

Leena Rossi**Do no harm- power in oral history****>>PDF-version**

Since the 1970s, especially feminist scholars have paid attention to the ethical problems that may rise in doing oral history, the elements of inequality and exploitation, even betrayal, of interviewees. [\[1\]](#) Among other things they have discussed the imbalance of power in interview situations and the interpretation of the oral material. [\[2\]](#) This discussion has alerted scholars in other fields, too.

Throughout the research process we historians exercise more or less power; we plan the research, formulate the problems, we collect and/or create the research material, we analyse and interpret it, and we create the final publication, most often a text. In the end we may even participate in publishing and disseminating the printed product. The academic community, its gatekeepers, sponsors, publishers, as well as the reading audience may affect the individual scholar's work, but the researcher is always the main agent that has final authority with and responsibility for her/his research.

Several ethical problems in historical research are connected with the use of power. In this paper I will discuss the possibilities scholars and interviewees have in exercising power in various phases of oral history. As the well-known feminist scholar and linguist, Daphne Patai has said, objectification, the utilisation of others for one's own purposes and the possibility of exploitation, are built into almost all research projects with living human beings. But even "neutral" and "objective" traditional history that uses primarily written sources by and about dead persons has ethical problems. [\[3\]](#) Oral history is ethically demanding, especially because there is always at least one more person present in addition to the researcher in every interview situation.

Feminist Scholars Challenge the "Masculinist" Model of Interviews

Before going into the phases of oral history research I want to give background for the ethical dilemmas. In the end of the 1970s, two linguists, Gunther Kress & Roger Fowler suggested in their article "Interviews" that communicative relationships are generally asymmetrical, in the sense that one participant has more authority than the other(s). They also said that inequality in the distribution of power seems to be inherent in interviews: differences in individual purposes and in their status and roles distinguish the participants. Kress and Fowler also questioned any appearance of intimacy, solidarity, and co-operation in interview conversation. [\[4\]](#) They described an interview situation as follows:

He is in control of the mechanics of the interview: he starts it, he has the right to ask questions, and he has the privilege of terminating it. Through his choice of questions he selects the topics which may be introduced and, ... he even has the prerogative to ask questions so designed structurally that no new information can be introduced. The interviewee only has the right to ask questions in the very rare, and often merely token, situation of being given explicit permission to do so. The interviewer may, even then, refuse to answer a question ... yet failing to answer the question, or deviating from the drift of the question, is the most damning sin the interviewee can commit. [\[5\]](#)

At the same time feminist scholars, the sociologist Ann Oakley in the vanguard began to question the traditional, masculine model of interviews, where the interviewer is a mechanical data-collecting instrument for the researcher and

the interviewee a passive data-producer.^[6] In her own studies Oakley replaced the model of a distanced, controlled, and ostensibly neutral interviewer with that of empathy and mutuality. She was convinced that the neutral and detached interviewer is neither possible nor desirable. Quite convincingly, she argued that her method, "sisterhood", produced not only a better research process but also better research results.^[7]

Soon some feminists hopefully believed that oral history allowing an interactive process will end the exploitation of women as research object.^[8] But others were quite cynical about it. In 1991 Judith Stacey, also a sociologist, wondered whether the appearance of greater respect for and equality with the research subjects in the ethnographic approach masks deeper, more dangerous forms of exploitation than the more positivist, abstract and "masculinist" research method. She wrote that engagement and attachment might place research subjects at grave risk of manipulation and betrayal by the ethnographer.^[9] On the other hand, Daphne Patai (1991) stressed that gathering lengthy personal narratives, in particular, generates an intimacy (or the appearance of intimacy) that blurs any neat distinction between "research" and "personal relations".^[10] She did not quite agree with Jack C. Douglas who a decade earlier (1979) had written that the relationships we develop in friendship and in research situations differ only in degree, and that we have fewer social obligations to our research subjects since we tend to be less intimate with them.^[11]

Kress and Fowler's description of an interview was a valid one for a long time after its publication, but today it is only an alarming caricature of an oral history dialogue with the researcher misusing her/his power. An oral history encounter is supposed to be a dialogue where the researcher and the narrator together create the material to be used later as historical source. Mostly it depends on the interviewer if the ideal is reached or not. In the worst case, the interview may still turn into a power struggle.

Before the Interview

In general, people are quite willing to participate in research interviews, but their motives can vary. Some want to tell "the truth", while others appreciate the entertainment, prestige, or publicity the interview might offer. Some use the interviewer as a kind of therapist, but most sincerely want to help the researcher "do history". I find the motives secondary if the narrators co-operate with the interviewer.^[12]

It depends completely on the scholar if the interviewees-to-be are asked to participate in the planning stage of the project. In a positive case they may have an effect on – if not choosing the topic but – formulating the research problems. In the pilot interview the key informant^[13] can also influence the interview questions before the ethnographic fieldwork proper so that the researcher may even have to remodel them.

