

CHAPTER 5

ORAL HISTORY

A Collaborative Method of (Auto)Biography Interview

“To speak is to preserve the teller from oblivion.”

Alessandro Portelli

Storytelling is a natural part of the human experience. Human beings communicate meaning through talk. Oral historians have harnessed this tradition of transmitting knowledge and created an important research technique that allows the expression of voice. While storytelling has a deep history, the adaptation of this human process into a legitimated research method is relatively new.

Oral history was established in 1948 as a modern technique for historical documentation when Columbia University historian Allan Nevins began recording the memoirs of persons significant in American Life. (North American Oral History Association, as quoted by Thomson, 1998, p. 581)

Some researchers find it helpful to distinguish between “oral tradition” and “oral history,” the former being the umbrella category in which the oral history method can be placed. “Oral tradition” among many Native American

150 ● METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

people refers to stories handed down for multiple generations that can also involve nonhuman subjects (Wilson, 1996, p. 8). This differs from the more recent academic use of the term “oral history,” in which personal stories are collected from an individual.

As we will show in this chapter, oral history is a very unique kind of interview situation because the process of storytelling on which it is based is distinct. There are moments of realization, awareness, and, ideally, education and empowerment during the narrative process. When conducting an oral history with a college-aged woman struggling in a serious battle with anorexia nervosa, there was a point, two long sessions into the life history project, when the interviewee noted the moment in her life that culminated in a turn towards anorexia. It was a significant moment in her life narrative that could only have come through by the autobiographical telling of her story. Not only did this represent a major turning point in the respondent’s self-awareness, but it also helped elucidate and expand on existing substantive knowledge about eating disorder vulnerability and the onset of such disorders. The clarity with which Claire notes the moment she turned towards body obsession and the way in which it initially occurred could only have happened through the telling of her story from childhood on.

I kind of focused more on my circumstances and the lack of opportunities that had been available to me. Like, all these things that I had, put up waiting, you know, I had waited for, for so long, and everyone was like, “one day, one day,” and then, that day was here and nothing was happening. You know? And so that was hard. Um, but I and actually it was at that time when I knew I was staying at school, that I remember thinking, ok, obviously I can handle the academics. You know, the friends, maybe I won’t be developing my closest friends at college, but I still have my ones from high school. You know, what am I going to do with this time? Like I was sitting here looking at, a three-year period going, what am I going to do with three years of my life? You know? And I think that was the other disappointing thing, is that with the exception of perspectives, my other classes were like high school. They were very structured, very like, rote memorization, as opposed to: what ideas do you have? Like, do you think this is, a good idea? How do you feel about this? And so I was kinda like, what am I gonna do with three years? And I can remember that day, thinking to myself, well, at least I can come out with what I want to look like. Like, part of being successful to me, like, I had a certain image in my head, and that image was not like, a woman with baby fat on her face. You know? It was very in-shape; it was funny because I never wanted to be skinny. But I wanted to be strong. I always,

I mean, especially growing up with guys, I wanted to be able to take them on in basketball. And I wanted to be able to go skiing, you know? I just wanted to be in really good shape. And I was just like, ok, well at least I can, I can control my health. You know? Even though I don't really have much I can do about this decision, and now looking back I can see that I, you know, that I did have a voice. I could have said forget it, I'm just leaving, you know? But when I weighed the pros and the cons, especially because I was always someone to keep the peace in my house, to disrupt a balance, or to make unnecessary trouble, wasn't something I was willing to do. So I, you know, I remember saying to myself, well, I'll just start exercising, to watch what I eat, you know, I mean, it was the first time I wasn't in organized sports, so like, I wasn't going from season to season. *And um, I was just like, ok, that's what I'll do.* [Leavy, 1998, interview two with Claire (pseudonym), emphasis added]

What a powerful moment in the research process—the revelation of when and why what would become a life-threatening body obsession began two years earlier.

As you can already begin to see, oral history is a special kind of intensive biography interview. During an oral history project a researcher spends an extended amount of time with one respondent in order to learn extensively about her life or a particular part of her life. The preceding excerpt is taken from a project which used oral history as a way to understand how otherwise successful female college students with eating disorders became so focused on their bodies—what life experiences webbed together in a way that created body image obsession vulnerabilities in Claire and others? But it is not enough to say that we learn about the lives of our respondents as with other qualitative methods of interview and observation, oral history allows researchers to learn about respondents' lives from their own perspective—where they create meaning, what they deem important, their feelings and attitudes (both explicit and implicit), the relationship between different life experiences or different times in their life—their perspective and their voice on their own life experiences. Oral histories allow for the collaborative generation of knowledge between the researcher and the research participant. This reciprocal process presents unique opportunities, continual ethical evaluation (heightened in the electronic age), and a particular set of interpretive challenges. Predominantly a feminist method, oral history allows us to get at the valuable knowledge and rich life experience of marginalized persons and groups that would otherwise remain untapped, and, specifically, offers a way of accessing subjugated voices. Beyond contributing to social scientific knowledge substantively, the oral history process can be a rewarding and empowering experience for both the

152 ● METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

participant and researcher, as in the case of Claire, who later reported feeling empowered by gaining insight regarding pivotal moments in her life.

● ORAL HISTORY AS DISTINCT FROM IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW

What is oral history? As we have already said, oral history is a special method of interview where the researcher and research participants spend extended time together engaged in a process of storytelling and listening. In other words, it is a collaborative process of narrative building. However, this alone does not distinguish oral history from other forms of qualitative interview. So the real question is: what makes oral history special? What is unique about this method, how do qualitative researchers use this method, and, what does it add to our knowledge of the social world? In order to explicate the special qualities of oral history, we must differentiate it from in-depth interview, which is the closest alternative.

As we saw in the last chapter, in-depth interviews are an excellent way to gather rich qualitative data from the perspective of the people being studied. The same is true in an oral history. However, when using in-depth interviews an interviewer will typically have a focused topic for the interview and will follow an interview guide which, as we saw, may be semi-structured or relatively unstructured. Interviewees may or may not be asked identical questions, depending on the design and goals of the project. Oral history interviews differ in that, while the researcher is studying a specific topic, the organization of the topic is likely to be far less focused. For example, if you are interested in studying the body image issues women experience while in college, in-depth interviews may be the appropriate method for focusing on that issue while still allowing respondents ample room to qualitatively explain what is important in that regard, from their perspective. Now let's say that you want to study body image issues among college-age women as a part of their life process. Meaning, if you are interested in the life of the respondent from childhood on, such as the various life experiences that may have webbed together to create particular body image vulnerabilities once in college, oral history may be appropriate. This was the case in the study Claire participated in. Oral history allows you to study a long period of a person's life or even their entire life. You can narrow down the topic, such as body image, work experiences, parenting experiences, etc., but ultimately you will get a much more in-depth story from each individual participant. This depth may sacrifice some breadth as they start to detail particular experiences at the exclusion of others, but we will discuss this more soon.

It is not enough to say that you are studying a longer period of time with oral history; in fact, in some cases this may not even be true. What is really underlying the strength of the method is that you can study *process*. If you are studying a woman's life from childhood through college in order to understand her body image issues at the present time, what you will learn about is not only what she is currently experiencing and her perspective on that, but the *process* that lead her there. Likewise, historical processes and circumstances will underscore her narrative in ways that help us understand individual agency within the context of social and material environments. So, while oral history focuses on the individual and her narrative, it can be used to link micro- and macrophenomena and personal life experiences to broader historical circumstances. Accordingly, oral history is a critical method for understanding life experiences in a more holistic way as compared with other methods of interview. This is congruent with the tenets of qualitative research and can yield not only rich descriptive data but also knowledge about social processes. Some topics simply lend themselves more to one method. History-driven topics are highly congruent with oral history. For example, if you are interested in studying a historical event or a historical time period and how a certain population experienced that event or lived in that period, oral history may be the best method.

Botting (2000) used oral history as a way to understand the experiences of a particular group of working women in the 1920s and 1930s. Specifically, she was interested in domestic servants who had migrated from coastal communities to a mill town in Newfoundland for employment purposes. She used oral history as a way to understand the experiences of both migration and domestic work for that group of female workers, who at the time represented a large proportion of women workers in that area. This kind of research is essential in filling gaps in our current knowledge base of what it means to be a woman from a particular social class in a given time, place, and industry, from the woman's own perspective. There are numerous examples of how experiences that have not yet been researched could begin to be understood from the vantage point of those who have lived them by using oral history in the way that Botting did. In this way previously excluded groups can share their valuable knowledge with us. In addition to these kinds of expansive experiences, oral history is invaluable in coming to understand how people have experienced historical events of import.

Crothers (2002) launched a fascinating project at Indiana University Southeast in which undergraduate students extensively interviewed community residents about historical events. Specifically, World War II and Korean War veterans were interviewed as were people who lived during the Great Depression. The study had an immeasurable positive effect on both

154 ● METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

the interviewers and interviewees. One dimension of this outcome could be categorized as community-building because the community learned more about its constituent members. In terms of direct educational benefits, students learned about the relationship between individual experience and socio-historical conditions, allowing the importance of a historical perspective to emerge during the experience of doing qualitative research.

After interviewing World War II and Korean War veterans, students no longer view Pearl Harbor, Normandy, Iwo Jima, Hiroshima, and Inchon as distant locations on a map but as places where young Americans like themselves fought and died in miserable conditions and often without recognition. Students learn that though the veterans invariably remembered their service with pride, most had no desire to repeat the experience. Veterans left permanently disabled, both physically and psychologically, and those who were prisoners of war reinforce the lesson that war, even a “good war,” should be entered only with trepidation. In short, interviews made a profound impression on students. (Crothers, 2002, p. 3)

Additionally, research participants were given a voice and the opportunity to tell their story to interested listeners. This too is a profound and important part of the oral history experience.

Students also interact directly with some of the community’s most undervalued members, senior citizens, who share the richness of their lives and experiences. As one student noted, “I think the older people [involved in the project] were made to feel important. *They had a story to tell* and I think college students taking the time to investigate their experience made them feel like someone cared about their sacrifice. (Crothers, 2002, p. 3, emphasis added)

When used in these ways, oral history can meet ideals of education and empowerment as well as substantive knowledge building. There are also examples of using oral history as a way of understanding current events of import from the perspective of those experiencing them while they are still fresh.

