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This study examines how professionals in the field of oral history collection at university repositories evaluate validity in the materials they access. Questions of bias, the importance of pre-research and interview tactics have been analyzed.

Data has been collected and compared from four academic, professional respondents at important regional research sites from around the United States.

Headings:

Archives – Recorded Sound

Special Collections – Oral History

Tape Recordings

**COLLECTOR APPRAISAL
OF CURRENT COLLECTION TRENDS FOR THE
ENHANCEMENT OF VALIDITY IN ORAL HISTORY
TAPES AND TRANSCRIPTIONS**

By

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INTRODUCTION:

In the last century, oral history as a discipline has had to overcome biases about its validity, the degree to which a question elicits a response that actually serves as an indicator of whatever the questioner is hoping to measure. A reading of the broad literature on the evolution of the discipline and its wider acceptance from scholars and archives' collectors depicts great changes in the practice and description of that medium.

Oral history has attracted to its professional ranks of advocates historians, anthropologists, psychologists and sociologists who have added their disciplinary diversity in background and perspective to the development of a more diverse understanding of what oral history can be used for as a tool of social analysis. They have contributed to ideas about oral history's values, applicability, need for structural guidelines and authenticity as perhaps the ultimate primary resource for human witness and testimony.

Perhaps the greatest application and by-product of the use of oral history tape recordings and transcriptions has been the use of the medium to capture the voice of the common person, the marginalized and uneducated who often lack the circumstances and opportunities to leave a documentary record of their experiences. These participants in society--so influential in their population size culturally and opinionated in their perspective of American history-- have largely been rendered silent by a procurement of historical analysis that has favored opinions from elite, decision making societal voices.

The possibility of empowering the voice of the historically underrepresented made oral history an effective device for exposing women's and minorities' issues and perspectives. These records have unique value, increasingly utilized in educational core curriculum over the past half century. This new historical conception elevated oral history to the status of being a primary anthropological tool of modern scholarly analysis.

As we enter the twenty-first century it is important for archives and repositories and their collectors to understand that oral history tapes and transcriptions, when coupled with good pre-research and corroborated by other testimonies, are the most reliable means of determining historical, factual validity. The added dimensions of pitch, voice tone and inflexion, witness of the struggling for words, pausing and physical and emotional cuing are examples of what this discipline offers beyond what written historical prose can offer.

At the same time, the question of accuracy has always hung over the head of oral history as a discipline. What selection criteria have professionals, namely archivists and repository collectors, developed to amass valid historical testimony in their collections? We are entering a digitalized era where materials will become increasingly available on the web. Given the inherent ethical, privacy and accessibility of issues of open public access, archivists must maintain catalogs and develop finding aids that reflect and introduce reliable, quality testimonies. With an ever-increasing audience of students and researchers accessing electronically, the ability to describe and present materials derived

from good collection's policy standards will be of great assistance to upholding the quality of a collection. Thus, persons in the field must be aware of criteria assessment strategies. This paper will attempt to present major issues of collection criteria professionals hold themselves accountable to, reflecting the commonly held notions of oral history collectors in practice at the end of the 21st century.

This paper will present some of the practices of some of the important regional repositories in the field. Four participants will be interviewed for this study. Elizabeth A. Millwood is one of two persons responsible for selection assessment and the establishment of criteria for the Folk Life Collection for the Department of History at U.N.C.. Her background combines insights into professional practice in the field and the added dimension of psychological and educational perspectives. In graduate school she was a mentee of Dr. Charles Morrissey, a noted authority in the scholarship of oral history.

Dr. Robert Sawrey, Professor and Chair of the history department of Marshall University, brings a socio-anthropological critique of the field as that is the orientation of his program. Sawrey holds a PhD in sociology from Penn University.

Dr. Charles Lee, a professor of special and public history and Director of the University of Wisconsin- La Crosse Oral History Program, offers a historical perspective. He holds a PhD in History from S.U.N.Y.-Buffalo.

Finally, Dr. Rebecca Sharpless, the Director of the Baylor University Institute for Oral History holds a PhD in American studies from Emory University.

BACKGROUND: THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE S.O.H.P. COLLECTION AT U.N.C. CHAPEL-HILL:

In 1973, in an attempt to enhance scholarly study of the southern region of the United States, the Southern Oral History Program began to collect interviews with southerners who “made significant contributions to various fields of human endeavor.” As of Spring 2001, 2328 interviews in either tape, transcription or both formats were housed in the repository in the Manuscripts Department of the fourth floor of Wilson Library on the University of North Carolina Chapel-Hill campus. The program is especially attentive to the voices of societies’ marginalized with special projects continuously under development to “render historically visible those whose experience is not reflected in traditionally written sources.”

Materials are both produced by program staff, graduate students, faculty members or paid consultants for in house historical project purposes, or, collected via the acceptance of donations of tapes and transcripts of interviews conducted and donated by other researchers. Officially, the collection houses sound recordings of most interviews, with written transcriptions for the vast majority and abstracts or tape indexes for many others.

In 1994, a gift from Walter Royal Davis expanded the scope of the Southern Oral History Program’s project of recording as many perspectives on the southern historical experience as possible. The Davis contribution funded six projects focusing upon the way

North Carolinians have dealt with the cultural and societal changes since the Depression. Stylistically, the interviews are conducted in ways appropriate to the interpretation of history desired by the particular historical interviewer. Many take a biographical approach while other interviews focus on a respondent's particular experience with a specific aspect of history under examination.

Transcriptions, in many ways a poor substitute for an actual audio account of an interview exchange, are none the less available to the public with iconology that depicts important facets of the listening dimensions of hearing a tape. Ellipses denoting pauses are a notable example of transcription attempts to convey unique audio characteristics to a reading researcher.

EVOLUTION OF COLLECTION STANDARDS BY THE S.O.H.P.:

In the early years of the program, transcripts were largely hand written. Over the years transcriptions became more typically typed out. In either case, interviewees were often given a pre-editing perusal of the interview record to strike statements from, change testimony or alter it after further reflection. Thus, some were significantly reworked beyond the scope and original content of the interview form. The importance of tape logging (key words or elements transcribed in abstract fashion on a script marked by the counter time of a recording machine) was so emphasized that, in the early years of the collection, tapes of interviews were often not acquired or preserved. Not until the early

eighties were audio versions preserved to any great extent let alone transcribed as transcription that typically involves six hours work for every hour of tape.

