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Workshop: Doing Oral History

I. Methodology

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- Poor Memory
- Anachronisms
- Distance
- Different Perspectives
- Assessing Narrators
- Nostalgia

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A. Qualities of a Good Interviewer

- Putting narrator at ease, eliminating anxiety
- Listening
- Guide without Leading

B. Basic Principles—

- Be well prepared, do your homework for that particular interview
- construct meaningful but open ended questions
- do not interrupt responses
- follow up on what you have heard
- know equipment well

C. Preparation

- Research
- Do we want to conduct interviews in a roughly chronological fashion or topically?
- Questions
 - Number of questions
 - Length of interviews
 - Framing Questions— What is the role of the interviewer?
Should the interviewer be an objective or neutral participant?
- Embarrassing Subjects
- Equipment

III. Goals of Black Thursday Project

- What is not known about the events of Black Thursday?
How can we add to documentary evidence?
- What do we want to find out in our interviews?
- How much of our questioning should be focused on the events of Black Thursday?
How much life history do we want to delve into?
- How many interviews do we want to conduct with the narrators? How in-depth?

--How do we coordinate the work of multiple interviewers?

--Interview Outline.

Methodology

Memory—

How much do we challenge the narrative?

Problems with memory?

Should be aware of these although there is no ultimate solution.

Bad Memory--Some memories are just bad. Can't really remember events. We must be prepared to help with some detail but not lead the interview. It's important not just to help narrator but to also to communicate these concerns to the listener/reader of the interview

Anachronisms—inevitable. But be on the lookout for filtering the past through things we know today. Tricky—some oral historians, some historians are going to understand the anachronisms as valuable. But, since they are inevitable, and our interest is getting the best account of past events then we need to be ready to redirect. Or, ask follow-up questions that ask for clarification. (ex. Contemporary cynicism, changing attitudes about race, gender, etc....). (DONA MARIA's STORY)

Distance—Similar to anachronism. People often make sense of these events over time by giving some details more importance than they would have at the time. They know the outcome of things so they can assert things in ways they perhaps wouldn't at the time. This is also tricky b/c we have to be aware of this and ask follow-up questions in unobtrusive ways. (ex. Really? Weren't you scared? Or, that must have been very hard on an 18 year old?). Gently taking people back to the moment might bring forth remembrances, feelings that they have deemphasized over the years.

Also, with regard to distance, we should also keep in mind that many of the participants in Black Thursday, even local people we might interview, often are in contact with one another. They often discuss these issues in groups, in these Black Thursday remembrance events and that helps to construct a group story that reinforces some memories and deemphasizes others. We need to get a sense of that basic narrative so we can gently challenge it from time to time. (These things get fleshed out as we do some interviewing.)

Perspective—We must be aware of the different types of stories we will hear from different narrators depending on their relationship to events. For instance, people at the center of events (like Black Thursday) will likely have a really good sense of their own actions, their own importance. But they will not often have the best understanding of the big picture; of what other people were doing; perhaps of what its importance is down the line, historically.

On the other hand, people at the periphery often are good at understanding the big picture, at understanding what others were doing and how larger events unfolded. But they may not have much internal understanding or their own actions were of less importance.

This is important because you have to assess the narrators differently and must be willing to expect different stories, different types of knowledge. So, you do want people to focus on the important events as best they can but we must be realistic about what is

possible and appreciate the different types of stories we will hear (feel like I'm saying a lot of use your best judgment).

Assessing Narrators—As I've mentioned we must form some assessment of the reliability of the narrators memories and ultimate credibility. This is why it is so important to prepare and research your narrator as best you can. This way you can help fill in blanks. More important, we should have a sense of what this person is likely to know, what it is unlikely they know (first hand knowledge, possible biases they have that might have shaped perceptions, how they have changed over years). Some people might pass along rumors, second-hand stories that may or may not stand up to scrutiny. These may be interesting and may even have some value but it is important that we indicate that is what they are. (For instance, a second-hand story might tell us a lot about how people remember an event but if we think it unlikely that the narrator knows this information first hand we should ask, "did you see this?", "were you there?" Not in an accusatory way but in a way that allows the listener, years later, to properly assess the information.

Questions to ask yourself:

What subsequent events might have caused a reevaluation?

How closely does the testimony agree with the documentary sources?

How can the narrator explain discrepancies?

Nostalgia—It is very common that people try to remember the past positively. We seem to want to structure things as having long-term meaning and usually positive meaning for our lives. So, look out for possible inflation of the past (the Good Ole Days). Also, be aware that many people will try to cover up trauma, hard times in the past. They, of course, do so for many reasons: to traumatic and they want to have more optimistic outlook on trajectory of their life.

This is hard issue. I find it sometimes not just uncomfortable to bring up but also very hard to do so well. It seems to me that Black Thursday might present us with just some of these problems. Maybe not on the level of Minnie Jean Brown Trickey but I do expect some of it.