Merely days after the terrorist attacks of 9–11, “The September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Project” was initiated at Columbia University. Bearman and Marshall Clark were co-founders of this institutionally supported longitudinal research project. Within seven weeks after the event the researchers had collected oral history interviews from almost 200

people, and within six months they had collected an additional 200 oral history interviews, including those with volunteers, rescue workers, survivors, and others who lived or worked in the area of Ground Zero. The researchers were interested in understanding the construction of individual and social memory. Specifically, they wanted to understand the role of the mass media and government in the interpretative process of individuals regarding coming to terms with the events that had transpired. Furthermore, as their interviewees were ethnically diverse, they wanted to understand how a heterogeneous group of people who were at the epicenter of the event has interpreted it and filtered the information and images they were receiving from the larger culture. How did feelings of patriotism and alienation impact the construction of individual memory during the immediate aftermath? In the minds of those there, does 9–11 qualify as a “turning point” in American history as it has repeatedly been portrayed by media analysts and political leaders? These were amongst the questions the researchers had as they listened to the stories of 9–11 from those who had experienced it and were now trying to make sense of it. Oral history became an important way of understanding memory construction as it was actually occurring.

The researchers found that political imagery was an important component in early memory construction. The researchers ended up determining that there were various recurring categories of interpretation that people placed on their experiences in order to make sense of them. These can also be likened to frames through which people come to interpret their experience of the tragedy. Categories/frames included patriotism, flight and refuge, consolation, and solace (p. 7). The frame of interpretation that the researchers were most interested in was the idea of 9–11 as an “apocalypse.”

Perhaps the most important for our ultimate considerations of the significance of September 11 as an axis of national as well as international understanding, the attacks were perceived in direct and indirect ways as an apocalypse. It was registered, in that sense, as a moment that stood outside of time and an event that ended history as we had previously understood it. The interviews we conducted with survivors and eyewitnesses were frequently shot through with religious analogies and metaphors and with apocalyptic imagery from films and movies, demonstrating the ways that many wrestled with questions of good and evil, life and death outside the frame of history as they had previously understood it. (Marshall Clark, 2002, p. 7)

The ability of oral history to tap into the intersection of personal experience, historical circumstance, and cultural frame is clear in the 9–11 oral

156 ● METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

history study. Moving away from these specific examples, we can make some comments about the relationship between biography, history, and culture as revealed by oral history.

In a general sense, oral history provides a way to invite someone to tell their story—of their past, a past time, a past event, and so on. However, their individual story is always intimately connected to historical conditions and thus extends beyond their own experience. Oral history allows for the merging of individual biography and historical processes. An individual's story is narrated through memory. This means that their recollection of their experiences, and how they give meaning to those experiences, is about more than "accuracy;" it is also a process of *remembering*—as they remember, they filter and interpret. Having said this, there is a tension between history and memory, the collective recorded history and the individual experience of that collective history, that can be revealed, exposed, and explicated through oral history. In this vein Richard Candida Smith (2001) says: "memory and history confront each other across the tape recorder" (p. 728). As we will expand on in our conclusion to this chapter, you can see that oral history is becoming increasingly important in the growing interdisciplinary research on collective memory.

Similar to the study of historical or current events, oral history is also very useful for studying the individual experience of social change and merging social and personal problems. Slater (2000) used oral history in order to understand how four black South African women experienced urbanization under apartheid. The women, as perhaps would be expected, had both shared and individual experiences which are brought out during the life history process. The data show how structural constraints shaped these women's economic realities in profound ways (p. 38). However, these women also illustrate that their own agency ultimately impacts their lives, as does the social reality that they share.

... life histories enable development researchers to understand how the impact of social or economic change differs according to the unique qualities of individual men and women. This is because they allow researchers to explore the relationship between individual people's ability to take action (their "agency"), and the economic, social, and political structures that surround them. (p. 38)

Slater makes a case that oral history can be an integral method in development research.

As globalization and our study of it increases, oral history can continue to be used to study political, social, and economic changes. In this time of world change, oral history can help us understand both the shared and the personal

impact of social upheaval on the individuals living within it. For example, oral history would be a wonderful method for understanding how individuals within Iraq are experiencing the U.S. occupation, political regime shift, and rebuilding of their country. How do individuals adapt to these major social changes? What are individual coping strategies? How do individuals filter and respond differently to these changes? How has social change impacted people's personal relationships, including marriage, courtship, and parental relationships?

Oral history is also often used to study the experience of oppression—the personal experience of being a member of an oppressed group. Sparkes (1994) conducted an oral history interview project with a lesbian physical education teacher in order to examine the ways that discrimination and heterosexism shaped her workplace experiences. Personalizing the shared experience of oppression is a strength of oral history.

When using oral history researchers may interview fewer people in total but spend more time with each participant, which is likely to occur over several pre-planned interview sessions. Qualitatively inclined researchers who work with human subjects, particularly in fields such as sociology, are likely to be drawn to both in-depth interviews and oral history interviews. A choice between the two should be based on the fit between the research goals and research method. When comparing in-depth interviews with oral history interviews, the appropriateness of the method is related to the topic you are pursuing and the number of respondents and depth of data that you are looking for. It is important not to privilege one method over the other but rather to focus on the strengths of each. Likewise, the two methods can be combined in multimethod designs, though this is pretty uncommon due to their similarities and the fact that they are both very time-consuming.

Now that you are getting a better handle on how oral histories are distinct from traditional in-depth interviews, it is important to examine more closely why oral histories are special and why feminists in particular have worked so hard to revive, study, broaden, and legitimate their use.

ORAL HISTORY: RAPPORT, LISTENING AND STORYTELLING AS RESEARCH TECHNIQUES

Building Rapport and Dealing With Difference

During data collection, oral history relies on recording verbal communication between the researcher and research subject. We can break this down further and say that oral history is dependent on two techniques which foster

158 ● METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

the flow of data: talking and listening. Before a story is even told the interviewer and interviewee can begin to understand how to listen and talk in the context of producing a life narrative. It is important that the interviewer and interviewee begin to create a rapport prior to the first recorded interview session (if possible), a rapport which they must attend to throughout the interviewing process. While rapport is always dialectical, the primary responsibility is with the researcher who has initiated the research process. This may mean some preliminary discussions so that both parties feel comfortable with each other and begin to become familiar with each other's "talk style."

Prior to the initial meeting, interviewers can discard their own research-oriented time frame in favor of narrators' temporal expectations. Taking time to know another means more than a preliminary interview; it entails meeting for an extended session or more. Congruent with good oral history practice, researchers take the opportunity to solicit narrators' comments and suggestions about the project, including names of potential narrators, other resource persons, and sources for photos, artifacts and written materials. However, the purpose of the initial contact is not just a preliminary interview to obtain data; the meeting is an opportunity to promote collegiality and to engage in mutual self disclosure. (Minister, in Gluck and Patai, 1991, p. 36)

The process of gaining rapport and building collegiality is vital to the successful interview process. Linguistic practices are also a part of this. As we will see later in our section on storytelling, there are various structures people use to tell their stories, and both parties must be comfortable with each other's style.

Although we have discussed rapport and reciprocity as critical in the use of all interactive qualitative research methods, these issues are perhaps heightened in the oral history situation—particularly for researchers who envision the process holistically. This is because, as a researcher, you are not simply asking the research participants to allow you to observe naturally occurring behavior that is independent of the research process (as in field research). Likewise, you are not asking a set of questions on a clearly defined topic (such as with in-depth and focus group interviews). When you ask someone to participate in an oral history project you are asking that person to narrate their life story and, through words, to share themselves on a deep level. Depending on the nature of the project you may be asking them to revisit difficult times in their life without any guarantee that once you have triggered their memory, they will be able to "turn it off" at will. Likewise, you may have no idea what directions the

person's story will go in once the narrative takes off. Thus you cannot define all of the topics that will be covered in advance—you simply don't know them yet. Rapport is therefore essential in the oral history process because the interviewee gives a high level of trust over to the researcher and makes themselves vulnerable to a range of emotions, feelings, and thoughts that may stretch from very positive and joyous to difficult and painful. When a foundation for trust is established the collaborative process of oral history can proceed and the research participant will know that the researcher is truly there with them for the ride. As you will see, oral history is an intimate process of two people working together in order to produce a meaningful biographical narrative.

Given the collaborative nature of oral history, who can do it? Who can be an interviewer? As with all interactive research, issues of difference are an inseparable part of the research process. As such, to what extent can the researcher and narrator differ from one another? For example, some researchers suggest that because different groups within the social order have particular experiences and particular ways of expressing those experiences, "sameness" is integral to a successful oral history interview. Minister (1991) explains that women communicate differently than men and without supportive communication in return some women may be muted. As such, women must interview women because they share in a particular sociocommunication subculture and understand how to talk with other women. Other researchers actively incorporate difference into their research but practice reflexivity throughout the project in order to avoid claiming authority over another. For example, Sparkes (1994) conducted an oral history project with a lesbian despite the fact that he differed in terms of both gender and sexual orientation. As such, he did not share in the experience of oppression (and multiple oppressions) that framed his respondent's life. As a part of reflexive practice Sparkes wrote about the experience of interviewing someone who does not share in the unearned social privileges that he enjoys. By incorporating this difference into the entire research endeavor, including the write-up, Sparkes demonstrates that social privilege can be used to help give voice to those typically silenced within the culture (1994). There is much debate in academia about who can be a knower, who can understand the words of another, and so forth. Ultimately, these are personal choices that the researcher must make. In thinking through some of these issues as you select your topic and design your research project, you'll have to consider your epistemological beliefs regarding the relationship between the researcher and researched. When writing up your results, you'll need to consider to what extent you are able to have authority over the life story of another, particularly if you do not share a vital social status (i.e., the experience of oppression due to race, ethnicity, social class, gender, or sexuality).

160 ● METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

● LISTENING

During the interview process the researcher assumes the role of active listener. This role is not simply the role of listener we all enact with friends, family, and colleagues. As the interviewer in an oral history situation, the researcher must learn to listen with a completion and attentiveness that is far more rigorous and in tune with nuance than most of us use in daily life. As such, we must train our minds and ears to *bear* the story of others, not just the words, but also the meaning, the emotion, the silence. We must listen to the narrator and to ourselves. This process may involve the questioning and disavowing of previously held concepts and categories that frame our understanding of social reality, making the process potentially transformational for the researcher as well. Feminist scholar and oral historian Dana Jack explains that the complexity of “listening” experienced in oral history is *the very thing* that makes this method unique. Let’s join her behind the scenes.

