

Secondly: the risk of coming into conflict with local historians who also might not appreciate the project though for different reasons. Thirdly: the risk of presenting an interpretation of the activity of the very same local historians who are also the subjects of my work. Although oral history analysis certainly does not offer evaluation of the actions of the particular museum or its leader, it does suggest explications of motives for that activity which may not fully coincide with those that are declared by the museum members. Would I have to start my future papers not with acknowledgements but rather with apologies?

And there's one more risk. Once the publication of the materials collected in the previous stages of the project entered the local milieu it is highly probable that the book affected the recollections of local people. Now a fear of encountering citations from our own work will accompany all ensuing researchers in this particular place.

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THE INTERVIEWER'S DILEMMA

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In countless methods books, authors in various fields of oral history research have written a great deal about the attributes of a good interviewer and about personal qualities which could have an effect on the interviewing process, consequently making a difference in the oral material created and to the whole research project; age, sex, ethnicity, social background, appearance, religious or political ideology and way of speaking are examples of such qualities. Some of these can be hidden but others cannot and need not. The possible impacts of the interviewer's characteristics have also been frequently reflected upon in research publications, which have, of course, come out after the interviews have been conducted.

In addition to many other ethical problems, all oral historians encounter the question I call the 'interviewer's dilemma': "Am I the right person to interview this particular individual?" This leads to another question inseparably connected with it: "Could another interviewer with different qualities be able to conduct a richer and more fruitful conversation with this person?" Answering these questions compels the researcher-interviewer to an honest and careful self-reflection about her qualities, not only after the interviews, as has mostly been done, but also at all phases of the research. And the reflexivity should not be restricted to individual textual approaches in publications but it should be extended to a collective process within academia. Moreover, the researcher should be prepared to withdraw from interviewing certain persons if she is worried about the impact of her special qualities on the interviewees-to-be and simultaneously on the whole research process. So far, I have found hardly any author questioning her suitability as an interviewer, let alone revealing that she has given up interviewing certain narrators and invited a colleague to replace her.

Of course, some researcher may have done the former but not the latter, since, depending on the nature of the research project and its specific problems, it is not always necessary or useful to offer such details about the interviewers in the report.

Although some writers have frankly admitted experiencing difficulties in interviewing due to their personal characteristics, they have usually concluded that their qualities had not prevented them from establishing a rapport with the interviewees and from creating rich and relevant oral material for the project, but, on the contrary, had benefited interaction and conversation as well as producing information. In a few publications authors have openly admitted that members of the chosen research group have refused to cooperate with them, but they presume that it was some special aspect in the culture, not their personal qualities, that caused the conflict. I have not been any braver: a couple of times I have indeed asked other members of the project to interview certain persons since I have felt unable to erase my preconceptions about them, but I have not reported the procedure in my publications.

Most oral historians who have acquired the necessary training in interviewing techniques can conduct decent interviews with almost any narrator but we cannot take this for granted. Nor should we expect narrators to accept just any available oral history expert who wants to probe into their private matters and life experiences, regardless of personal qualities which might in some cases create a very strong antipathy or reluctance in the interviewee-to-be. I argue that narrators have the right to refuse to converse with interviewers whose behaviour or characteristics make them uneasy or nervous and to ask for another partner if they want to contribute to the project at all.

In various research projects I have noticed that many scholars, irrespective of their personal qualities, want to conduct all or most of the interviews themselves. Perhaps this is because they enjoy the activity so much or because they do not want to miss the non-verbal information the narrators provide or maybe it is that they do not trust anybody else's interviewing skills. In such cases the researchers are convinced that they are the right and the best possible interviewers and nobody else can replace them. Of course, if the researcher is working on her own and is the only interviewer in the project there are no alternatives, but, fortunately, in most oral history projects there are several members who can conduct interviews, and then it is possible at least to try to discover optimal conversational partners. I have to admit that in my own projects I first doubted whether other interviewers could create as good material as I felt I could but shortly I realised that their interviews are not necessarily better or worse than mine, though they are different.