The key informant may strongly influence the choice of the interviewees; (s)he can instruct the researcher on who should definitely be interviewed and even prevent her/him from interviewing certain persons. If the researcher is totally ignorant about possible interviewees, (s)he is at the mercy of the key informant. If potential narrators are so numerous the researcher cannot interview them all (s)he has to take a sample, but by selecting intentionally only those who represent her/his preconceptions the researcher already heads towards a biased interpretation in the beginning of her/his work.

Participation as a narrator in an oral history project is always voluntary: no scholar should force anybody to participate in a scientific venture. But the scholar's duty is to inform the collaborators-to-be about the purpose of the project, its sponsors, the subject matter of the interviews, the time they require, and possible (predictable) consequences – before they promise to participate.^[14] Leaving this undone is, of course, wrong. It is also questionable if the researcher persuades somebody into an interview by appealing to her/his authority or that of her/his institute. Besides, I find all attempts to lure interviewees with monetary or other material rewards completely indefensible although some anthropologists have used them.

During the Interview

When a person agrees to participate in a research project (s)he also accepts the inherent fact that the interviewer conducts and controls the interview by asking questions. This does not, however, mean that the researcher has the right to control the content of the answers. Fruitful interviews are always run on narrators' terms, in accordance with what they want to relate and in the way they have learned to narrate. Feminist scholars, like Kristina Minister, stress the inter-subjectivity of feminist oral history where questions flow both ways and narrators have an opportunity to interrogate interviewers about the research project and about the interviewer herself. She also points out that class, age, ethnicity, and cultural distinctions, like education, speech and dress, tend to build hierarchy that inhibits disclosure. [\[15\]](#)

In an oral history interview, it is unethical of the researcher to force the narrator to tell about things that (s)he wants to keep silent about. It is also immoral to demonstrate the narrator's ignorance by asking her/him repeatedly – and thus frustratingly – about matters (s)he obviously does not know of.

In an interview, the scholar can deliberately get a biased view about past in many ways; by leading questions, by putting words into the narrators' mouth, by questions that can be answered yes or no – such answers do not provide any new information. Or the researcher can abandon questions that the interviewee would answer in a way opposite to or deviant from the scholar's preconceptions.

During a lively natural oral history interview participants occasionally interrupt each other without any attempt to dominate, but the researcher can also interrupt the narrator in order to prevent her/him from finishing her/his account or expressing divergent opinions. It is quite common that the researcher prevents the narrator from telling about matters that are not relevant to the project although they are significant to her/him. – In Finland, old men tend to speak about their war experiences no matter what the interview is supposed to be about. – Although the researcher does not openly prevent the narrator from speaking (s)he may listen to her/him so carelessly that (s)he is not able to follow up with relevant questions the clues the narrator gives and thus perhaps misses very valuable information. Careless listening may also offend the interviewee.

"Consciousness raising" can be an explicit goal in a feminist research project, but most scholars reject all attempts to transform the interviewee's ideas. The French linguist and literary historian Marie-Francois Chanfrault-Duchet says: "This would be to practice a kind of savage social therapy." If attempted, any such consciousness-raising must take place after the analysis. [\[16\]](#) Daphne Patai agrees with Chanfrault-Duchet and says that turning the interviews into opportunities for imposing our own politically correct analyses requires "an arrogance incompatible with genuine respect for others." Patai adds that scholars betray the implicit trust if they utilise the interview as an occasion to force on the interviewees ideas of a proper political awareness. [\[17\]](#)

Although her/his possibilities are more limited the interviewee can, on her/his part, exercise power during the interview in several ways. (S)he may deliberately miss the point of the question asked or completely ignore certain questions. The interviewee may also ignore all the questions and speak only about matters that interest her/him preventing the researcher from interrupting. In case (s)he does not really know anything about the research topic the narrator may invent stories or tell what (s)he has read in books only to please the researcher. It is also possible for the narrator to completely refuse to discuss certain topics or give intentionally distorted answers. [\[18\]](#) According to my own experiences, the interviewees do not, however, deliberately tell obvious lies.