Behind-the-Scenes With Dana Jack

What I think the unique aspects are is that what it does is it allows the researcher to situate herself or himself right in the middle between the culture and the individual. And what I mean by that is as we listen to a person, what we hear is an individual’s life story in its full idiosyncrasy, with all of the details and all of the sort of particulars of that person’s life. But as a researcher you’re also listening for the culture and so you also know that the very words that the person uses to explain their life and their situations also come from the culture and so they’re explaining their life though um, culturally available stories. And yet, when we listen carefully, you can hear how the individual also participates in all those cultural stories but also brings their different experiences and so what you’re listening for is how—to me I’m listening for so many things. One is how the person, the individual, the idiosyncratic story relates to the larger cultural story and how the narratives are available and how those cultural narratives can sometimes obliterate a person’s meaning, a person’s experience, and then they have to sort out what they think and feel in relation to the larger story, and so I guess what I love about the oral history method is that it lets you listen to the individual really carefully while also still understanding the larger cultural narrative and how the person participates in that. And of course there are many larger cultural narratives . . .

So it lets, let's see how to say this, well, I don't know (*laughs*). It just lets us, it lets us listen to at least two large voices, one is the individual and the other is the cultural narrative that they dip in and out of. And then how, where's the tension? Where are the questions? Where's the person um, feeling confused by how their own experience relates to these larger narratives? How and why are they trying to distinguish their experiences or does the larger narrative try to you know, seem to obliterate it and what happens then? How do they feel? So I'm always listening for not just one voice, not to that subject's voice only, but how it intertwines and distinguishes itself and is in conflict with other narratives, other larger narratives.

As qualitative researchers engaged in research involving human participants, we are searching for meaning from the perspective of those being studied. In order to get at this kind of meaning we must become nonjudgmental and open listeners. The researcher needs to be right there with the person narrating their story. In this way we need to “immerse ourselves in the interview” (Jack, 1991, p. 18) [AUTHOR: is this Anderson jack?] [Yes, but this text is odd. The authors, Anderson and Jack have indicated in the chapter who wrote which section—this section was written by Jack but in the piece by Anderson and Jack, so I'm not sure how this is to be properly cited] in order to hear meaning from the perspective of the person speaking. But how are we to know if what we are hearing is the person's perspective? How do we know that our own life experiences and categories of understanding are not filtering the meaning we take from the experience? While, of course, as imprinted human subjects ourselves, we can [AUTHOR: can or can't meant here?] [can't] simply disavow our own understandings of social reality, there are techniques that we can apply to the oral history interview in order to better get at meaning from the respondent's perspective.

Dana Jack (1991) suggests three techniques aimed at helping us become more effective listeners. These are specific things we can *listen for*—places where meaning, from the narrator's viewpoint, can be found. First, researchers can listen to a person's “moral language” (p. 19). These kinds of comments tend to be self-evaluative. How a person evaluates themselves can tell us a lot about where the person is placing emphasis in their life, and how they use cultural constructs of success, failure, attractiveness, promiscuity, etc. as measures in their own lives and identity formation. These comments also provide insights into a person's emotional center, places of self-confidence and self-scrutiny.

162 ● METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

Although very different in tone, these moral self-evaluative statements allow us to examine the relationship between self-concept and cultural norms, between what we value and what others value, between how we are told to act and how we feel about ourselves when we do or do not act that way. (p. 20)

For example, if you are conducting an oral history with a woman and you are talking about some joyous event in her life, such as a special birthday party or other family celebration, and in the midst of her talking she says “the cake was really beautiful with ornate decorations and it was so good but of course I felt guilty about having so much right there,” this would clue you in to several things. This is an example of using moral language—the language of guilt—to impart meaning. This may serve as a signal to the interviewer that there are some body image issues going on or that the respondent has concerns about her weight and how she appears to others. Her statement is not, however, occurring in a vacuum, but rather in a cultural context that puts a premium on thinness and self-control, particularly for women. So here you can start to make some links between the respondent’s self-concept and the larger culture in which she lives. Both what she has said and the way she has said it are important. Such statements may also provide the interviewer with probes to be pursued later or even at a different session with the respondent (as to not interrupt the flow of what the narrator wants to say).

The second thing to actively listen for is what Jack terms “meta-statements” (p. 21). These are places in the interview where the interviewee will stop and double-back to critically reflect on something they just said. They have made a statement, but now they are going to return to that statement in order to comment on it. This may illustrate a change in their thought process, a moment of self-realization or discomfort with how their statement may have been perceived and thus an internal desire to support their words.

Meta-statements alert us to the individual’s awareness of discrepancy within the self—or between what is expected and what is being said. They inform the interviewer about what categories the individual is using to monitor her thoughts, and allow observation of how the person socializes feelings or thoughts according to certain norms (p. 22).

For example, someone who has just made a comment about race may then double-back to clarify, explain, or support their original statement. This kind of cycling back may be a reflection of historically specific societal norms, such as appearing nonracist, and the interviewee’s awareness that they may have violated those norms in the eyes of the interviewer. Such statements are

then one potential space for understanding how individuals feel about and adjust to societal norms, values, and expectations.

Finally, we must learn to listen to the “logic of the narrative,” paying particular attention to consistencies and contradictions and “recurring” themes (p. 22). More specifically, the way that themes are brought into the person’s narrative and their relation to other themes is important data. The placing of emphasis through recurring themes and both consistencies and conflicts within statements can give us insight into the logic the person is using to tell their story. For example, what assumptions do they hold to be true that inform how they interpret their own life experiences? What thoughts, beliefs, values, and moral judgments are underlying their interpretive and narrative processes?

Beyond using these listening techniques, Anderson and Jack (1991) also encourage researchers to learn to listen to themselves, and, in our experience, this is a critical part of the listening process in oral history. As you listen to the narrator you must listen to your own internal monitor—your feelings, confusions, questions. These are areas that may require clarification, elaboration, and exploration. You do not want to interrupt the narrator to answer these questions; remember, your primary job is that of listener. However, when pauses and transitions arise you may want to cycle back and probe based on the various thoughts and feelings you experienced while listening. It is a fine line that through practice you will learn how to navigate. On the one hand, to be an active listener in this collaborative narrative process you can’t just “be in your own head” having an internal conversation; however, you want to be listening to your own gut reactions while you listen to the respondent.

When we choose to practice oral history we are making a commitment to understanding meaning from the perspective of those being interviewed. We want to know what they think, how they feel, how they filter and interpret in the ways that they do. In order to do so, we become highly engaged listeners. So far, we have been talking about listening to the content of what a respondent is saying—the main kinds of statements that emerge as people tell their stories. As important as the substantive content of oral history narratives is the form through which people tell their stories. In other words, the narrative style. In this vein, the nuances in the way a person narrates her story are also an important data source. We recommend that you come up with a consistent way of transcribing data that allows you to note pauses, laughter, the raising or lowering of voice, tonal changes, the elongation of words, and so forth. All of this can alert you to where a person places meaning and how that person is feeling at a particular point in the interview. Putting such remarks in italics, bold print, parentheses, etc. is an easy way to retain this valuable data in your initial transcript. We will discuss this more later when we talk about transcription and analysis.

164 ● METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

In terms of listening, what is missing from their story, silences, absences, feelings for which there are no words, are also components to knowledge that emerge in oral history form. We will talk about narrative style more when we discuss storytelling and “talking” as a method of data building, but for now we will elaborate on what we mean by listening for “silences,” remembering that we are meaning-seekers.

What is left out of the narrator’s story can give us insight into their struggles and conflicts, such as differences between their explicit and implicit attitudes, but also the impact of the larger culture on the person’s biography and retelling of that biography. Clear omissions, for example, may indicate that there is a disjuncture between what the person thinks and what they feel is appropriate to say. This may be the result of their perception of social norms and values or their feeling that they are in violation of normative ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving. For many researchers who practice oral history, such as feminist and multicultural researchers, the research project is imbued with an intent to access subjugated voices—the perspectives and people who are forced to the peripheries of a given social order. In this circumstance, listening for silences may also indicate that the categories and concepts we use to interpret and explain our life experiences do not in fact reflect the full range of experiences out there. The silence therefore indicates something about the culture at large and a gap between ways of framing experience and the experience of the individual. In other words, culture may not be providing everyone with appropriate tools with which they fully and freely express what meaning something has for them. For many, this is the very reason why listening to the voices of individuals, particularly those long excluded from the production of culture, is imperative.

At the heart of the collaborative process of data collection is both an emphasis on listening and talking. The form talking takes is that of storytelling and narrative.

Storytelling and Narrative Styles

During the oral history interview the research participant assumes the role of narrator and tells their story. This is a collaborative process of storytelling involving both the narrator and interviewer. The narrator tells their story, but the interviewer fosters the narration through the listening and observational techniques described earlier. In addition to the spoken word itself, the way in which a participant tells their story is itself recognized as an important knowledge source by oral historians.

Qualitative researchers are generally concerned with attending to the meaning people attribute to their life, but oral historians are interested in attending to the experience and voice of those they study in a comprehensive way, unique to the practice and historical development of oral history methodology. Williams (2001) distinguishes between voice and Voice within the research process, using the capital “V” to denote a holistic conception of the term *voice*. Voice in this sense includes nonverbal gestures, intonation, expressions, bodily movements, speech patterns, and silences (p. 43). These components of the interview are a part of the interviewee’s full expression of herself. In other words, we must attempt to retain and learn from the *performative* aspects of the storytelling and not allow this to be lost during transcription and analysis (p. 46). Williams encourages researchers to attend to the Voice of the participant more than simply the spoken word provided by an unembellished or “clean” transcript. The researcher can then use their listening and observational skills (p. 45) to take “field notes” or “memo notes” during the interview or transcription process, respectively. Returning more specifically to the role of the participant as narrator and even performer, let’s examine storytelling techniques and speech patterns, central components of data building in oral history.

