviewer, however, that person should not only adhere to the restrictions for use placed on the recording(s) by the interviewee, but should also, where thought necessary, restrict usage of potentially sensitive material from general consumption even though this may not have been originally restricted by the interviewees. This is especially true where excerpts from a recording(s) are requested for use by the electronic media or in publications. The interviewer should always, if possible, inform the interviewee of such requests when they occur and be guided by the latter's response even if an excerpt or excerpts could be legally used.
- h. The interviewer, whether independent or sponsored, should identify completed tapes and accession these accordingly, either in basic numerical progression or in a fashion predetermined by the interviewer or sponsoring institution. The interviewer should also, through summary or transcription, provide a written record of material recorded. If the interviewer produces a transcript of an interview, it should be sent to the interviewee for review and correction of any error in fact or spelling but significant alterations in content or grammar should be discouraged. The same restrictions (if any) as placed on the recording(s) by the

interviewee apply to the transcript although, after reviewing same, the interviewee may decide to lift these in whole or in part. A written contract or release form, including any restrictions, should then be signed by the interviewee and interviewer. As in the case of recordings, if a transcript(s) is donated to an institution by an independent interviewer, a release form should be signed by that person and a representative of the institution and the latter, in turn, should prepare another release form to be countersigned by the interviewee, indicating his or her approval of the transcript's deposit.

2. Ethical Conduct and Responsibilities for the Interviewee

- a. The interviewee, if properly informed by the interviewer, should recognize the importance of oral history as an historical source, together with the research goals of the particular interview(s) or project to which contribution is being made and should, therefore, make an attempt to review any notes, diaries, records or letters, together with his or her collective memory in advance of the first interview session.
- b. The interviewee should also, within reason and circumstance, afford the interviewer a comfortable and relatively quiet space in which to conduct the interview, if this is to take place at his or her residence and should attempt to impart quality information during the interview session or sessions. If payment is involved, the latter aspect should be understood and accepted by the interviewee.
- c. The interviewee, again if properly informed by the interviewer, should recognize the possible uses of the recorded material by either the interviewer or the repository and should, therefore, strive to reach a mutual agreement through written contract whereby his or her words are donated to the interviewer or institution together with any possible restrictions thereof.
- d. The interviewee should be permitted to exercise his or her preference with regard to any restrictions placed on the recorded material but should not be so overly protective as to restrict, in whole or in part, valuable material of a non-sensitive nature which would be of benefit to researchers, the educational system and the general public. If it is agreed, however, that the recording(s) or portions thereof should be restricted, the interviewer or institutional representative (archivist) must exercise judicious control over the donated material and prevent misuse where this is suspected. The same vigilance should also be applied even if the recordings are unrestricted.

- e. In the event a transcript of an interview is produced by the interviewer, the same procedures and mutual responsibilities as noted in “h” of Section 1 should be followed by the interviewee.

3. Ethical Conduct and Responsibilities for the Institution

- a. The institution, if sponsoring an oral history project, should make a careful selection of both interviewers and interviewees such that the maximum potential of the project might be reached.
- b. The institution should identify, index and catalogue interviews received under its sponsorship and an attempt should be made, through summary or transcription, to provide a written record of the material accepted. Generally, the interviewer or interviewers sponsored by the institution should prepare the summary or transcription although, for one reason or another, this is not always possible. The independent interviewer, for his or her part, should identify, number and prepare a summary or transcription for any tapes offered for donation to an institution or archive. Once these processes have been completed on an given interview, project or outside donation, the institution, subject to any restrictions placed on the recordings, should inform interested parties and the general public of their existence.
- c. The institution should exercise careful judgment over material received either as a result of its sponsorship or that which is offered as a donation and should not hesitate to establish priorities in the processing of such information in accordance with its historical value. The institution should also consider the option of rejecting material offered as a donation or for sale if this is judged to be substandard in historical quality.
- d. The institution should ensure that all recorded material received under its sponsorship is accompanied by a written contract donating the interviewee’s words to that institution together with any performances included on the tape or tapes (including folksongs). Likewise, any material donated by an independent interviewer and accepted by the institution should be accompanied by a contract signed by the interviewer and a representative of the institution. In this situation, a contract is also required between the interviewee and the institution to complete the transferral linkage and thus formalize understanding and agreement between the two parties.
- e. The institution should abide by any restrictions placed on recorded material by the interviewee resulting from sessions conducted under its sponsorship or a donation from an outside source and

should use proper judgment in making even unrestricted material available for public use, especially in the broadcast or print media, since the interest of the interviewee should always come first.

- f. If a transcript of an interview is produced by the institution under its sponsorship or by an independent interviewer who later donates the tape(s) to the institution, written contracts or release forms should be signed covering all links in the transferral of such material to the institution and mutual rights should be observed. See “h” of Section 1.