The advent of the Davis funding gift changed collection policy at the Southern Oral History Program. In the past six years, audiotapes have been viewed as the most revealing tool of historical insight for interview testimony. With the money to collect or purchase tapes and fund time consuming transcript production, the S.O.H.P. fundamentally improved the value and dimensionality of its collection for researchers and students alike.

THE BAYLOR UNIVERSITY PROGRAM:

The Baylor University Institute For Oral History began in the fall of 1970 from collected aural materials housed in the history department. As its goal, the program strived to become an innovative center for southwestern historical research. It worked in conjunction with The Texas Collection, the university library's renowned memorabilia collection to update the 20th century segment of their archives for research study.

Gradually, under the guidance of Vice-President Herbert H. Reynolds, the Baylor program came to specialize in interdisciplinary programs. Specialties included oral history research and tapes concerning the judiciary and legal professions that came to be known as The Texas Judicial System Project. Similarly, a multi-denominational religion and culture project and a history of business oral history collection from the Hankamer School of Business were also created. Field interviewing projects for student researchers

were developed via grants from The National Endowment For The Humanities to immerse both graduate and undergraduate students in oral history course methodology.

In 1982, the program began to promote research in the field and offer public workshops to promote oral history concepts. In turn, the Institute began to broaden the scope of its research to National and International fields of endeavor.

Six years later, with the rise of interest of the field of psychology in oral history, the Memory and History program was started where the history and psychology department collaborated to create collective themes of research for students to participate in.

1995 saw the influence of civil rights activist and noted oral historian Julian Bond promote the program's twentieth anniversary project- a depiction of the interplay between the land and the people in the history and culture of central Texas. Subject collections have arisen dealing with issues such as cotton gin cooperatives, farm women of Buckland County and African American farmers on the Texas frontier. These programs have been specifically designed as projects of community history designed to link student research to the lives of the region's citizenry.

EVOLUTION OF COLLECTION STANDARDS AT BAYLOR:

Transcription, editing and indexing of oral histories were hallmarks of the editorial processing center established early in the programs history so that recordings were preserved on paper in transcription as well as on magnetic tapes. As much as possible, tapes were to be accompanied by transcription for later research providing traditionally

accepted written sources for documentation. Voice recordings were deemed original oral history documents. Funding was received for a full-scale transcribing/editing center. In the pre-style guide era of the seventies, visiting consultants like Charles T. Morrissey, Gary L. Shamway, James M. Wilkie and William Weinberg encouraged transcribers to not be stenographers but thoughtful editors who captured the essence of the tapes in creative, descriptive ways. As a result, unique approaches to processing tapes from their oral essence to the written form were developed. Editing of the oral tapes along these developed style guidelines has become the hallmark of Baylor's reputation in the field with this developed acumen being enhanced by the revolution in word processing technology in the years since.

THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-LA CROSSE PROGRAM:

Established in 1968 from funding provided by faculty oral historian Howard Fredericks, the University envisioned its repository as a holdings to preserve the heritage of Wisconsin and its contiguous areas. Its goals were to disseminate the use of oral history interviews for education, public service, research, public projects and public access to oral history resources. Collection policy revolves around two major themes: the community and the university and the documentation of everyday life inherent to that end.

In the years since, grants have funded special projects often done by students involving interviewing and transcribing of projects reflecting the program's mission.

Themes involve exposure of ethnic and racial minorities and their histories as well as individual working conditions, technological, commercial and ecological transformations of rural life to modern agriculture, rural women's livelihoods and the recent history of health care.

COLLECTION STANDARDS AT WISCONSIN-LA CROSSE:

The collection houses more than 700 fully transcribed tapes with an active schedule of interviews and transcriptions. Although the collection is small, interviews are completely transcribed by policy and fully catalogued.

THE MARSHALL UNIVERSITY PROGRAM:

Established in 1970, the program was started in conjunction with the history department as a repository for coal mining experiences and topics related to family issues. Since 1983, under the directorship of Dr. Robert Sawrey, the program was transferred to being under the guise of the sociology-anthropology departments. The focus of collection came to increasingly involve gender and ethnicity issue materials particular to the West Virginia region. At the same time, the program features a repository of accession material concerning West Virginia small business history as well as the history of West Virginia Vietnam veteran's experiences. Funding has been largely generated by donations from the Rockefeller Foundation as well as from small local grants.

COLLECTION STANDARDS AT MARSHALL:

Marshall has been able to fully transcribe virtually all of its oral history tapes in order to offer a complete series of both transcription and the aural.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

As a scholarly information source, oral histories serve an important function in any academic library setting. Pfaff (1980) and Zachert (1984) view oral history as a source of primary research material derived from question and answer format narratives that develop specific, pre-researched issues. Zachert, although working from a perspective of integrating materials in his paper into broader collection themes, brings a research librarian's method of evaluating the quality of primary materials. Gusts (1987) cites the importance of determining "the evolution of credibility" (p. 268) at the level of the interview. The problem for special collections developers in the library setting as defined by Huffman (1984) is that while there are criteria valued in the field, inaccuracies in the collected material are common. There are means, however, to detect dishonesty, reticence and flaws at the interview level. This notion is expressed in the field as validity, the degree to which a question elicits a response that actually serves as an indicator of whatever the questioner is hoping to measure, i.e. information derived and determined to be at once relevant and meaningful. Given the possibility for rooting out false testimonies, Howard, Hummert and Williams (1990) caution that there is "no proven technique for obtaining untainted data because human beings (interviewees) have implicit/explicit agendas in interpretation that stamps any recall with value laden perspective."