People have different styles for telling their stories. These different communicative styles result in various kinds of narratives. In this vein, the researcher needs to focus on the “narratology” or narrative structure (Williams, 2001). As feminist and other critical scholars have long explained, narrative form and language choice also provide important data about the narrator. In this way the language and speech style used by the narrator do not merely frame the substantive content of the interview but are also an integral part of it. A holistic approach to oral history emphasizes all aspects of the process. Oral historians, who often work from feminist, multicultural and third-world theoretical perspectives, are interested in understanding the experiences of those marginalized within the society. How has their position within the culture influenced their life experiences as they interpret them and how have these experiences in turn impacted their approach to storytelling? Etter-Lewis expresses these issues:

Language is the invisible force that shapes oral texts and gives meaning to historical events. It is the primary vehicle through which past experiences are recalled and interpreted. Attention to language, its variations and categorical forms, enriches narrative text analysis beyond strictly linguistic concerns. On a most fundamental level, language is the organizing force that molds oral narrative according to a narrator’s distinct style. Styles vary as widely as individuals, but recurring patterns indicate more than speakers’ personal quirks. Speech patterns inherent in oral narrative

166 ● METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

can reveal status, interpersonal relationships, and perceptions of language, self, and the world. In the case of black women, we must ask what their narrative patterns reveal about their lives. How do their unique experiences influence the manner in which they tell their own life stories? (In Gluck and Patai, 1991, p. 44–5)

To be successful at the art of oral history means, for the critical researcher, to understand, accept, and embrace different narrative styles and, moreover, to recognize their importance rather than disavowing the meanings implied by such difference. This is not without its difficulty. First, scholarly oral history developed within a patriarchal context. Second, those whom we wish to hear from may themselves be accustomed to the silence. Let's examine each of these intertwined issues.

In a male-dominated world, male forms of communication are normalized and communicative expressions that differ from this model are assumed to be less valid. Qualitative interviewing, including oral history, has not been immune to the culture in which it is practiced. The academy is deeply entrenched in male ways of thinking about knowledge construction. Even nonpositivistic research methods have been influenced by male ways of thinking about language, and this includes qualitative interviewing.

What needs to be altered for women's oral history is the communication frame, not the woman. Oral history interviewing, influenced by its ties to academic history and by the practice of interviewing in general, has developed in the context of the male sociocommunication system. Because in an andocentric world male speaking is the norm, any other kind of speaking is subnormal . . . (Minister, in Gluck and Patai, 1991, p. 31)

Given our immersion in our culture, we are accustomed to male forms of communication (this could of course be broadened to include the privileging of all hegemonic ideals including white and middle/upper-class styles of communication). So, in order to perform our role of enabling others to tell their stories, we must be attentive to diversity in communicative styles and narrative forms, which includes being reflexive about how our culture has already influenced our assumptions about "the right way to tell one's story."

When engaged in this process many scholars explain that we will be confronted with gender differences in communication styles. Specifically, as embodied actors within a larger social order, women communicate differently than men. Furthermore, women's communicative styles have not been legitimated by the academy or society in general. As such, when interviewing women, the researcher must understand the participant's storytelling process and legitimate it.

Although some women narrators have adapted well to this male interviewing system that female oral historians must acquire, we will not hear what women deem essential to their lives unless we legitimate a female sociocommunication context for the oral history situation . . . We will not be able to hear and interpret what women value if we do not know how to watch and how to listen and how to speak with women as women. We first need to know consciously how women do communicate privately and with each other. (Minister, in Gluck and Patai, 1991, p. 31)

When working within[AUTHOR: ok?] [yes]the assumptions of standpoint epistemology, this idea of communication subcultures is heightened. Standpoint acknowledges different perspectives based on differential positions within a hierarchical social order. One's experiences, visions, and voice are thus earned through their experience of being located at a particular point in the social order. Communication strategies may differ based on the intersection of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and nationality. In the context of a large oral history project involving the collection of oral history interviews from multiple participants, it is important to bear in mind that there may be differences across and within genders. Take this into account as you prepare to meet with each participant. You cannot assume that based on one characteristic alone a person will mirror the storytelling practices of a previous interviewee. Having said this, despite these differences, there are patterns by which people tend to tell their own life history. We refer to these patterns as *narrative structures*.

Etter-Lewis (1991) identifies three major narrative styles encountered in the life history interview process: (1) unified, (2) segmented, and, (3) conversational. To this we would add a fourth category, which Kohler-Reissman calls episodic storytelling. As with all narrative forms, the way your respondent tells her or his story may largely be influenced by factors such as race, class, and gender. Related to these characteristics are education, work, and geographic location.

Often researchers may have the expectation that the respondent will hear a topic or guiding question and respond by chronologically explaining their experience regarding the topic, providing in-depth examples to illustrate their experience, and remaining focused on the topic or question. This is the "unified" narrative style.

Contiguous parts of the narrative fit together as a whole, usually in the form of an answer to a particular question. Words and phrases all are related to a central idea . . . the narrator supports her answer as completely as possible by providing several relevant examples. The result is

168 ● METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

a stretch of discourse unified by its focus on a particular topic. (Etter-Lewis, in Gluck and Patai, 1991, p. 45)

A person who uses such a style of talk may also be telling us something about how she sees herself and how she interprets her life experiences. For instance, a unified approach may indicate that a participant sees the topic clearly and has a cohesive response to it. Beyond the topic at hand, a unified approach may indicate that on a more general level the narrator experiences her life as cohesive and clearly defined. This differs in significant ways from the segmented narrative form.

Continuous parts of a narrative characterized by a diverse assortment of seemingly unrelated utterances. (Etter-Lewis, in Gluck and Patai, 1991, p. 46)

This form of storytelling may be counterintuitive to some researchers who are not used to this form of talk. As such, the initial meetings between the researcher and respondent, where listening and talking skills are worked on, through the building of rapport, become critically important for the researcher to become comfortable with the narrator's speech (and vice versa).

A segmented approach to oral narrative can also reveal meaning from the perspective of the person sharing her story. For example, the narrator may feel fragmented or that the various components of herself or her experiences are disconnected. This may be true for people who have experienced multiple oppressions due to race, class, gender, and sexuality, which frame their life experiences. In this situation a discussion of female body image disturbances may result in a black narrator talking about how her female mentors taught her coping strategies for dealing with racism that in effect helped give her the high self-esteem needed to also combat a deeply sexist culture that reduces women to their physical bodies. Her experience of sociocultural female body pressures brings her to a discussion of race, because in her experience, these are inter-linked. Her narrative may shift around, but in ways that are inextricably linked to her experience of the topic being discussed. There are alternative reasons a narrative may be segmented. If the narrator has never been given the opportunity to reflect on the many experiences that comprise her life, the process of sharing her story may also be an intimate process of self-discovery. Thus her narrative style may reflect "a putting together of the pieces" for herself and simultaneously the researcher. What may initially appear as off the subject may actually be quite connected to the issue under discussion. This is intimately tied to our earlier contention that many of those we ask to speak may in fact be used to being muted due to their marginalization within the society. Those

denied access to the social tools by which to tell their stories due to their race, ethnicity, social class, gender, or sexuality may simply not have previous experience telling their story. In this vein feminist oral historian Armitage says, "We will learn what we want to know only by listening to people who are accustomed to talking" (as quoted by Minister, 1991, p. 32). We can see this in pop culture forms as well, such as Eve Ensler's play *The Vagina Monologues*, in which some women stated that they had difficulty talking about their sexual experiences simply because no one had ever asked before. They didn't know what to say and were surprised that someone was interested. A segmented approach to narration may in these cases be the result of unearthing thoughts and feelings that had previously been untapped. A process of making the internal orally available for external use may involve a negotiation expressed through words.

Narrators may also recount past conversations as a means of providing an answer to questions. Such an approach may result in an indirect but very important and descriptive answer to a question posed by the researcher.

A contiguous part of a narrative identified by the reconstruction of conversations as they probably occurred in the past. Conversational elements are used to illustrate an idea or event. The narrator modifies voice, tone, and pitch in order to represent different speakers and different emotions (e.g., high pitch for anger or surprise). (Etter-Lewis, in Gluck & Patai, 1991, p. 47)

Etter-Lewis (1991, p. 47) asserts that the narrator may choose to recount a past conversation instead of directly answering a question as a way of mediating painful or otherwise difficult feelings that come to the surface as a past experience is recalled. In this way it is a defense mechanism for tapering uncomfortable or particularly strong emotions. It is vitally important to enable this kind of self-protection, since, as discussed earlier, neither the researcher nor research participant can know the extent to which the oral history interview process will bring any given emotion to the surface. Participants need the freedom to deal with unexpected emotions in a way that works for them. To the ethnographic interviewer, the performative repetition of conversations may provide the details and descriptions the researcher is most interested in. Etter-Lewis explains that these recollections may actually serve as a "magnifying glass through which details can be highlighted" (p. 47).

Drawing similarities to segmented and conversational styles of storytelling, some people may use an episodic frame through which they share their story. Kohler-Riessman (1987) contrasted the episodic and linear ways women narrated their marriage life histories. Episodic narrative differs from a unified

170 ● METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

approach where a teller uses a linear (temporally ordered) model of storytelling. In episodic narration a participant speaks by telling stories as episodes within their life. Their speech pattern relies on recounting experiences as episodes that are not chronologically ordered but are rather thematically driven.

Research participants may use more than one of these storytelling techniques as they share their knowledge with you. Shifts in narrative frames may be important indicators of a narrator's feelings or where they place emphasis. In keeping with the goals of understanding social meaning from the perspective of those creating it, truly developing one's craft as an oral historian involves understanding the various frames through which people communicate ideas and paying attention to nuance, such as a shift in narrative form. In this regard the interview process results in more than the flat words on the transcript page, but a complex understanding of the person's story as it was told to you.

● COLLABORATION AND AUTHORITY: ISSUES OF VOICE, INTERPRETATION, AND REPRESENTATION IN ORAL HISTORY

In 1990 Michael Frisch coined the term *shared authority*, which put a name to an issue of particular salience in the oral history process: the extent to which oral history is collaborative. Frisch used the term shared authority to denote the collaboration of the researcher and narrator during interpretation and representation (Thomson, 2003, p. 23). While the last chapter of this book details the broad issues of interpretation, analysis, and representation that are central to qualitative research, given the particulars of the oral history method, it warrants its own discussion of interpretation.