After the Interview

In recording the interview it is usually the researcher who makes decisions and thus uses power. (S)he decides about the start and end of it although the interviewee can say if (s)he does not want certain things to be recorded. It is quite unethical to record against the will of the narrator or without her/his knowing. It is also wrong to omit certain parts of the discussion that don't fit in with the researcher's preconceptions. The narrator may completely deny video

taping or tape recording and ask to destroy the tapes after transcription, which (s)he has the right to do and the researcher has to respect her/his demand. But then the narrator – probably without realising it – also denies future scholars access to the original recordings. On the other hand, the researcher can on her/his own initiative destroy the recordings to prevent other scholars from listening to them. – I have to confess that years ago, by reusing the tapes, I destroyed the original recordings, because I did not have enough tapes with me in the field.

Transcription of the interviews after the sessions is also a phase in oral history research process where the scholar has the advantage over both the narrator and future scholars. (S)he might make only a short synopsis of the topics discussed in the interview and thus force other researchers tediously to listen to the tapes. On the other hand, (s)he can turn the original speech into worded transcription that can be in two modes, either in the speakers' original dialect or translated into standard language. The latter I find rather questionable, although I have also made such "translations" several years ago because I thought that other researcher might not understand the narrator's dialect. In any case it would be good to ask the narrators to check the transcription afterwards for both language and facts.

The oral historian continues to use power in categorisation, analysis, and interpretation of her/his material. But that is what the scholars are for. They should, however, try to avoid one-sided interpretations and let the narrators' voices be heard. It is this "polyphony" that actually makes oral history strong. The folklorist Katharine Borland has pointed out that years ago it was common for an oral historian to exclude the ethnographic subject from the process of post-fieldwork interpretation. But more recently, some researchers sensitive to the relationships of power in the fieldwork have questioned this model of the scholar as interpretive authority. [\[19\]](#) Borland admits that time constraints often prevent researchers from asking the narrators to give their interpretations. Even if we discuss the product of our research with our field collaborators these discussions are often overlooked or unreported in the final text. [\[20\]](#) However, with increasing reflexivity this kind of information has become more and more common in publications.

By asking the narrators to read the preliminary or final text and make the necessary corrections in their interpretations of the past the researcher can promote "multi vocality". Otherwise all the interpretations in the publication are those of the researcher. [\[21\]](#) However, the scholar should not yield to the narrators' demands to change her/his own interpretation if they are well grounded.

Regardless of the quality of the interview material, the researcher can bias her/his results if (s)he uses nothing but oral material or if (s)he uses only a part of it. – Traditional historians as well can be accused of giving a one-sided picture if they omit opposite or contradictory opinions. Very seldom is the researcher's view the only one to be discovered – not to mention "the truth". Although we aim at "partial truths", as postmodern ethnographers like James Clifford say, [\[22\]](#) we should include different interpretations into our final text. [\[23\]](#)

Verbatim citations from the (transcribed) interviews are essential in oral history but researchers disagree about them. Some use standard language regardless of the narrator's dialect; others cite every "ahem" and repetition. I personally think that both procedures are unethical. The citations should be as true to the original speech as possible, otherwise they are not citations. However, leaving all the "fillings" in the text makes the narrator's talking sound clumsy or unintelligent.

Betrayal often hides in oral history projects and usually becomes evident in the final text. The worst kind of betrayal is, if, in the final publication, the author denigrates the narrators, puts them in a bad light, or lays them open to ridicule. It is also malicious to emphasise one's own importance and proficiency by presenting the narrators either as stupid and ignorant or intelligent, all knowing, and exceptionally wise and rational.

Regardless of their promises the researchers do not always maintain the anonymity of the narrators – or they leave certain parts of the interview unpublished – although they have earlier promised to do so.^[24] It is also an ethical breach if the researcher leaves the field with the data and is not heard of thereafter; it is natural that the narrators feel disappointed and exploited. Here, as Daphne Patai has written, “problems of power and betrayal expose the fragility of easy assumptions of sisterhood and reciprocity.”^[25] Any kind of betrayal can prevent the researcher from getting to the field in the future.

After the publication, both scholar and narrators may continue the power struggle. The researcher can try to prevent the narrators from gaining access to the publication, and bitter or hurt narrators can – on good grounds or none – denigrate the scholar or tell pure lies about her/him. Of course, every author should welcome pertinent criticism and try to learn something of it.

Although it is mostly the scholar who controls the whole oral history research process, the narrators can also exercise power in it. Most often it is the interview situation where the interviewee can have some impact. It is good to realise that the partners do not only exercise power over each other and the oral material, but over the possibilities of future scholars, the interpretation of the past, and the final product or publication.

Is Ethical Oral History Possible?