Howard et al., (1990) operate from the perspective that the accuracy of narratives depends on linking events in interviews to triangulation of data sources. They are critical because of the danger of bias. Bias is the most difficult element to appraise in this endeavor. There are also, problems of forgetfulness, self-delusion, reticence of interviewees, and biases of interviewers that potentially affect the validity of the oral history transcriptions (Cutler, 1984). For Pfaff (1990), the problem of object validity can be minimized if oral historians in their research employ and maintain control of interviews to discourage digressions from central topics (p. 568).

Fogerty (1983) supports the notion that oral history must be documented, researched and interviewed properly to derive the most accurate accounts from human memory. Research is used by interviewers to construct “broad based interviews that provide information pertinent to the interests of other researchers” (p. 157). Fogerty describes the issue of the value of oral history and how extensive pre-research can enhance the reliability of data. Concerned with the validity of the narrator’s facts, he is interested in how he/she controls his/her biases. This problem is inherent and unavoidable in all written history. As Pfaff (1990) suggests, there is no better solution than “tightly controlled, well-researched interviews to minimize inaccuracies and self-glorification” (p. 568). This mode of stressing interview tactics to assure construct validity (the need to which a measure relates to other variables as expected within a system of theoretical relationships) and the need for good rapport was useful. Ritchie (1995), too, supports the need for validity to come from well conducted interviews and scholarly analysis of relevant materials (p.8). For Ritchie, an oral history’s value as a primary resource will be

most valuable to future researchers where first person witnessing of events can convey accurately the motivations and objectives of the narrative actors being interviewed. “The historian/interviewers’ job is to pull together a multitude of evidence from documents, objects, interviews and other resources--weaving them together to make narratives that can create sense out of conflicting evidence” (p. 20). Thus, Ritchie states that the validity of individual interviews can be determined if part of a series of interviews on the same subject matter where testimonies can be compared against one another (p. 13). The construction of an interview schedule with clearly defined goals of what we want to add to the historical record and how interviewing a subject might enhance the probability of new, insightful knowledge is crucial (Lummis, 1987).

Pre-research before conducting interviews is crucial to deriving the best information possible from a source. According to Ritchie (1995), and Davis, Back and MacLean (1977), information that keeps dialogue going that is pre-attained (where subjects live, their community life etc.) and conveys a seriousness about the interviewer’s interest in the topic to his/her interviewee/ narrator (see also Dillon 1990, p. 152). In turn, this puts interviewees at ease to allow them “to then proceed past feelings of reluctance toward honest self-critical evaluation” (Ritchie 1995, p. 57). Convincing a genuine interest in what the interviewee is saying and its importance to history helps the respondent understand the importance of conveying thoughtful, accurate responses (Lummis, 1987). According to Ritchie, pre-research is the key function toward enhancing the building of good rapport between parties of an interview. When the subject matter is not well known by the questioner, interviewees become impatient. For Davis et al., such pre-knowledge

allows the interviewer to develop precise, incisive questions and formulate common specific hypotheses (p. 33). Means of deriving such accurate information are study documents and relevant oral sources, textbooks and scholarly works, local or family histories, newspapers and informal recollections of local persons (p. 87).

Derived content interview data must be “compared with both questions and answers with other sources on the same subject to show discrepancies and identify unique information to be corroborated in turn” (Cutler 1984, p. 97). Cutler, overall, serves as a negative voice on oral history’s value, citing biases, non-reliability of subjects to show that oral history is usable but flawed. Most disagree that written sources are more reliable, but accept his strong insights into the use of pre-research to exact truths. According to Ringelheim (1998), “any information derived should remind you of your research” (p. 22). Her research stressed validity, using good guidelines or in-depth research, suggested themes, questions and the conducting of interviews. The work, specific to Holocaust interviews, shows that the older standards still applied. Where “inconsistencies emerge between printed and recollected records the interviewer should have living sources attempt to resolve these contradictions” (Hoffman, 1984, p. 67). Reliability, defined as the consistency with which an individual will tell the same story about the same events on a number of different occasions and validity, the degree of conformity between reports of the event and the event itself as recorded by other primary resource materials” is ultimately best arrived at from good pre-research and is the hallmark of any oral history material (Hoffman, p. 69).

The task of steering narratives toward the truth is arrived at by the use of questioning techniques that approach topics from several lines of inquiry. (Davis et al., 1977, p. 6; Howard et. al., 1990, p. 58) suggest not asking general questions about an interviewee's behavior, that directing questions to focus on interviewees' activity with specific people encountered in a historical event bears better results as memory and the accuracy of narratives are more reliable when focused on the linking of historical events together. "The more complex an event sequence, the less likely a story will be accurate" (Howard et al., p. 58). Howard admits that while subject memory tends to be inaccurate, it is so in predictable ways that can be determined by "triangulation of multiple data sources" (i.e. the usage of archival data, testimonies and written correspondence). (p. 58) In the actual interviewing exchange, however, the tactic of asking a question from different angles and perspectives can increase validity by probing for admissions and opinions the respondent would be otherwise admit to more hesitatingly or at least not immediately during the exchange (Lummis, 1987). Similarly, a questioner should never simply listen to a response and immediately move on to the next question. Rather, the informant should be encouraged to volunteer more information via appropriate and expansive follow-up questions based on the last statement.

Accuracy of material that can hold up to the standard test of historical evidence can be determined where several narrators describe an event similarly (Davis et al., 1977, p. 6; Gusts, 1987, p. 268). For Ritchie (1995), such background testimony can aid interviewers who detect false testimony by having them ask narrators to elaborate in a way that would expand their exaggerations against an existing corroborated body of

evidence (Howard et al., 1977, p. 57). Where interviewees are giving contradictory or irrational responses, an interviewer should press them on it. Validity can be best tested by such confrontational exchanges, which although seemingly forward, are necessary to determine honesty. A respondent should be seen as a person “capable of debate and discussion” and thus not immune to such inquiry (Lummis, 1987, p. 68).

For Gusts (1987), honesty is best witnessed in oral history tapes from determining the friendliness of the rapport between two parties. Interviewees tend to be more honest when they know the interviewer likes, respects and is interested in them (p. 195). Similarly, for Hoffman, (1984) atmospheres that increase respondent’s confidence perseveres even when they are asked threatening questions (p. 82). Dillon adds that the characteristics of compassion, empathy, honesty and respect are means of attaining truthful information (Dillon, p. 145).