When using the oral history method the data collection component of the research process is collaborative. The researcher and research participant create knowledge together through the creation of a life narrative. The researcher initiates the process and facilitates the narrator's telling of his story. Typically, the researcher then transcribes the interview(s) and may add his or her memo notes to the transcript in order to account for the performative aspects of the narration and/or add his or her own feelings, thoughts, questions, and so forth. So in the end, put simply, the researcher and narrator work together to produce the raw data: the oral history transcript (and any additional material). But what happens once the interview has been collected?

Does the collaborative process that shapes data collection continue during analysis and representation? Who gets to put their mark on the story that emerges out of this process? Who has authority over the narrative? What does shared authority mean in practice? Is it always possible or even desirable? What are the ethical considerations involved when determining the scope to which a

project will be collaborative? What impact does collaboration have on the researcher, narrator, and, the research? Generally speaking, how do we think about interpreting oral history data? These are just some of the questions the oral historian must consider. Thinking about the qualitative research process holistically requires the researcher to consider issues of interpretation during research design and continue to revisit these questions throughout the research process, since qualitative research often involves an openness to change.

At its core questions regarding collaboration beyond the data collection stage are really questions regarding authority and what we refer to as the oral history matrix: the intersection of method, ethic, and politic. Who has authority over the data? Is this authority shared between the researcher and narrator(s)? The complex question of authority is where the oral history matrix of method, ethic, and politic is most clearly seen. Due to its historical development and current uses within the social sciences and humanities, oral history merges a research tool with a particular set of ethical considerations and social justice politics. When writing about the phrase *shared authority*, Shopes says:

. . . this resonant phrase neatly captures that which lies at the heart of both the method and the ethic—or perhaps one should say the politics—of the oral history enterprise: the dialogue that defines the interview process itself and the potential for this dialogue to extend outward—in public forums, radio programs, dramatic productions, publications, and other forms—toward a more broadly democratic cultural practice. (2003, p. 103)

This raises important questions about the extent to which the knowledge that flows from the oral history storytelling process is collaborative in terms of development and subsequent availability and use. The collaborative potential of oral history is not simply a choice about methodology but also carries with it a set of politics and a host of ethical considerations. Central to these issues is the question posed by Frisch: “Who is the author of an oral history?” (2003, p. 113). In fact Frisch goes on to call our attention to the connection between the words *author* and *authority* demonstrating how representation is imbued with power (2003, p. 113). The person who interprets, formats, and presents the narrative has a certain authority over the data—this person controls the construction of knowledge. So what does it mean for a researcher to “author” another person’s story? How involved can the narrator be in this process? What options do qualitative researchers have?

As with all research projects, we recommend that the particular goals of the research project dictate the extent to which the interpretive phase is collaborative. Some projects will lend themselves more to sharing authority during all phases, while other projects will make this impossible or undesirable.

172 ● METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

Your epistemological beliefs about the relationship between the researcher and researched will help frame these decisions, as will your ethical and political motivations, but ultimately the research process must mesh with your goals and resources. All oral history interviews contain collaborative dimensions; however, interpretive strategies can employ a variety of perspectives. It may be helpful to think of oral history as existing on a collaborative continuum—projects can vary from being collaborative exclusively during data collection to being thoroughly collaborative from initial research design through representation. In this regard Frisch makes an important point:

... sharing authority is an approach to doing oral history, while a shared authority is something we need to recognize in it. (Frisch, 2003, p. 113)

Let's examine some of the pros and cons of using a shared authority approach to oral history by looking at various oral history research projects and how researchers have theorized and negotiated collaboration and authority in diverse ways.

De-centering Authority and Democratic Practice

Holistic collaboration, that which engages the researcher and narrator during all phases of knowledge production, is often appealing to those working from critical theoretical perspectives, including the feminist and multicultural frameworks. Likewise, this approach may be appropriate for research projects with the objective of creating social change or prompting social activism. Accordingly, as critical perspectives and social movement research are both on the rise, we are seeing an increase in collaborative research. This raises the question: Why are these folks particularly attracted to sharing authority?

Oral history is unique because it has the potential for decentering authority (Frisch, 1990; Shopes, 2003)[AUTHOR: we've got Frisch 1989 but not 1990]. [should be 1989, I made an error] As discussed in Chapter 1 historically the researcher has been privileged as the knowing party and he has had control over the research process and resulting knowledge. The researcher's authority over the data included analysis, representation/writing, and the dissemination of the resulting knowledge. For example, will the results be published? Where? How will they be used? Oral history assumes that the research participant has life experiences, thoughts, and feelings that can help us to better understand social reality or some aspect of it. In other words, the research participant has unique and valuable knowledge. The narrator alone has access to their own story and accordingly assumes the role of narrator.

This method thus allows the research participant to maintain authority over their knowledge during data collection. The oral history method inherently challenges positivist and postpositivist conceptualizations of the researcher/researched relationship, and, moreover, necessarily shifts at least some authority to the research subject. Scholars working from critical theoretical perspectives are committed to destabilizing relations of oppression and making those historically at the peripheries of the social order the center of the knowledge construction process. Feminist and multicultural scholars are interested in decentering authority as well so that women and people of color are given a central and authoritative position within the knowledge building process. Furthermore, feminists are concerned with accessing women's voices. By changing the locus of knowledge and constructing engaged researchers and narrators, oral history lends itself to collaboration and the oppositional possibilities inherent in a collaborative knowledge-building process. The resistive dimension of sharing authority is also inextricably linked to ideas regarding democratic knowledge production which may be particularly resonant for social movement scholars.

The use of collaborative approaches to oral history bears traces of the earlier paradigm shift that prompted the development of qualitative research and wide-ranging changes in our conceptualizations of knowledge and the knowledge-building process. Some oral historians working in the area of social movements, public policy, and social activism advocate sharing authority during all phases of the research project in order to create democratic knowledge production, which can most effectively benefit those groups for whom we often conduct our research. This is because collaboration allows us to speak *with* our participants instead of *for* them. This democratic approach to knowledge construction relieves some of the questions of social power that permeate traditional research while allowing those we wish to empower to teach us how to accomplish our goals. Kerr (2003) argues that sharing authority "can play a significant role in movement building" (p. 31). Referring to Frisch's work, he writes:

He argues for "a more profound sharing of knowledges, an implicit and sometimes explicit dialogue from very different vantages about the shape, meaning and implications of history." He argues that this dialogue will "promote a more democratized and widely shared historical consciousness, consequently encouraging broader participation in debates about history, debates that will be informed by a more deeply representative range of experiences, perspectives and values." I would add that the dialogue built on this basis needs to go beyond the way we view history, but also influence the way we view history[AUTHOR: something

174 ● METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

wrong here?] [it is correct as is—it is poorly worded but quoted properly], but also influence the way we design public policy and more importantly, the way we reproduce the social organization of the communities we live in. (p. 31)

In this vein, a collaborative approach to oral history analysis and representation extends beyond incorporating multiple voices and visions into our writing of history and can help shape the organization of our communities and the formulation of public policy. In this way oral history can promote multidirectional change. It is not surprising that social movement scholars have embraced this approach.

Kerr (2003) designed an oral history research project using collaborative analysis in order to study homelessness. As a part of his dissertation research Kerr spent years working on the Cleveland Homeless Oral History Project. This research, which involved multimedia interviews, is an excellent example of applying a shared authority approach holistically because it effectively enables the research objectives of an investigation. Kerr wanted to conduct research that could create meaningful dialogue among homeless people in Cleveland, which could foster the development and *implementation* of public policy changes aimed at reducing homelessness in U.S. urban centers. Kerr argues that traditionally the research on homelessness has failed to create conversations on a street level and, thus, without substantive input from the homeless themselves, resulting data hasn't garnered the support needed to both create and execute effective social policy.

Advocates and academics studying homelessness in the United States have primarily sought an audience of public officials, civic leaders, and middle and upper class progressives, who they believe have the power to create change. In part this focus has been structured by the public officials themselves who have encouraged this approach, seeking advice on the homeless problem almost exclusively from social service providers and academic experts. There is little incentive for academics to work collaboratively with the homeless. Those who have had the most success having their voice heard at the national policy level . . . have devised solutions without the input and oversight of the homeless and have done little to generate support for their solutions among the homeless. (p. 28)

The failure to produce knowledge that has successfully been used to alleviate homelessness is largely a result of two factors: (1) researchers cannot study misery from a neutral and detached position of authority, and, (2) homelessness has a structural dimension supported by powerful interests who benefit from

maintaining the system (Kerr, 2003, p. 30). Accordingly, Kerr had to give up the traditional privileged position of the “researcher as knower” and work collaboratively with the homeless in order to reveal trends, generate theory, advocate sensible policy changes, and, effectively implement them.

By broadening the scientific community through the process of sharing authority with the homeless, one does not give up objectivity; rather one produces more objective and effective research. Theories and solutions that garner support are effectively implemented, and successfully address common problems [that] are objectively better than those that do not [AUTHOR: something’s wrong with this sentence.] [inserted missing word above]. (p. 32)

In this circumstance, sharing authority was clearly the logical approach to the oral history process and promoted the integration of the researcher’s ontological, epistemological, theoretical, and methodological choices, creating a robust and layered body of applicable knowledge. This knowledge cannot be separated from its democratic process of production and, thus, in every way signifies the issues it implicitly raises about *who gets to participate in the construction of our communities*.

Additionally, Kerr reported that the research participants were empowered through their participation. The process helped the homeless to become agents for social change in an arena that is directly relevant to their daily lives rather than remain victims of a reified system.

Empowerment, Ethics, and Conflict Within Collaboration

It is not difficult to understand how sharing authority has the effect of narrator empowerment. Certainly people are more likely to feel empowered when they are fully included, valued, and are operating on an even playing field. Rickard (2003) writes that the research participants in her collaborative study of British sex workers also felt empowered by the oral history process. Rickard’s work is important because it raises key ethical questions about empowerment, advocacy, and sharing authority.

Is it always ethical to empower our research participants? What if they are engaged in illegal activity or an activity that we find morally or politically troublesome? As engaged researchers, where is the line between empowerment and advocacy? If we feel an obligation to benefit our research participants by empowering them (if possible), do we necessarily endorse their behavior? These are questions Rickard had to face when she shared authority with

176 ● METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

British sex workers, including using one as an interviewer. Rickard openly adopts a “sex positive” perspective, which has opened her scholarship up to scrutiny. Some likened her collaborative research design to promoting prostitution (p. 53).