Being members of different cultures makes the conversational partners insiders or outsiders, but all the personal characteristics of the interviewer I have mentioned above—age, sex, ethnicity, appearance and so on—can as well be seen as insider's or outsider's qualities from the perspective of the interviewee. Researcher and narrator are not necessarily of the same sex; they seldom belong to the same age group or social background; even in Finland they often have different ethnic backgrounds. Depending on the research problems, I have always been more or less conscious of age differences in interviews, but over time I have become aware that it is easier for me to communicate with elderly people and children than with young adults or teenagers. Other oral historians have also, in certain cases, felt like outsiders in their contacts with young people but they have not considered themselves disqualified for interviewing them.

Gender is also a quality that can make the interviewer feel like an outsider and there are apparent communicating gaps in male-female conversations on several levels. It is not sensible to generalise about whether same-sex or male-female interviews are better; this can vary from interview to interview though it is self-evident that the oral material will be quite different if produced in a same-sex rather than a male-female interview, regardless of the competence of the interviewer concerning the matters discussed. For instance, male narrators do not expect female interviewers to understand technological matters, which are considered to belong to the world of men. Thus, while interviewing male industrial workers about their attitudes towards newcomers and the initiation rites used in their workshops, I noticed that they first spoke to me in very general terms until they realised that I was not completely unfamiliar with their male traditions. Female narrators do not, for example, expect male interviewers to understand nursing problems and both sexes can feel uneasy disclosing their sexual or other intimate experiences to a representative of the opposite sex because they feel that the other one is an outsider. In another project, old sailors hesitated before they began to talk to me about their relations with women. Although they gave me plenty of valuable information, I could sense that they would have produced more and livelier narratives, had I been a man. Unfortunately, no male interviewers could be employed in the project.

The status of 'professional stranger' is one traditionally recommended to oral historians; they have been expected to keep a professional and analytical distance from their conversational partners and the topics discussed in the interviews. Thus the researcher's home community has not been suggested as a research topic, lest she becomes 'home blind'; closeness to the subject has also been seen as a negative factor. Nowadays the cultural competence that the insider's position carries with it is appreciated; if the researchers are sufficiently informed of the topics to be discussed they can pose meaningful questions which make the conversation worthwhile. In certain cases, however, researching within one's own culture is more difficult. I have found interviewing friends and relatives most problematic, particularly because the narrator often does not disclose all the details essential to the investigation because she assumes that I, as a member of the same subculture, already know them. On the other hand, during the course of the interview a narrator may come to understand that it is not only certain 'facts' but also her personal opinions and detailed experiences that I want to hear about, and she will begin to recollect her memories in a more informative way and from her own point of view. This has not always happened, however, and sometimes the narrator is left wondering why am I asking her about things I already know. She may feel silly or awkward being interviewed by a relative. Nevertheless, there are plenty of examples of successful interviewing of close relatives and friends; many oral historians have noticed that kinship can be an asset and even a distant relationship can enhance the rapport, although sometimes it can be easier to tell a total stranger about one's mundane or extraordinary occurrences. Researchers have various experiences of being an insider or an outsider. Some have discovered that being almost totally ignorant about the topic to be discussed can be an advantage: the narrator has been more than willing to describe all the necessary details to the uninformed as well as interpreting, commenting and explaining.

In some cases, an oral history interview produces better results if the backgrounds of the interviewer and interviewee are matched and, in other cases, interviewing across class, sex

or gender, or ethnic barriers creates richer material. Communication between the conversational partners does not require identical beliefs but it requires a sufficiently established working consensus to make cooperative activity possible. Therefore, it does not matter if the interviewer is an insider or an outsider but she must be aware of it and of its possible consequences.

To conclude, I suggest that, in order to ease encounters with the ‘interviewer’s dilemma’, oral historians experiment more and make it customary to have the same narrators interviewed by several members of the research team with different qualities. For instance, two researchers, a man and a woman, both in the age group of the narrator, could interview the same person or two interviewers of the same sex but different ethnic backgrounds could conduct interviews with the same narrator. Possible combinations of conversational partners are many. In addition, whatever the situation, the interviewer should be courageous enough to step aside if she is not sure of her suitability for interviewing a certain person.

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