

Oral History: Theory and Method

SOM Course No. ME: 150.713

Professor Comfort

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Wednesdays, 2–4 p.m.

Description

This graduate seminar is intended as a practical introduction to interviewing for historical scholarship. We will take oral history in a broad, interdisciplinary sense, as the use of interviews as a research method. The goal of the course is to sample *some* of the varieties of oral history methods, consider topics animating the discourse among oral historians, explore a variety of ways to implement interviewing in historical scholarship, and, most importantly, to equip you with the basic skillset of historical interviewing in an environment of guidance, peer feedback, and constructive criticism. We will stick fairly close to historical approaches, with dips into anthropology, folklore, and creative nonfiction: The unifying themes are narrative and participant observation—stories, rather than data. A wide world of sociological methods—including qualitative research, grounded theory, quantitative research, surveys, etc.—awaits the intrepid soul who ventures into the Sociology Department or the Public Health school, where courses on these topics can be found.

Your main product in the course will be a well-researched and professionally conducted and transcribed oral-history interview of 1–2 hours and a short paper based on it. This semester, all interviews will be conducted remotely via Zoom, due to the pandemic. The paper should be 8–12 pp. (2,000–3,000 words) and may be a piece of historical writing or a *substantive* reflection piece discussing your interview in light of the theoretical and methodological themes of the course. Your transcript is due on the last day of class; the paper, one week later.

After bounding the field and discussing ethical issues, we will span a spectrum of approaches to oral history that slide down a scale from reliability of the informant to total unreliability; all can yield rich material for the creative analyst. We will discuss nuts-and-bolts issues like questioning, transcription, and analysis of narrative. And we will examine a number of exemplary applications of oral history in scholarly works. I have tried to sprinkle the sessions on mechanics at about the time you will be putting them to use, but people are wiggly. If an assignment doesn't line up with the timetable of your interview, let me know—but if your subject can only do the interview at the very beginning or very end of the term, you should consider a different subject for this project.

Assignments and Evaluation

1) Annotated bibliography (15%; due 4/7)

Submit a bibliography including the following:

- Secondary sources ***on oral history*** that you want to use in your paper
- Non-oral-history-related secondary sources you expect to use
- Primary sources you have identified, ***including your own interview(s)***

2) Oral history transcript (30%; due 4/28)

You are to research, conduct, and transcribe an oral history interview with a subject of your choosing. Ideally (although not mandatory), it should be someone whose interests/expertise are relevant to your own research. The interview should be 1–2 hours in length and you are to turn in a complete transcript. You should make explicit decisions as to the transcription style you employ. The transcript should actually be completed well before this deadline, so that you can write the...

3) Analytical Paper (25%; due 5/5)

Your transcript should be accompanied by a paper of about 10 pp. analyzing and interpreting your interview. The form of the paper is fairly open-ended. You may choose to situate your subject within your research, write a biographical sketch of your subject, or write an extended reflection on the interview process as a historical technique. I'm happy to discuss further alternatives. Your paper should quote liberally from your transcript; the object here is to create a primary source and then use it.

Secondary sources should be annotated with 1–3 sentences characterizing the work and discussing how you expect to use it. Please put each list under its own heading (for the final paper, only primary and secondary sources need to be segregated. You may include as many works in each as you wish. I will evaluate them first on quality and then on quantity. It is unnecessary to include more than 20 of each of the secondary-source lists and more than 10 primary sources. It is understood that the bibliography of your final paper may evolve from this preliminary bibliography.

4) Participation (30%)

Weekly participation is essential for a successful class. Your participation will be evaluated on the consistency and thoroughness of your preparation (i.e., doing the readings) and in your contributions during class. You will be asked to prepare brief oral presentations of your historiography paper and your final project (length of presentation = # students/120 mins. – break time).

Note: The Oral History Association has assembled this handy list of resources for conducting interviews remotely:

<https://www.oralhistory.org/remote-interviewing-resources/>

Syllabus (see bibliography following for full references)