Hence, by undertaking oral history in this area, I had to align myself with the “pro-sex work” political lobby and to become involved with the activities of national and international activist groups who support sex workers rights. The activist involvement also came from the deep concern with sharing authority. To ensure people’s stories were recorded and collected I had to be prepared to use a position of academic privilege to offer political and practical support to interviewees, to facilitate communication through international networks, and to use oral history material for political and educational purposes. For me, this has led to a number of offshoot projects, such as the organization of a U.K. conference for sex workers, and the initiation of a health education project using extracts of OHP tapes as the basic resource. It has also involved me in local and national activist meetings and the use of oral history material as an educational resource for health workers. Over time, I have slowly realized that other sex work oral history has always tended to be carried out from a similar “sex positive” perspective to my own and nearly always in a context of personal and political advocacy. (p. 54)

Rickard is reflexive about her personal political alignment with her narrators and discloses how this impacts data analysis and her resulting scholarship. While we do not think it is necessary to comment on Rickard’s research choices per se, we think it provides a valuable example from which we can contemplate our own research. By engaging in a thorough discussion of both the context of discovery and the context of justification, readers of Rickard’s work are given enough information about the research process and the researcher’s relationship to the work that they can interpret her work as they deem fit. And in this way she has done her job and also provided a robust case study for examining how we all engage in the oral history matrix of method, ethics, and politics. This brings us to a host of additional issues surrounding collaborative interpretation.

While some research projects necessitate heightened collaboration, others may be impeded by attempts to share authority. Likewise, collaborative interpretation may alter the scholarship in ways the researcher is uncomfortable with. As interpretation is a fundamental component of sense-making or meaning construction, collaboration deeply impacts knowledge building and is not necessarily desirable.

. . . collaboration is a responsible, challenging and deeply humane ideal for some oral history work, but in certain kinds of projects, beyond a basic respect for the dignity of all persons, it seems not an appropriate goal . . . Taking the full measures of views other than your own is one thing; failing to subject them to critical scrutiny is yet another. Is presenting differing views in point/counterpoint fashion itself a form of critical inquiry? Is it enough? We need to think more about the limits and possibilities of oral history work with those with whom we do not share a fundamental sympathy. (Shopes, 2003, p. 109) [AUTHOR: Shopes 1994 is in the bib but no 2003] [added it to the bib]

Shopes raises several important points while reaffirming that a holistic application of shared authority is only one approach to oral history. It is perfectly reasonable and often appropriate for the researcher to retain authority over the interpretive process. As researchers we can maintain feminist and other human-rights perspectives without placing the interpretive views of our narrators at the same level on which we place our own analysis. We need not invite the narrator to participate in the research process beyond the interview sessions if our project doesn't warrant it. Our scholarship and/or our emotional well-being may require that we do maintain strict intellectual authority over the process of representation.

For example, the body image oral history project that opened this chapter necessitated a separation between the researcher and narrator during data analysis. "Claire" was still deeply in the throws of anorexia nervosa and her health was rapidly declining at the time of the project. Despite her obvious ongoing battle, Claire repeatedly insisted that she was now healthy and had "clarity" over her "former" disorder. In the case of anorexia, it is clear that this kind of mindset is common amongs women in the thick of an eating disorder. Her ability to judge the situation in a useful way was seriously hampered by her illness. In addition to her deep-seated denial, she was physically failing (which also had an apparent impact on her mental faculties). All of this made a collaborative analysis impossible and undesirable. In this type of situation, the researcher has to maintain intellectual authority over the data in order to generate meaning that is true to the story told by the narrator. This can be hard if you have a strong connection to your narrator; however, as the researcher you need to think of the overall process and the eventual knowledge, which may mean making a difficult decision. In our example, at the time Claire did not have the ability to effectively help interpret the web of pressures that culminated in her body image disturbance. Even in situations where a narrator is "able" to participate in the interpretive process, it simply may not be something the researcher is interested in. This is fine too.

178 ● METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

At a basic level, I do think that the interview dynamic is collaborative. But I also think we need to think carefully where we wish to share intellectual control over our work and where we don't. We do need to be clear where and how we want to differ with narrators, perhaps in the interview itself, more likely in what we write based on interviews. We need to be clear when we wish to be critical of narrators, when there is no room for a shared perspective. (Shopes, citing herself in 2002; 2003, p. 109)

For example, what if your narrator is racist, sexist, or homophobic? If we are committed to the spirit of social justice then there are times when shared authority simply isn't an option. Regardless of whether or not we share a "fundamental sympathy" (Shopes, 2002; 2003, p. 109) with those we interview, we need to seriously consider the place of our own intellectual voice within our work. This requires us to construct, question, negotiate, and renegotiate the boundaries of collaboration within any particular project—always reflecting on the fit between our choices and our research objectives. Likewise, we think it is important for qualitative researchers to write openly about this process to assist others in thinking through the complexity of collaborative research and make informed decisions about where on the continuum any given project will fall. Let's look at an example that illustrates the importance of staying true to one's voice and the potential pitfalls of ill-defined collaboration.

Sitzia (2003) wrote a case study about the relationship she had with her oral history narrator as they tried to share authority while producing his autobiography over a six-year period. Her experience illuminates the rewards and dangers inherent in collaboration.

Sitzia shared important insider traits with her narrator, Arthur, particularly a working-class background, and common interests, which together facilitated a wonderful data-building rapport between the two.

This constant dialogue between me and Arthur enriched the process of working on another's life story. I quickly moved from being an interviewer to a facilitator in helping Arthur uncover his past. The development of the dialogue within the process was only possible through our relationship. (p. 94)

The kind of mutual engagement with, and shared ownership of, the project produces data that may otherwise remain hidden. However, the engagement required for collaboration has an emotional price and can at times be overwhelming. Likewise, while some scholars feel their work is enriched through shared interpretation, others may experience an unwanted loss of intellectual authority over their research, as Sitzia explains.

When our work began . . . I felt very pleased with the way the project was progressing . . . as . . . we drew closer to the publication of a book, Arthur began behaving aggressively; putting substantial pressure on me to work more quickly, threatening to complete the work with another editor, and most importantly, raising issues of ownership: “our” book became only “Arthur’s” book. This situation was made worse by the fact that Arthur was going through a severe emotional and mental health crisis, which also meant that he became very dependent on me, calling in varying states of distress at all times of the day and night. I felt—and still do feel—a huge responsibility for Arthur and felt I should help him resolve his crisis, but did not feel equipped to do this. On reflection, these complications partly arose because of the experimental nature of the project: neither I nor Arthur had worked in such a collaborative way before. My approach to the project was an informal learning experience . . . I now believe that it is crucial to define clear boundaries and guidelines when embarking on a project of this nature. At the beginning of this collaboration I directed the work to a large extent and certainly had a “voice;” one consequence of this lack of clarity is that as the project progressed I felt that I gradually lost authority, that Arthur became more and more dominant—and in fact bullying—and my own voice seemed to be lost. (p. 97)

This illustrates the tensions a researcher may face when trying to determine where to place a project on the continuum of shared authority. In the end Sitzia came to understand that, in the case of her project, both she and Arthur could “own” it by being open to multiple outcomes from the one study. She and her narrator are thus free to draw on the work in various ways and, through those unexpected avenues, they can each make their own mark on the knowledge they have created. Sitzia uses aspects of the project in her writing while Arthur is able to use it in his performance pieces. This required them to let go of the idea that “one book” would be the outcome of this process and consider multiple outcomes. We think it is important to remain open to the data being used in multiple ways, as was the resolution here; however, we caution that this is not always appropriate and must be carefully contemplated by the researcher. Make choices and find resolutions that make sense in a particular circumstance.

Despite the difficulties that can arise, collaboration can be a worthwhile or necessary practice. It is therefore helpful to be proactive, design your study well, and remain open to modifications as practice dictates. If you decide to share authority with your narrators, we suggest the following strategies for dealing with the specific challenges you may encounter.

180 ● METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

- Create clear boundaries regarding the relationship between the researcher and narrator. In other words, devote some substantial time to defining your relationship. Talk this through together so there is mutual clarity. Continue to have these conversations throughout the various phases of the process so you are constantly reinforcing your definitions and expectations (while modifying them as appropriate to growth in the relationship). This relationship must be tended to holistically.
- Set up precise expectations regarding each person's role(s) in the collaborative process. Things to discuss and come to an agreement on include:
 - The transcription process
 - Field notes and theoretical memo-taking
 - Analysis procedures
 - Interpretation and theory-building
 - Writing and/or representation
 - The use of the results (including how many possible outcomes are expected)
- Construct practical ideas for how to deal with potential interpretive conflicts.
 - What degree of difference does each party expect to have included in the final write-up?

By thinking these things through, you can avoid many potential pitfalls—this is time well spent. You can thus be open to less traditional approaches to oral history that may allow the asking and answering of new social scientific questions. Don't be afraid to create new methodologies as long as you remember that experimentation necessitates openness and rigor.

Archiving Oral Histories

As you have already seen, qualitative research in general, and oral history in particular, demand a high degree of ethics in practice. The archiving of oral history transcripts and/or projects is an important part of the oral history process. The American Historical Association says that arranging to deposit oral history interviews in an archival repository is a part of ethical research. The archiving of oral history materials, which makes them available for any host of future uses, may influence the research process in many ways. If a participant is well informed about the research and its outcomes, as they should be through informed consent, then the knowledge the interview will be

archived may influence their storytelling. This is particularly salient when unedited interviews will be archived as narrators understand their initial telling of their story will be documented and made available forever.

The deliberate consideration of what can and should be said, and how it should be said, is pronounced when interview transcripts are specifically prepared for archival purposes because narrators will seek to prepare their narratives for an undetermined public audience. This has a double-edged effect. On the one hand, it can produce more accurate recollections and fuller accounts if narrators take the time to refresh their memories by consulting old documents, and/or other people who experienced the same events. On the other hand, however, it may produce more of a “canned speech,” or a more carefully crafted statement that is sensitive to wider implications of what is said. (Wilmsen, 2001, p. 72)

Edited interviews, intended for archival deposit, present their own set of challenges.