With so many possibilities to misuse power, we may ask, if ethical oral history research is possible at all. Daphne Patai says that, globally, we have to answer: “No,” and further explains that “in an unethical world, we cannot do truly ethical research.” Exploitation and unethical behaviour are always a possibility when research is conducted with living persons and especially when the researcher is interviewing “down”, that is, among economically, politically, or socially less powerful people.^[26]

The researcher may gain “fame and fortune” with her/his publications. But do the narrators get anything of participating in the oral history project? It is a common observation that the collaborators get something out of it too. They get the undivided attention of another individual and the opportunity to tell their stories and recuperate their memories. They get “the entry into history”, perhaps the chance to exercise some editorial control over the project or even its products, etc. Some researchers believe that the opportunity to talk about one's life to another person makes the interview a “fair exchange,” where each partner receives and gives in equal measure.^[27]

Doing oral history in fairly equal societies like the Finnish one, the researcher's rigorous self-awareness of the ethical dilemmas throughout the research process I have discussed here might be enough to prevent power struggle. In every case, we have to decide whether our research is worth doing or not, and then determine how to go about it. Although the oral history research situations where oral narratives are typically gathered and utilised are rather complex, it is not reasonable to abandon them.^[28]

The asymmetry in oral history interview situation cannot be avoided, neither should it, because without the researcher's authority there would never be any research. Oral history is always partial but the scholar has to make every effort to avoid deliberately biasing it. In a reciprocal, respectful, sympathetic, non-authoritarian situation there is no need for power struggle; it only arises if the researcher does not treat the narrators as equal human beings. So far there is no Code of Ethics for historian in general, but associations of oral historians and anthropologists as well as sociologists have published ethical standards or codes where the main guideline is to avoid harm or wrong to the people with whom we work.^[29]

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[1] This article is based on the paper I gave in "Det VIII Nordiska kvinnohistorikermöte: Kön och kunskap" in the session "Ethics and the role of researcher in history-writing", Turku, Finland 12–14.8.2005.

[2] See e.g. Oakley 1981; Gluck & Patai 1991.

[3] Patai 1991, p. 139.

[4] Kress & Fowler 1979, p. 63.

[5] Kress & Fowler 1979, p. 63.

[6] See esp. Oakley 1981.

[7] Oakley 1981, pp. 30–61; see also Stacey 1991, pp. 112–113. The leading Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli also encourages the interviewer to be open, answer if the narrators ask, and tell them about her/himself. Portelli 1997, p. 62.

[8] Klein 1983, p. 95.

[9] Stacey 1991, pp. 113–114.

[10] Patai 1991, p. 142.

[11] Douglas 1979, pp. 27–29.

[12] About the motives of the interviewees see e.g. Kuula 2006, p. 155–161.

[13] I agree with Oakley (1991, p. 58, note 6) when she says that the label *informant* suggests that the interviewer's role is to get the interviewee to 'inform' (somewhat against his/her will) on closely guarded or dangerous secrets. Portelli also used *informant* till his colleague Louisa Passerini made him realise the connotations of the term.

[14] Quite convincingly, Patai (1991, p. 137) says that we are unable to control the potential consequences of our procedures and of the research product in which they result. See also Kuula 2006, pp. 101–108.

[15] Minister 1991, pp. 36–38.

[16] Chanfrault-Duchet 1991, p. 89.

[17] Patai 1991, p. 148.

[18] In her article, the Finnish folklorist Outi Fingerroos (2003, pp. 204–205) has paid attention to the ways the interviewees actively maneuver the interview and the contents of the information to be collected.

[19] Borland 1991, p. 64.

[20] Borland 1991, pp. 70, 71.

[21] In her dissertation folklorist Tanja Ukkonen (2000, p. 98) has suggested that collaboration in the analysis and interpretation of the material is probably fruitful but she has also noted that the interviewees don't usually consider themselves capable or competent to do it.

[22] Clifford 1985, p. 7.

[23] Portelli 1997, pp. 64–67.

[24] About the anonymity see e.g. Kuula 2006, pp. 108–115.

[25] Patai 1991, p. 149.

[26] Patai 1991, pp. 137, 150. When interviewing children or elderly persons the researcher should be especially careful. See e.g. Alasuutari 2005 and Lumme-Sandt 2005. The power balance might tip over if the researcher has to interview "up". See, e.g. Tienari, Vaara & Meriläinen, 2005.

[27] Patai 1991, pp. 143, 149. Interestingly, the Finnish sociologist, Tommi Hoikkala (1995, p. 186) has admitted that he felt like an exploiter because he could not give back anything to his interviewees.

[28] Patai 1991, p. 150.

[29] See e.g. *Code of Ethical and Technical Practice*, 2001; *Principles and Standards of the Oral history Association*; *Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association*, 1998. See also Liite 2, in Arja Kuula 2006.