Sitton, (1983) finds non-judgmental, friendly and attentive behavior crucial. (p. 96) Ineffective interviewers can compromise validity of testimony. Actual projected stimuli, “age, appearance, speech, actions, preparations and credentials will determine how that interviewer is perceived by an interviewee whose content style and quality of response will be duly effected” (Hoffman, p. 72).

Interview bias, be it the making of biased comments, a lack of good preparatory foreknowledge of a subject, or a deliberate hurry-up approach to interviewing is a hindrance to getting the truth out of narrators (Sitton, 1983). Hoffman (1984) insists that interviewers should be aware of and conceal their biases. “Certain remarks, emphatic intonations or even a single affirmation if constantly applied can distort a respondent’s

account of the past” (p. 82). Biases allow interviewers to tailor their questions to fit pre-conceived patterns of expectations or allow the interviewer to make hasty judgments based on pre-conceived stereotyping. (Hoffman) On the other hand, pre-conceived notions based on pre-research allow researchers to make presumptions and find truths in what interviewers answer (Dillon, 1990, p. 133). Without pre-research, questions with false-presuppositions and indeterminate nature are asked and the likelihood of false answers is increased (Dillon, p. 133). Dillon’s chapter “Notions of Questioning” discusses validity of questions, question strategies and methods of deceptions but is not strong enough on pre-research aspects.

There seem to be common characteristics of interviewees that detract from the validity of oral history interviews. According to Dillon (1990), respondents commonly find it easier to not disagree with pre-conceived notions of interviewers, because they do not want to complicate the exchange (p. 138). Similarly, for Hoffman (1984), “correct premises or assumptions in questions (made by interviewers) can increase honesty and candor as they convince respondents that only a frank answer will be satisfactory” (Hoffman, 1984, p. 83). Narrators can also be deceptive due to their position at the time of events. Any intervention into the construction of a narrative is fraught with the possibility that the interviewer is intruding his/her own ideology into the process (Grele, 1991, p. 15). According to Ritchie (1995), the more distant a narrator is from the event, the more susceptible testimony is to distortion. Interviewees on the periphery need to offer testimony that is corroborated by similar witnesses (Ritchie, p. 18). The withholding of information by interviewees through “verbal signs of vagueness, evasion, contradiction

and inconsistency of answers” is another common hindrance (Dillon, p. 160). There is also a significant danger to validity where interviewees are the same age as their interviewer and of the opposite gender (Lummis, 1987). Finally there is the non-corroborative problem of an interviewee’s unstated, withheld information (Lummis, p. 88).

At the level of the actual interview, various strategies are used by historians to engender elaboration from respondents. Many researchers suggest the need to pause. Pauses give interviewees time to mull questions over in their mind and a delayed response can lead to very fruitful, information-laden answers. According to Ritchie (1995), when there are too many specific questions and not enough open-ended (how and why) queries, interviewees are stymied from elaboration as they are uncertain about how much detail in their answers is expected. Respondents, in turn, must be offered the opportunity to return to previously addressed topics when their recall is kindled (Sitton, 1983). Another interview tactic is the ability to reinsert questions that the interviewer did not feel were sufficiently well answered later in an interview. Such a method might involve a different twist on the way the question is phrased or the use of the same query in an entirely different context of the inquiry (Sitton, 1983). Verification of responses later in an interview can catch and clarify deliberate errors or non-intentional inconsistencies as well (Cutler, p. 83). In all, Sitton’s paper was designed for public libraries setting up projects. It has strong emphasis on pre-research and interview/validity themes (probing for information etc.).

The formal style of interview is the most interesting aspect of the process of garnering valid information. Morrissey (1992) describes the legal deposition style of deriving information. Such interviews are “adversarial charges and countercharges as found in litigious confrontations.” These are carefully pre-researched and verified accounts that have been proven to be the highest standard for “extracting truth in the face of exaggeration and deceit” (p. 4). Such a form of questioning may not be highly recommended, but for the purposes of this paper and determining validity of material, a collector or librarian finding such a disposition should view it with much credibility.

Sitton (1983) positively cites interviews that are chronologically or topically ordered as opposed to patterns that are developed in rigid, logical sequences. The latter manner is indicative of a poor listening interviewer who “restrains the quality or quantity of a testimony” (p. 100). As a general reference more validity is likely to occur in interviews where verbal cues, emotionality, the asking of physical descriptions or the replaying by going back in time of personal encounters are utilized (Davis et al., 1977, p. 20). Sitton (1983) suggests interviews that start with substantive questioning patterns. Questioners should construct questions from pre-research that one knows the respondent can answer at some length in a manner that conveys confidence in the ability of the interviewee to provide “unique and valued knowledge” (p. 93).

Generally, however, the consensus seems to be from the literature that an open-ended style of questioning best promotes object/content validity to engender the most reliable historical accounts possible. Open-ended questions are the best way for respondents to volunteer information or improvise about material that they think is

relevant to the subject. This strategy, if coupled with the use of specific questioning to elicit factual information, is a good way to combine the previously alluded to values of incurring trust, conveying value in what the respondent has to say. Furthermore, if coupled with pre-research knowledge and expectations, Sitton (1983) and Dillon (1977) relate that open questions (responses answerable in depth because they are subject to more than one interpretation) are superior to closed (yes or no) or leading questions (giving information to lead the respondent to confirm expectations.) According to Reimer (1984) too many closed interviews yield too many yes/no responses while a propensity of open-ended questions lead to an interview that quickly loses focus, purpose and direction (p. 23). All in all, for collectors quality oral testimony can best be evaluated by many devices of preparation by interviewers. The crux of the problem then is, to quote Moss (1984), “how credible are the facts at hand compared with known consequences of action and events recounted” (p. 98) In other words, the quality of the link between the historical evidence and the pre-research is crucial. Information must be thoroughly researched and the quality of interview must cover the appropriate topics and be cordial and candid on an equally considerate emotional level. Bias can occur where redundant language or disinterested, confused behavior exists (Moss, p. 99).