Analyzing, interpreting and writing up your data is always a part of meaning-making. Producing a version of the work can be equated with producing meaning itself—creating knowledge. Editing is thus tied up with the construction of meaning (Wilmsen, 2001). As the researcher, how are you going to edit the transcript? Will you “clean it up” in terms of pauses, “ums,” “likes,” and the other informal ways people speak? Will you fix grammar? Will you change the particulars of their way of speaking, and, if so, what implications does this have in terms of meaning construction? Will you delete or add emphasis to convey meaning? And, if so, meaning from whose perspective, yours, the narrator’s or your interpretation of the narrator’s meaning? How is all of this influenced by social class, race, gender and other characteristics? In other words, what are the implications in changing the grammar of a narrator from a lower socio-economic background? What are the implications of changing, or adding your own explanations for, slang words, which may be the productive of ethnic background and other social characteristics? These are all considerations when determining how to edit the transcript. Wilmsen (2001) cautions that these choices are interlinked with social power—the power to construct and disseminate knowledge.

A significant feature of the social relations of oral history interviews is the power relations between the interviewer and the narrator. Gender, class, race, and other social considerations enter into every interview situation to a greater or lesser extent. They affect editing through narrator and interviewer/editor perceptions of the social status similarities

182 ● METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

or differences between them, which in turn shape their understandings of their respective roles. The importance this has for editing is the way in which power relations are interwoven with differing experience with the written word. The fact that narrators have varying experience with the written word, the world of publishing, research archives, libraries, et cetera, affects what editing decisions are made, who makes them, and why. (p. 75)

As with all of the choices a researcher makes when thinking about interpretation and representation, editing is an important arena in which meaning production occurs. Reflexive researchers must consider issues of difference and research power relations as a part of ethical praxis.

The extent to which the research process is collaborative will also impact the editing process. If the narrator is involved in the interpretive process they will likely have input upon reflection. In other words, when reviewing the raw transcript, it is very likely that the narrator will recall things that were forgotten at the time of the interview that they may want to add. Likewise, they may want to elaborate or edit parts of the transcript. As a part of ethical practice we encourage you to share your transcripts with your narrators for their approval and input; however, we caution that this of courses raises many possible responses. Ultimately, the degree of influence the narrator will have on the editing process is linked to the issues of authority previously discussed.

[AUTHOR: THIS WAS ONE WORD IN CH 1; IS THERE A STANDARD IN THE DISCIPLINE?] [SHOULD BE ONE WORD IN ENTIRE CHAPTER]

● AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Sometimes researchers use themselves as the subject of their research. In this way, one can conduct an oral history project using oneself as the narrator. For example, if you are interested in your own personal experiences and how they are situated in a cultural context, this approach may help you meet your goals. Qualitative researchers often use autobiographical data in both explicit and implicit ways. For instance, field researchers often keep a journal, ethics diary, or reflective diary where they document their thoughts, feelings, emotions, and so forth (Tenni, Smyth, & Boucher, 2003, p. 2). In this way autobiographical data is a part of the research process. Additionally, particular theoretical and epistemological positions may influence a researcher to explicitly include autobiographical data. When using standpoint epistemology as conceptualized by Sandra Harding, and thus using “strong objectivity,” the researcher necessarily discloses information about her own biography and how it is informing the knowledge-building process. There are many examples of researchers incorporating their own experience into their projects, including doing so

implicitly by imposing categories on their data derived from their own life experience. Autoethnography is a particular approach to oral history in which the research explicitly constructs data from their own life history. Furthermore, many researchers merge autobiographical writing with fiction as they write up their autoethnographies. This method thus allows researchers to fictionalize aspects of their work and create characterizations.

But it is insufficient to say that autoethnography is simply an oral history interview that you do to yourself. There is a key distinction between oral history and autoethnography. The difference is that a traditional oral history interview is based on talking (verbal narration that is recorded) whereas an autoethnography is based on writing (Maines, 2001, p. 109). Oral history interviews produce transcripts which replicate narration (Maines, 2001, p. 109). In the case of using oneself as the data source, talk is replaced by writing (Maines, 2001, p. 109). Talking and writing are entirely different modes of communication and thus deeply impact the data produced. People talk faster than they are able to write, produce more detail, and are less likely to censor themselves talking (Maines, 2001, p. 109). Additionally, speech patterns, gestures, tone, and all of the other nuances of the narrative process we discussed earlier are removed from the writing process where the author retains total control and may place emphasis differently than if speaking. Now that we have reviewed the major difference between biographical and autobiographical oral histories, let's look more closely at the kind of writing process that constitutes autoethnography.

The term *autoethnography* can mean different things depending how it is applied and what theory is applied to it; however, in this section we are focusing on autoethnography as a very general form of autobiographical oral history.

Autoethnography refers to writing about the personal and its relationship to culture. It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness. (Ellis, 2004, p. 37, quoting Dumont, 1978)

Ellis (2004) expands on this definition in order to illustrate the richness of this method and variability in representational forms it can utilize, which includes books, essays, poems, plays, novels and performance pieces.

What is autoethnography?" you might ask. My brief answer: research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political. Autoethnographic forms feature concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection portrayed in dialogue, scenes, characterization, and plot. Thus, autoethnography claims the conventions of literary writing. (p. xix)

184 ● METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

This method allows us to use our own experiences, thoughts, feelings, and emotions as data to help us understand the social world. Through this approach we are able to link our personal stories to the larger society, which is the structural backdrop against which we experience everything. We can also fictionalize aspects of our project for the sake of the narrative told. This kind of research can be empowering for the researcher-subject and raise our self-consciousness and reflexivity. Having said this, these potential rewards carry their own burden.

As stated earlier, the oral history process is intellectually and emotionally draining. When conducting an oral history interview we can never be fully prepared for what the narrator might say. Nor can we fully prepare our narrators for the range of possible emotions that could flow from telling their story. The same is true for when we use ourselves as the subjects of our research.

The engagement with what is going on for us must be physical, emotional and intellectual. It is with the physical and emotional in particular, that we often get the first clue that something is happening and may be worthy of exploration. So our annoyance, discomfort, restlessness, sadness, excitement, triumph, tense neck, scratchy eyes or feeling of serenity is also data that alert us to something. This process may cause some degree of distress so having supports in place (such as a supervisor, colleague or support group) is important.” (Tenni et al., 2003, p. 3)

Heightened emotions during the research process can be markers of important data that we need to flesh out and try to make sense of. These moments also represent times where we may need additional support because the strains of the research process may be more than we can comfortably handle alone. Keeping track of one’s emotions during the process can thus serve as both data and signals to the researcher about how he or she is coping with the autobiographical process. The data analysis process may also require external assistance. Differing from traditional supervisory roles of detachment and purported neutrality, supervisors engaged in assisting with autoethnography must be invested and engaged (Tenni et al., 2003, p. 3). The person or people invited to help the researcher gauge the process and interpret the data must be invested in the process, because it is, after all, about the life of the researcher, who may be their friend or colleague. Having an external dialogue (Tenni et al., 2003, p. 3) can help the researcher stay grounded and also help alleviate some of the concerns about validity that are often raised when researchers use personal data. Additionally, an external party, but one who is committed to the project, can add complexity and nuance to the data analysis process—he or she may help the researcher “see”

more broadly, enhancing both the data and what the researcher takes away from the project in terms of self-consciousness.

Autoethnography can also be challenging, as you are opening up your own experiences for “public” consumption and perhaps the scrutiny that comes along with that. In other words, this method requires a level of vulnerability on the part of the researcher. Author Carolyn Ellis explains how she had to deal with this issue as she performed autoethnography. Let’s join Ellis for a backstage look at the reality of confronting this process.

Behind-the-Scenes With Carolyn Ellis

More than a decade after writing and publishing an autoethnographic story with my partner Art Bochner about an abortion that occurred early in our relationship, I received this e-mail from a professor, who had assigned our story in an undergraduate class. “I gave the students the opportunity to write about it. Would you like to see what they wrote?” he e-mailed. I said yes, though I felt some anxiety when the responses arrived the next day.

The assistant professor begins this e-mail with:

The students were asked to write about how they felt while reading the text. This was optional, but many students indicated that the text was extremely evocative and I wanted to provide a space where they could express how they truly felt. So several decided to send me an e-mail while others chatted with me outside of class.

Scrolling down, I note the comments continue for six pages. I take a deep breath and read. Addressing her letter to Art and me, the first respondent describes the narrative as being very touching. She likes the openness of emotion and reflection. Acknowledging crying several times while reading the story, she thanks me for expressing the turmoil, reality, and emotional confusion associated with pregnancy and abortion. She continues:

Short of actually having experienced what you did, I don’t think I could understand or feel the reality of abortion more clearly. While I was uncomfortable in some parts, I think that the way in which the forbidden topic was portrayed was informative and beneficial. It was necessary to make the readers feel awkward in order to convey the emotions you felt.

She asks several questions:

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What made you pick this intimate experience to share openly with so many people? Outside of the academic discipline, what was your purpose in writing on the topic of abortion? Very few people care to acknowledge their experience, let alone write about it. I was also wondering how the abortion impacted your relationship with the father? Our professor informed us that you are still together, but did it strengthen your love for each other or create some obstacles to overcome? What are your present views on abortion? Do you view the circumstances the same way after these years?

I feel relieved and pleased. The student shows an understanding of what we were trying to do in the story and an empathy for the difficulty of our choices. As I contemplate answering her questions, my eyes fall on the word *father* and my stomach involuntarily contracts. I move to her questions. A part of me wants to avoid revealing anything about my current relationship; another thinks she deserves a thoughtful and deep response. I type in her e-mail address, thank her for her astute and empathetic response, then say:

We wrote this primarily to work through our own relationship and the pain brought on by having the abortion. I'm happy to say that we have a wonderful relationship, now 10 years later, and that writing about the experience brought us closer together.

We would make very different decisions now if we had the opportunity. I try not to allow myself to second guess the decision we made in 1990. It felt like the best decision then. I feel very different about abortion for myself now, and would have serious difficulties ever having another one, though I still think women should have the freedom of choice—and I think we should try to educate everyone to be responsible regarding pregnancy. My husband and I would have liked to have had a child, but we did not have another opportunity. Nevertheless we are very happy with our family of four dogs.