*Asterisk indicates Perks and Thomson, *Oral History Reader*

- **Bold and bulleted indicates due date for written work.**

Week	Date	Title	Assignment
1	1/27	Fact vs. meaning	Louis Starr, "Oral history" Doel, "Oral history of American science" Lindee, "The Conversation" Thompson, "The Voice of the Past"* Frisch, "Oral history and <i>Hard Times</i> "*
2	2/3	Human subjects	Health and Human Services, 45CFR46 ("The Common Rule") The Belmont Report Schrag, "Introduction," <i>Ethical Imperialism</i> , 1–10. Stark, "Gaps in medical research ethics" Shopes, "Oral history, human subjects, and Institutional Review Boards" <i>See also: Oral History Society. "Is Your Oral History Legal and Ethical?" Accessed Jan. 13, 2021</i> https://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/ethical-and-legal/ ; <i>Oral History Society. "Data Protection for Oral Historians and Organisations Holding Oral History Interviews."</i> https://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/data-protection/
3	2/10	Questioning & listening	McPhee, "Elicitation" Karpf, "How we colour our voices" Yow, "Interviewing techniques and strategies" (chap. 11)* Anderson and Jack, "Learning to listen" (chap. 12)* <i>Browse other chaps. in P&T Part II</i>
4	2/17	Using unreliability	Portelli, <i>Death of Luigi Trastulli</i> , chaps. 1–4, 10 • 1 paragraph on who you will interview and why. Make sure you have preliminary consent!
5	2/24	Rumor and gossip	White, <i>Speaking with Vampires</i> Geissler, "'Kachinja Are Coming!' Portelli, chap. 6 • All materials for (streamlined) IRB proposal
6	3/3	Silence	Portelli, chap. 7 Hamilton, "Sex, 'silence' and audiotape" (chap. 26)* Blee, "Evidence, empathy, and ethics" (chap. 28)* Bornat, "Remembering and reworking emotions" (chap. 29)*
7	3/10	On memory	Terkel, <i>Hard Times</i> Terkel and Parker, "Interviewing an interviewer"* <i>Optional: Chaps. 21–25 in P&T or parts thereof*</i>
8	3/17	Transcription	Good, "Voice, ear and text" (chap. 30)* Portelli, chap. 5

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 pp. of interview transcribed 2 ways: literally, w/ every “um” and “ah”; and literarily, as polished, paragraphed standard English
9	3/24	Interpretation & Context	<p>Figes: "Private life in Stalin's Russia" (chap. 24)* Borland, "That's not what I said" (chap. 27)* Comfort, "When your sources talk back" Mintz, "The anthropological interview and the life history"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Same 2 pp. as last week, transcribed to your taste
10	3/31	Collective interviewing	<p>Graham Smith, "Remembering in groups" (chap. 13)* Tansey, "The Witness Seminar Technique" — — —. "Witnessing the Witnesses."</p> <p>Choose one witness seminar from the series and be prepared to discuss: What is gained in this format? What is lost or obscured? What is privileged?; identify a specific example of an interaction among the participants. http://www.histmodbiomed.org/article/welcome-witnesses-volumes.html</p>
11	4/7	Analyzing narrative: case study	<p>Escott, "The Art and Science of Reading Slave Narratives" Shaw, "Using the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives to Study the Impact of the Great Depression." Gamble et al., <i>Slave Narratives</i>, excerpts: Guidelines for interviewers in Federal Writers Project; "Rufus Dirt"; "Mama Duck"; "Cindy Kinsey"; "Robert Barr"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annotated bibliography due
12	4/14	BREAK DAY 3	
13	4/21	Ethnography	<p>Hofmeyr, "The craft of oral historical narrative" Livingston, "Creating and Embedding Cancer" Löwy, "The IL-2 Trial at the Cancer Foundation"</p>
14	4/28	Student presentations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare to lead discussion of your interview process, interpretation, context, and implementation in a work of history • Transcript due
Reading 5/5 week			Final paper due

The Umbrella IRB

Submitting an IRB proposal is a lengthy and fairly onerous task. However, I have an umbrella IRB exemption for oral-history projects conducted by students under me. You therefore have a greatly streamlined process for getting the green light from the JHU Homewood IRB (the Arts & Sciences IRB understands oral history much better than the SOM IRB): I simply have to add you as a Team Member to my ongoing pedagogical oral history project. In order for me to do that, you need to give me:

- 1) A 1 p. project description and sample questions (Word doc)
- 2) Consent form (from template, adapted to your project) (Word doc)
- 3) CITI Human Subjects certificate (PDF)
- 4) Completed Add Team Member Form (PDF)

For full details and instructions, see my SCOHP kit, located here and on Blackboard:
<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/00pnivzywyuvgmq/AABf3pKFIsqyoNDB6eLDyYoda?dl=0>

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Bibliography

Required Texts (purchase from your favorite independent bookseller; also on reserve in Rare Book Room):

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- White, Luise. *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

Articles and chapters on reserve and/or on JStor:

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