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

As a discipline, oral history's greatest challenge is overcoming biases about its ability to measure validity. Tapes and transcriptions are being collected not only by history collectors but by those in the anthropological, psychological and sociological fields of academia. Members of these disciplines have added to the conversation as to what oral history can be used for as a tool of social analysis. They have shaped the dialogue of determining the important values, applicability and need for structural guidelines and authenticity of oral history so it can be an accepted scholarly resource for witness and testimony. In interviewing practitioners in the field, I felt it was important to select representatives of American university history departments with backgrounds reflecting diverse disciplinary experience. By sampling those reflecting historical as well as sociological, psychological or anthropological disciplinary backgrounds, I hoped to highlight some of the accepted practices of selection criteria for determining the most valid interview testimonies. I selected five main issues or guiding questions from which to formulate my interview questions.

- Are there characteristics of interviews that detract or enhance validity?
- Is good rapport important between questioner and interviewee?
- How is validity (the degree of conformity between reports of an event itself as recorded by other primary resource materials) enhanced by pre-scholarly analysis of relevant materials?

- Do substantive question patterns or construction of questions from pre-research (questions that are easy factually and pre-known) set up more expansive answers and elaboration in interviewees?
- Can tactics such as verbal cues, the asking for physical descriptions, pausing etc. increase validity in respondent testimony?

METHODOLOGY:

My initial focus in finding the common, significant practices of selection criteria of valid factual testimonies by collectors was to examine the nuances of interviewing conveyed in oral tapes. Using U.N.C.'s Wilson Library archive in the Southern Historical Collection, I listened to tapes while following along via the reading of transcriptions. I planned to record various segments of interviews to show examples of leading questions, interviewee responses to particular interview insertions and tactics as well as a general evaluation of examples of excellent rapport between two conversational parties.

Initially, I intended to give taped samples to my original group of respondents (in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina area repositories) along with a survey of questions based upon my research and literary findings. However, my faculty sample pool did not seem to have the time at the end of a semester to give ninety minutes to two hours to such a pursuit. Opting for a forty-five minute questionnaire based upon the most pertinent issues found in the literature seemed a better course of action.

I wanted my respondents to possess either a master's in two academic disciplines or a PhD in an academic discipline emphasizing oral history collection. This narrowed the field locally and I decided to contact institutions nation wide by telephone. After gaining acceptance from an individual, I sent out a formal e-mail questionnaire. My findings and analysis are based upon comparison of the responses garnered from my pool of respondents. The questions asked of each were:

- 1) If you wanted to determine the validity of what an interviewee was telling you as he/she describes an event for which you've interviewed ten other witnesses, do you tend to use pre-research derived information in a triangulation of sources fashion i.e. using archives, testimonies and correspondences to corroborate something?
- 2) In hearing a tape or reading its transcription how quickly can you determine that the interviewer has effectively used good pre-research?
- 3) Why would interviewers' command of knowledge of an interviewees' experiences (based on good pre-research) reduce reluctance of response in an interviewee or even enhance their honesty and open self-reflection? (The literature consistently claims this—does it seem possible to you?)
- 4) Does the establishment of an obviously good rapport (respect, interest conveyed by an interviewer and congeniality conveyed by the interviewee) incur more honesty or at least, interviewee openness? Is that good rapport a positive towards gaining good testimony and even more honest responses?
- 5) In the same scenario (really good rapport is established) and then a sense of trust becomes obvious (interviewee conveys an early sense of trust that is obvious in the interviewer) do you see situations where the interviewer will insert a threatening, right to the heart of the matter question and the interviewee will attempt calmly to answer that question without hesitation or appearing startled. In other words, if a questioner wants to get the interviewee to reveal something they might not initially expect to get can such a “softening-up” tactic work?

- 6) Where there is a well-pre-researched interview going on but the interviewer is asking leading questions or commenting after an interviewee's response, "but don't you really mean..." to mold answers what weeding criteria do you use for such examples?
- 7) Do you think when an interviewer allows lengthy pauses after an interviewee has given testimony this encourages further elaboration on the part of the interviewee?
- 8) Does a sequence of closed, specific questions by an interviewer tend to limit interviewee elaboration?
- 9) What might be the advantage of an interviewer's asking questions in a historical, chronological pattern?
- 10) Is there any advantage toward enhancing the chance of getting reliable information from an interviewee by use of topically ordered question patterns?
- 11) Why would the encouragement of memory recall through the use of verbal cues, photos or the tactic of asking for vivid and specific physical descriptions of past things increase validity and accuracy? Is this device becoming more prevalent in the field?
- 12) Do you ever see interview patterns where the interviewer seems to be probing the interviewee with short, closed-answer corroborative fact questions to test the interviewee's credibility in responding about a subject?

- 13) Are open-ended questions more likely to garner accurate object/content validity responses than closed questions because respondents feel they have to elaborate more?
- 14) Is validity best derived from questioning techniques that approach topics from several different lines of inquiry?

FINDINGS:

The determination of validity at the interview level is an inexact science with inaccuracies in transcripts a way of life for collectors. Fortunately there are good tactics being practiced in the field for detecting dishonesty, reticence and other hints of validity inconsistency in any one on one exchange. It would seem that validity can never be accurately measured per se due to the factors of the shortcomings of human recall, forgetfulness, self-delusion or simple reticence.

Triangulation, the use of evidence from different sources or divergent research methods of collected data to establish evidence that is corroborative, is considered to be the best form of accuracy according to the preponderance of the literature. Elisabeth Millwood (University of North Carolina) accepts triangulation as a given part of the pre-research process while offering the following investigative tactic as a field tool for probing for validity at the interview level. The goal of a conducted interview should be to elicit an interviewee's description of events and probe that information by integrating questions raised by pre-interview research. A method encouraged by the history department at U.N.C. is a displacement to a hypothetical third person mode whereby an interviewer does not directly confront his/her subject with ownership of the question. Devices such as "I've been told that..." or "I've heard..." keep the interviewer in the position of being a neutral arbitrator of the query without having to be in any way directly confrontational. Similarly, a direct question taken from a different angle, or, a query to

gain elaboration upon the initial response of the interviewee become available options for the questioner.