I then scroll down to the second response. This student thinks the article is an insightful portrayal of emotions and especially appreciates hearing from the male in the experience, but she feels that as a reader she can only partially enter the story because each person's story is so different. She objects to my referring to the pregnancy as a problem and interprets that to mean that I was not ready to be a parent.

I continue reading. The responses get more negative and I wonder if the professor of the class has organized them that way to soften the blow. If so, it doesn't seem to be working. Without signing a name, the third student states that he or she is pro-life and found the article very difficult to read. This student appreciates hearing the father's view and empathizes with the woman's pain, but finds it disturbing to read what the baby went through given that he or she loves children so much.

The fourth student identifies himself by name and says he could feel every emotion and kind of physical pain as he read. He wonders, What if it was my parents who had to make a decision like that? What if I was a burden on them? He asks how Alice and Ted [the names we gave ourselves in the story] could possibly look themselves in the mirror for their actions. They, along with the doctor, played God, he says. At the same time, he professes to understand how tough the decision was and how heart wrenching and emotionally consuming this was.

I hesitate. It's hard reading these things about Art and me, things that people ordinarily won't say to you directly. This is certainly not the way I see myself. I take a deep breath and continue. The last one is the most critical. Though the student does not say, I think the response is from a male. A devout, anti-abortion Catholic, he is appalled at the disregard for human life and the inability for anyone to look at this situation from the unborn child's perspective. This decision, he continues, was made out of convenience. They both seem too wrapped up in their own careers to face up to the circumstances that they created for themselves. The arguments continue for several paragraphs and end with, "Taking this life is murder."

I am trembling by the time I finish. I want to dismiss these responses but, similar to the actual abortion experience, I push myself to face them. I know people react in these ways, but it doesn't dull the pain of seeing the condemnation in print, a pain that is part of the cost of doing autoethnography deeply and honestly.

A few days later, I get an additional response from another student in the class. I am relieved when he tells a story—rather than condemns—about an experience in which the writer, at age 16, thought his girlfriend was pregnant. Since he tried to talk her into an abortion, he empathizes in particular with Alice. I do not take comfort in his empathy.

I write back to the teacher and thank him for sending the responses. I admit the responses were painful, but add that I welcomed pain as part of the lived experience, a truthful response but one no doubt engendered as well by my concern that he not feel badly for having sent the e-mails. I wonder how he, a religious grandson of a minister, responds to the story; how his religious beliefs affect how the story is given to and received by the students. Does being gay make him more open to this kind of complexity, or not? He doesn't say; I don't ask. I do ask him to thank his students for responding and to tell them I learned from what they said. As I click "send," I wonder what it is that I did learn. I already knew that people usually had one of three responses to the piece—right to life, right to choose, or a complex emotional response that incorporated the lived experience of both positions.

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188 ● METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

I write Art an e-mail message asking if he wants to see the students' responses. I found them painful to read, I warn. Though I don't say so, I fear they will be even more painful for him. He writes back that he'd like to see them. Other than acknowledging that they were difficult to read, we don't discuss them, bringing back briefly memories of the silence we endured immediately after the abortion, which was one of the reasons for writing this story in the first place.

When Art reads the paragraph I have written above, he writes in the margin: My sense was there was nothing more to say about them. I felt a closure at the time and know that my memory and feelings are significantly influenced by my immense love for you, what we have become together, and the occasional absence I feel from not having children. If there was silence, it was not the same kind of numbing silence I experienced after the abortion, at least not for me.

Nor for me, I think, in retrospect.

Not long after I received these student responses, I get an e-mail from Christine Kiesinger, a former student, who also had used the abortion story in a segment on relationship studies in her undergraduate Introduction to Communication class. Would you like to see what they said? she asks, and I respond that I would. She writes that their reading of the abortion story had occurred in the context of reading other autoethnographies, including a piece I had written on taking care of my mother, called *Maternal Connections*. The students had looked at the way Art and I had negotiated through our relationship dilemma, focusing on how the issue of choice is experienced as a constraint for both partners and on the relative newness (ten weeks) of the relationship and how it impacted the decision. Additionally they discussed the often contradictory feelings both characters experience—knowing you are going to terminate, yet rubbing your belly, knowing something living exists inside—the pull between fantasizing about a child, having and raising a child, and simultaneous need/decision to terminate. The students, she said, were not convinced that Ted wanted to end the pregnancy, and empathized with him, yet admired his stance to support Alice, regardless.

When I wrote *Maternal Connections* five years after the abortion narrative, I talked about desiring a child. Christine's students felt that, in retrospect, I regretted the decision to abort. This, she said, made for very interesting classroom time. According to Christine's interpretation, only one student struggled with the decision to terminate and that was Sara, self-defined as a feminist, whose philosophy included a pro-choice stance. This was the first time she felt torn, Christine said, as she thought about you as a character in *Maternal Connections* who later desired a child. . . . It bothered her to think that you might have some lingering regret or pain about the choice to terminate.

Throughout the semester, Christine writes me later, our names often would come up as the students struggled with some tough issues about intimacy:

What do you think Art and Carolyn would do in this circumstance? they began to ask. It was as though, Christine reports, they really identified with Ted and Alice as a couple engaging in a very conscious, very communicatively strong relationship—a couple who might have insights and ideas that would assist others in moving through their own relationships. While I hardly wanted to be a role model, her message reminded me of the usefulness of this piece as a pedagogical device and as a point of comparison for discussing how to live.

Note: See *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. (C. Ellis, 2004, Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press), from which this piece is partially excerpted, for a fuller discussion of this topic. For the original story, see Ellis, C. and Bochner, A. P. (1992). Telling and performing personal stories: The constraints of choice in abortion. In *Investigating subjectivity: Research on lived experience*, C. Ellis and M. Flaherty (Eds.) (pp. 79–101). Newbury Park, CA: Sage. Also mentioned in the text is: Ellis, C. (1996). Maternal connections. In *Composing ethnography: Alternative forms of qualitative writing*, C. Ellis and A. Bochner (Eds.) (pp. 240–243). Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

CONCLUSION •

As you have seen, oral history is an intense, rewarding, and variable research method. It is particularly useful for gathering rich data from the perspective of those who have traditionally been marginalized within the culture and excluded from their own representation. In this way, oral history allows narrators to use their voice and reclaim authority in an empowering context where their valuable life experiences are recognized as an important knowledge source. Oral history is also an excellent tool for situating life experience within a cultural context. In other words, personal stories can be interlinked with collective memory, political culture, social power, and so forth, showing the interplay between the individual and the society in which she or he lives.

Oral history is a collaborative process that must be conceptualized holistically. Special attention must be paid to the relationship between the researcher and narrator, and clear guidelines should be employed through a rapport-building dialogue that is revisited throughout the project. And as we have outlined, a researcher needs to consider the oral history matrix: interplay between the method or tool, ethical considerations, and politics.

GLOSSARY •

Autoethnography: Research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political.

190 ● METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

Autoethnographic forms feature concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection portrayed in dialogue, scenes, characterization, and plot. Autoethnographies may combine fiction with nonfiction.

Narrative Structures: There are three major narrative styles encountered in the oral history interview process: (1) unified, (2) segmented, and, (3) conversational. To this we would add a fourth category Kohler-Reissman calls episodic storytelling. As with all narrative forms, the way your respondent tells her or his story may largely be influenced by factors such as race, class, and gender. Related to these characteristics are education, work, and geographic location.

Oral History: A method of open-ended interview, usually occurring in multiple sessions, where a researcher aims at interviewing a person about their life or a significant aspect of it. This is a highly collaborative interview method resulting in a co-created narrative.

● DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss some of the differences between oral history and in-depth interviews.
2. In what ways does oral history benefit the researcher and participant?
3. What is the significance/importance of building rapport with your research participant? How does the establishment of a good relationship between the researcher and research participant contribute to a successful oral history?
4. What is “shared authority” and how is it distinct in oral history? We note a few instances in which a shared authority would not be beneficial to the research process. Can you think of any other instances? What are some of the problems that can arise?
5. What are some things a researcher should keep in consideration when deciding whether to use a collaborative strategy? What are some of the ethical considerations a researcher must keep in mind when determining the degree to which an oral history project will be collaborative? What kind of guidelines can help collaborative research work effectively?
6. How does oral history help us to bring about social change and aid in social activist efforts?

7. What is autoethnography? Why use this method? How can this data be represented creatively? How can external assistance be beneficial to both the researcher and research project in an autoethnography?
8. Do you believe the collaborative process that shapes data collection should continue on during the analysis and representations phases of the research project?
9. In what ways can society impact the ways in which a person tells his or her story, and why is it critical for the researcher to cue into this?
10. Oral history can be an empowering experience for both the researcher and research subject. In what ways can this be true?
11. If, for example, you were interested in how teenage females internalize images of female beauty in American society, how would the use of oral history be beneficial as opposed to an in-depth interview method?

SUGGESTED WEBSITES ●

The General Commission on Archives and History

<http://www.gcab.org/oral.html>

This website is a clear cut, easy to understand guide to oral history interviewing. It gives the steps of interviewing as well as useful tips and a reference list of books and articles.

How to Collect Oral Histories

http://www.usu.edu/oralhist/ob_howto.html

This website explains what recording oral histories entails. It also has a link to other useful websites dealing with collecting oral histories.

Oral History Interviewing

http://www.cps.unt.edu/natla/web/oral_history_interviewing.htm

This website gives a step-by-step easy guide to understanding and conducting oral histories. It also has a link to a sample release form and sample interview questions.

192 ● METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

Center for the Study of History and Memory

http://www.indiana.edu/~csbm/oral_history.html

This site has links to techniques for oral history interviewing, resources, newsletters, and forms. The most useful link at this site is the techniques link, which provides a lengthy description of techniques for oral history.

Center for Oral History

<http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special/williams/index.html>

This website offers a list of publications including some online publications. It also has links to projects, forms, other sites, and their newsletter. The mission of the Williams Center is to collect and preserve, through the use of tape-recorded interviews, unique and valuable information about Louisiana history that exists only in people's memories and would otherwise be lost.

American Sociological Association

http://www.asanet.org/public/IRBs_history.html

This link contains information about oral history interviews and protection provisions.

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194 ● METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

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