Although this is tough it is our goal to move past nostalgia and confront the past critically, openly. (Hard to do, we are never grilling people). Funneling questions. Best to begin with broad, open questions (You were arrested? Can you tell me about that experience? What were your feelings? How were you treated by the police officers? Etc...)

Also, with nostalgia people sometimes want to talk about a beautiful past that was dashed by some event (maybe Black Thursday). So if someone were to vaguely say, "Oshkosh was a peaceful beautiful place" you need to challenge that in an indirect way. If you say you're crazy, Oshkosh was a dirty, violent logging town, they will shut down. Probably the same if you were to ask them if they think the black students were to blame for that. More important, you will not get at why they think things changed, which gets at their attitudes. You do best if you directly engage that perception and let them get into it. "Really, what was it like in the 1950s?" "What were the neighborhoods like?" "Tell me about the people in your neighborhood?" "When did it change?" "Why did it change?"

People don't want to discuss uncomfortable subject, especially race issues. They may think you are trying to trick them but you need to give them space to explain their vague perceptions about the past. Draw them into more detail.

Can't just let people tell the most positive details about themselves.

Conducting Interviews:

Qualities of Good Interviewer—Putting narrator at ease, eliminating anxiety.

Again there is a balance between taking the interview seriously so that the narrator will, too; but also not letting them feel intimidated, dumb, forgetful—don't grill but try to get best information.

Listening—for key information, unexpected information, to show interest and encourage the comfort of the narrator.

Guide without Leading—provide names, dates, keep things moving.

Goal is to move narrator beyond reluctance to an honest and perhaps self-critical evaluation of the past.

Basic Principles—

- Be well prepared, do your homework for that particular interview
- construct meaningful but open ended questions
- do not interrupt responses
- follow up on what you have heard
- know equipment well

Preparation—

Research--Do lots of research on the individual. Many oral historians suggest a rule of thumb of 10 hours of preparation for every interview hour (at least for 1st interview meeting, after this less is needed). This might be a little more than we can accomplish since our narrators probably won't have nearly the paper trail of a Congressman, but need to do our best on this. Why background info and Tiffany's work is so important. If it is hard to find background information we can ask for some detail from the narrator prior to the interview but it shouldn't be too specific—people don't like being re-interviewed and usually don't respond as well the second time. Knowledge builds rapport and helps earn respect (filling in blanks). Sometimes it is good to listen to other interviews before hand to start thinking about interviewing techniques.

Chronology—important to have good sense of this. **Do we want to conduct interviews in a roughly chronological fashion or thematically?** Chronology works well and it is important that we have that clear so we can keep events in order.

Also, new information is likely to come up and we must be willing to deviate from script, allow useful new information, question it well, and be mindful of points you want to return to.

Questions—how many questions?

Best to have too many. Can't judge how loquacious narrators will be. Some people jump around and anticipate other questions you have in mind so you have to be

really flexible in questioning. Also, some people are very brief with their responses and need lots of follow-up questions.

If lots of left over questions a second interview might be necessary.

How long should interviews be? Usually no longer than 2 hours.

Framing Questions— What is the role of the interviewer? Should the interviewer be an objective or neutral participant?

Big questions. I think it is clear that we want to impose our own points of view as little as possible. Questions should not reveal from what position you are coming from. Why general questions are the best and then follow-ups should be in the interest of clarifying but should avoid, as best as possible, revealing what we might expect or hope to hear. It's much more difficult than it seems—lot's of criticism of your interviews is necessary.

If answers are too short it may be that the questions are too specific and the interviewer should draw back a bit. Also avoid jumping into the next question too quickly. Let the silence remain for 10 seconds or so before you ask the next question (clarifying questions can be peppered in).

Home Run Question—Studs Terkel. Hold off but, perhaps at end if things are going well you should look for this question, gets at heart of what has been said.

Uncooperative Narrator—Usually not a problem with projects like this b/c uncooperative people don't do them to begin with. Try to consider why person is bitter, uncooperative and deal with those reasons, go to areas that you know they like. If someone angry about BT events then you might start somewhere else and work back.

Embarrassing Subjects—Most suggest that when this occurs you must address them. Should build rapport first, ask questions later. Helpful to introduce them indirectly at first, according to newspapers...., some said.... Then, it is important to go back, maybe later and address the response more directly so that it is not just a defensive answer but that the details are fleshed out.

Setting up—Equipment questions. Should be out in open but not in the direct line of vision. Electrical outlets. Battery packs. Be very, very familiar with equipment and do an equipment check at the beginning of the interview (about 2 minutes in, basic information given, say hello, little banter perhaps, then check, do the same after you change tape, be aware of time of tape.) Check sound quality and room noise, we should really avoid busy public places (hotel bars, SDSers interviews in coffee houses on State Street and trucks obscure long stretches).

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