Bias is different prospect altogether. Accuracy can indeed be sabotaged by intentional defensiveness or promotion of personal agendas. Yet it is nearly an impossible task to measure how much validity is being compromised by intentional misinformation. The issue that seems to be necessarily addressed is can bias be controlled by discouraging digressions from central, controlled themes ? A solution would require stringent research of documentation, thorough analysis of relevant materials and deliberate, appropriate questioning strategies to develop as solid an interview schedule as possible. Such discipline will serve to convey a seriousness and commitment to the project that will not only enhance the dialogue exchange but incur a sense of easement and commitment from the respondent based upon the interviewers seriousness in his/her work. Where multiple subject interviews can be arranged involving the same topic of interest, solid comparison can be made between testimonies that will highlight discrepancies and inconsistencies that will ease corroboration of facts.

The University of North Carolina Chapel Hill history department collects with the idea that each interview exchange is unique as a result of the variety of different participants and the diversity in situating topics of investigation. This is also a hallmark collection standard at the other responding sites. As a result, it seems that pre-research thoroughness is considered to be a very important step toward minimizing bias. Much of the UNC collection is made up of specifically researched, topically ordered interviews based on existing assumptions collected in an already existent body of research material.

Such a study based on a body of available evidence requires an interview approach that differs from a first time interview with, for example, an elderly subject concerning his/her own personal reminisces.

In evaluating transcriptions to check for a minimum of bias, Millwood suggests analysis of the way interviews frame questions. The most common problem with some of the collections' transcriptions made by UNC graduate students in previous decades is that such interviews often allow their specific research needs and pre-assumptions to frame particular questions. This serves to constrain a respondent from telling their stories openly. This is perhaps the most common and problematic form of bias inherent to the Wilson library collection.

Effects of constructive pre-research, according to Millwood, are evident where an interviewer probes beneath the surface level of the conversation with good command of background knowledge and factual evidence. This evidence can be seen in repeatedly incisive follow-up questions that make responses even clearer and tighter and more factually succinct.

Among the other respondents, the use of good pre-research is unanimously favored as an essential means of gaining a quality interview with the greatest likelihood of validity. For Rebecca Sharpless (Baylor), pre-research reaps great dividends as it allows an interviewer to "cut to the chase" and ask questions that are unique to the respondent's experience in a given issue and create interesting queries that build rapport. When there is discontinuity between the researched facts and the respondent's testimony, pre-research allows the interviewer to offer an alternative set of circumstances for the interviewee to

react to. Chuck Lee (University of Wisconsin-La Crosse) and Robert Sawrey (Marshall) concur on the value of pre-research, but for the former, the notion that pre-research incurs respondent honesty is hard to determine although it clearly “energizes” dialogue. In and of itself pre-research should uncover factual evidence by its own accurate methods while the willingness of an interviewee to be candid or open can be deemed irrelevant.

Interviewer bias is most notably negated when a respondent clearly engages, according to Millwood in an obvious, committed attempt to tell as complete a story as possible. Although there is no measurable proof, she feels that interviewees do find it a mark of respect that an interviewer has cared enough to do thorough research that undoubtedly decreases bias. Sharpless agrees stating that the good pre-research results allow the interviewer to offer an alternative set of circumstances for the respondent to react to when he or she has obviously made factual errors based on the research. Coupled with good rapport, this reframing of the question works quite smoothly and should derive highly corroborative testimonies. Validity, thus, is certainly enhanced by positive rapport, knowledge that the other party likes, conveys respect, is friendly, attentive, empathetic or non-judgmental with his/her counterpart. This environment seems to manifest itself in an increase in the respondent’s confidence levels. Millwood has seen no research that could decisively conclude that good interview rapport generally decreases bias but personally believes it from impressions based upon her experience. With respondent bias so difficult to measure, the UNC History Department stresses the importance of an individual’s personal narrative style and clarity of memory in determining that transcripts are worthy of accession.

Other means of increasing validity derive from tactics used in a researcher's questioning pattern. Approaching questions from several lines of inquiry seems the best way to mete out validity where responses manifest themselves in complex event sequences that decrease the possibility of testimonial accuracy. This can take the form of open-ended elaborations or expansion upon specific contradictory statements. Such an approach can be backed up in the post interview analytical phase by the use of triangulation of data sources to corroborate divergent evidence.

According to Millwood, some interview tactics for the UNC staff are not considered ethical in the professionalism of oral history. Where good rapport and trust are immediately evident in an interview, one should not see the questioner insert a hard cut to the chase question directly after a relaxed personal exchange. "Softening up" respondents is considered to be a journalistic device in the oral history field of practice and is not acceptable. These can take the form of a pattern of closed questions with easily verifiable, pre-researched answers available to the interviewer for use in determining the respondent's credibility of response.

Another device that feeds off of the good rapport conveyed between interviewer and respondent is where in a relaxed, mutually satisfying engagement a questioner will insert a rather direct, controversial type of question and see the respondent calmly answer the query with surprising lack of hesitation. For Sawrey, such a tactic is common but in and of itself does not consistently increase loquaciousness with the hope of increased validity. Rather, in many cases it fails with reticence prevailing. Lee believes this tactic may increase loquacity and validity because it serves to energize a dialogue pattern noticeably.

Taking a divergent view, Sharpless believes sudden insertion of a threatening query is unprofessional in nature. Rather, she considers the building of a pattern of questions that allow a person's narrative to flow logically and expansively toward a crescendo finale where more controversial, in-depth, reflective questions can be broached.

The insertion of leading questions is always a controversial topic in oral history. For Sawrey such devices demonstrate poor interviewer technique simply because such a method so greatly harks to questions of questioner bias and flawed validity.

Unfortunately, determining whether leading questions have stepped over the line into exhibiting such bias are one of the hardest determinations for collectors in the field to make. In shedding more light on why this may be so, Sharpless, in agreeing with Sawrey, cites the inexperience and over-enthusiasm of non or semi-professional researchers, often students, just entering the field. Positing another angle on this difficult to access tactic of oral history, Lee believes consideration of the degree of how leading a question may or may not be is irrelevant. He does not see the question as being one of an ethical test.

Rather, where respondents are allowed the opportunity to elaborate fully- to have the last word on raised issues of inquiry without being cut off or had their testimony disrupted in obviously deliberate ways, validity will have the best chance of occurring.

In the field of practice, oral history training dictates that threatening questions should be left to the end of an interview. Millwood, in supporting Sharpless and Lee, feels it is unprofessional to challenge an interviewee's telling of an event (when an interviewer questions its validity) in a confrontational manner. This seems to be the crux of how collectors look at testimonies to find interviewer bias and abuse of the exchange.

Millwood offers that it is almost impossible for even an excellent, experienced interviewer to never deliver a leading question. Practice helps interviewers prevent themselves from doing this voluntarily. On the other hand, one must tread the fine line between leading questions and a questioner's asides and personal comments that are so integral to the development of a good interview that in effect becomes an exemplary form of reflective conversation that build rapport. However, leading questions occur all too frequently in conversation patterns where it becomes obvious a student is out to prove or disprove a thesis. In the UNC collection this is most frequently evident in some of the archives' worst derived interviews-- often from dissertation candidates untrained in oral history and methodology. Leading question patterns do not elicit the most unique, valid responses.

Other unethical practices emanate from a lack of pre-research, deliberate hurrying up of the interview's course of dialogue, leading remarks or biased interjections or emphatic intonations. Intentionally or not, a researcher can tailor questions to fit pre-conceived notions or jump to unfounded or stereotypical conclusions without good pre-research and a well ordered schedule. One highly practical interviewing technique that seems to incur validity through its inherent encouragement of respondent elaboration is use of the pause. When a pause is used by an interviewer after the interviewee has given an answer of some kind it allows time for the latter to insert delayed responses that might otherwise have been cut off by the next question. Similarly, silence infers to the respondent that more elaboration may be possible which allows the storyteller to rethink on the subject and perhaps expand upon it. Much of this psychology revolves around the

truth that an interviewee who has been treated with respect will be more likely to want to please the questioner which seems to elicit valid responses more than contrived ones. According to Millwood, the pause or long hesitation before proceeding on to the next question on the schedule by the interviewer allows respondents this valuable time to reflect and elaborate. Professor Charles Morrissey of the University of Michigan relates “that good oral historians should be comfortable at a Friend’s meeting.” As an assessor of transcript quality, Millwood focuses upon aspects of an interviewer’s patience in the interview. There should be an obvious comfort with silence, not a nervousness, hesitancy or impatience that disrupts focused thought in the interview setting. Such discipline conveys to the interviewee an amenability that he/she remains free to calmly reflect. The three other respondents firmly advocate the use of the pause as an effective interviewing tactic as well.

Conversely, elaboration and its inherent tendency to promote validity are stymied by question patterns that involve too many specific and not enough open-ended questions. From Millwood’s experience, far too many questioners find ways to stifle a respondent’s elaboration. Yet specific/closed question patterns in a substantive fashion are crucial to determining validity in an interview. As a primary oral history tool, the closed question serves to establish and confirm primary facts and can serve as a test of respondent honesty. These base facts, once confirmed, should then be elaborated upon with a sequence of open-ended questions that encourage reflection and elaboration. Some of the most insightful material derived from interviews about factual events is incurred by this method. Conversely, while closed questions are an excellent way to confirm

interviewee credibility and frame a particular topic, a respondent's factual errors don't invalidate the quality of the interviewee's perspective that might lead to reliable information later in the interview anyway.

For both Sharpless and Lee open-ended question patterns are the natural format for conducting personal narrative interviews of any intention or scope. The benefit is that such questions promote interviewee elaboration although there is no true way of determining validity as perspectives on events are unique to any individual and, thus, a fact of life in historical research. According to Sawrey, it is equally hard to determine whether respondents are deliberately being biased. The best check for interviewers is to shape their questions through follow up questions to corroborate confirmable, pre-researched fact determinations.

Other valued patterns of proper interviewing to incur validity include chronological or topically ordered schedules. The other three respondents agree that this interview format provides the best structure and pacing standard possible. According to Dr. Lee such schedules are the accepted form of scheduling practice in the field today. Where several respondents are commenting on a similar set of event's circumstances, more corroborative validity will occur where a set pattern of questions is offered as long as they are based on good, accurate pre-research findings. The question of whether or not topically ordered question patterns promote reliable information for Millwood belongs to the opinion of the interviewer. It is a fact of human nature that five different witnesses will give five different testimonials as to the same event. Yet given a pool of conflicting perspectives corroboration can occur best when specific questions designed to weed out

inaccuracies can be used on a new interviewee and then later compared with the existing analysis to come to hopefully more tenable conclusions.

Validity can be enhanced furthermore when new questions arise from comparing new interview material to an existing body that allows a researcher to re-question earlier respondents and have the opportunity to derive yet more corroborative information. A chronological pattern, according to Millwood, depends solely on the memory of a respondent that is a factor of the individuality of a particular subject. In a recent interview with a ninety-five year old woman, Millwood found the respondent was getting her facts and testimony jumbled until she was encouraged into a chronological sequencing of her stories. Normally chronologically addressing an issue makes sense because a respondent can reframe their responses more accurately if their recall is conveyed in a story like sequential fashion. In terms of validity, a good interviewer who has done the proper quality of research can then assist in the process of rekindling respondent memory by assessing if certain tangents of a story are relevant to the focus and issues at the heart of a questioner's study.

Reframing past events through verbal cues, emotionality, the asking for physical descriptions of things in other time contexts or replaying events descriptively for a respondent to comment upon appear to excellent means of increasing validity. According to Beth Millwood, it is helpful to use such clues as photographs and documents to encourage accurate recall. In the interviewing sequence, the good questioner will ask his/her subject for specific examples whenever a general fact

statement is made. It is not considered ethical practice for a questioner to stir up a respondent emotionally as this tactic may be used to serve some implicit questioner bias. Evidence of such incitement is often not duly noted on transcriptions but will certainly be present on tapes. Presence of this effect for Millwood should not be confused by collectors with the interviewee's incitement of a respondent into experiencing very powerful, conveyed emotions simply through the power of a conversation. It remains a question of evaluating a researcher's intentions. Heightened validity can occur amidst an emotional episode as long as an interviewee is given the unobstructed freedom to communicate freely his/her responses.

Ultimately, all pre-research, analysis, development of rapport, question patterns and tactics function to create corroborative analysis tools for the crux of an interview exchange-- that is, open-ended queries. Open-ended questions lead to expansive elaboration on the part of a respondent. Where freedom and trust are conveyed between interview partners and factual knowledge and background material are well established, the greatest likelihood of finding validity on a subject matter follows. These types of questions serve as the forum by which the interviewee improvises to improve fact content and is encouraged to volunteer relevant information expansively throughout the communicative exchange. Open-ended questions without the establishment of their closed factual counterparts will elicit vacuous, unfocused often non-relevant information from respondents. Yet if they are never inserted into the question pattern, an interview loses its focus where closed factual questions predominate. The respondents advocate this tactic wholeheartedly. According to Dr. Sawrey, this device called "prompting" leads to

exchanges of higher quality and validity. While such methods may bring about strong emotional responses in respondents a collector's assessment on the issue of interviewer abuse is measurable by the persistence of the asked question. Such a function will break the bond of trust established between the two parties and incur low quality and very likely low validity testimonies.

According to Beth Millwood, a balance between the two types of questions must be reached. The garnering of relevant information comes about from a combination of the two types so that each is used to derive validity. Closed questions confirm facts while the open ones search for further elaboration on events or corroboration of common themes from other sources' opinions on an issue. Another dimension to the pattern, that of approaching questioning from different lines of inquiry can reframe questions so that an interviewee will eventually give a more clear answer to a query if there is still confusion. Dr. Sharpless and Dr. Lee agree that approaching questions from several lines of inquiry is an accepted practice in the field. Conversely, Dr. Sawrey presents the view that several lines of inquiry border on being "respondent-badgering." He wonders how the line can be drawn to tell whether or not interviewer bias is present where the differing approaches of the varied questions might be viewed as an attempt to adjust the course of an interviewee's narrative. He does not support this tactic.

Information from open-ended promptings can in turn foster new closed questions in a cyclical pattern that can continue where a researcher knows what he/she is doing until real factual evidence can be solidified into confirmable historical testimony.

OBSERVATIONS:

This study shows that there are many accepted practices by which an increase in validity can be enhanced for the benefit of scholarship. Pre-research, particularly the posing of questions developed by methods of collected data analysis like triangulation is considered vital to the organization of an interview. It ensures good flow and that both parties stay on course with regard to the subject matter. The maintenance of a sense of respect for the story of the subject is also vital as interviewees seem to take an interview more seriously where the questioner treats the matter with dignity. To minimize digressions from the subject matter, controlled question patterns based on a well-researched interview schedules allow for a probing beneath the surface level of a conversation that narrows the scope of the inquiry. Similarly, where inconsistencies of testimony arise, solid pre-research offers the questioner a chance to reframe queries in a manner that can make it easier for the respondent to answer more honestly when they are uncomfortable. Rapport between parties does not measurably increase the likelihood of validity in an interview. However, the consensus of the respondents to this study is that tactics that promote congeniality and increase the comfort level of both parties certainly do incur validity although there seems to be no data to support this. One helpful tool toward bonding parties is the method of displacement where an interviewer establishes a perspective aside from that of the two parties and arbitrates the conversation between the point of view of the respondent and that of the imaginary third person.

There are many hazards to the garnering of validity in an interview exchange. Examples of interviewer bias can be witnessed in some cases where leading questions, baiting of an interviewee or the manipulation of a respondent's emotions towards some extreme response are in evidence. Such incidences tend to exemplify unprofessional or inexperienced interviewing behavior and tend to distort the truth to lessen the chance for validity to occur. The consensus of the respondents to this survey suggest that the key hallmark of deciding whether or not interview validity has been significantly compromised is where a respondent is not allowed to give the last word on issues. A respondent's testimony should not be challenged by his/her questioner.

At the same time, there are accepted tactics in the field to encourage elaboration and, hopefully, increase validity. It is common practice to approach questions from several lines of inquiry to "surround" an issue and ferret out validity. There is also the asking of open-ended questions to increase elaboration. There is some tension over whether or not question insertions increase loquacity or reticence in subjects. Some experts encourage tactics that increase energy into an interview, while others feel they do not belong in an interview structure where an interviewee's narration should be developed logically based upon a quality interview schedule. The use of the pause by an interviewer to increase elaboration is a widely accepted practice in the field that allows time for a respondent to insert delayed responses of thought that otherwise might have been cut off. Other excellent practices are chronologically or topically ordered question patterns and reframing of the use of cues or memory prompters followed by the asking for specific examples.

It is difficult to measure the level of bias in a respondent. To establish the validity of a testimony corroboration is necessary which requires a number of similarly experienced subjects and triangulation of appropriate resources. Thus, the consensus of those in the study is that pre-research should uncover factual evidence in spite of an interviewer's deception or inconsistencies.

One of the real tensions of this study arose over how interviewers should use closed and open-ended question patterns to determine validity. It seems as both types have their merits a balance in their usage in an interview would be most constructive. The key point expressed by each of the survey's respondents, however, is that where testimony is uncorroborated on certain issues, it may signify the unique perspective or interpretation of the interviewee on an issue. This is why validity is not a key issue in determining accession of oral materials in a collection. Each perspective has value towards the ultimate goal of collecting information.

In summary, the key ingredient to be found in an interview setting that promotes the best probability of validity is a well-researched, respectful and professionally conducted interview approach that gives subjects unobstructed freedom to communicate freely their responses. Where interview tactics (i.e. asking leading questions, prompting or inciting emotional responses) are used, bias is measurable by the persistence of the framed question. Drawing the lines of where the persistence is too great or bordering upon respondent-badgering is the point at which the experts in the field most disagree.

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