In memory of my father, Fletcher Raleigh Yow,
who showed me the power of words.
And for my mother, Mae Moore Wyatt,
who revealed to me the power of imagination.

53058

RECORDING ORAL HISTORY

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR SOCIAL SCIENTISTS

VALERIE RALEIGH YOW





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Preface

This book is intended for use by researchers who want information on carrying out the recorded in-depth interview. Ethical issues, questions about interpersonal relationships, and techniques for interviewing will be of interest to scholars in the social sciences and also to those who use the in-depth interview to enrich their knowledge of their own history. Because I am a historian, I often take a historian's point of view and discuss specific issues of concern to those researching contemporary history by means of oral history methodology. But I also address concerns of scholars in other disciplines when they differ from the historian's approach.

This is not a guide for conducting a diagnostic interview, although some aspects—such as building rapport—are similar to the work done in an oral history interview. And although it is not a book intended for researchers doing focused interviews, the chapters on interview-

ing skills, ethics, and interpersonal relationships may be helpful to them as well.

The in-depth interview is a research methodology with standards of excellence and guidelines for achieving these, and I present them here. Hard and fast rules, however, are not always appropriate in approaching the in-depth interview. Often problems arise that require considering the consequences of several strategies and then making a judgment. Nevertheless, a thorough knowledge of ethics, legalities, and techniques helps in this process of deciding what to do. And an awareness of what is happening in the interpersonal relationship during the interview situation can make the difference between a productive interview and a superficial, truncated interview.

Because almost no empirical research has been done on the efficacy of specific interviewing techniques, I must of necessity rely on the consensus (when there is one) of experienced interviewers on a solution for a particular problem. I give examples to illustrate what I mean with the attitude that we are all in this together and that we learn from one another. I hope my readers will forgive the prescriptive tone: It stems from an earnest desire to help the individual beginning to do this kind of research and also from the conviction that this is serious business—this dealing with living persons. On the other hand, I have tried not to be formal because I wanted the manual to be "user friendly." I do not disguise the speaker's "I": This is congruent with my belief that the writer of this kind of manual is a guide, not an unquestionable authority. And although it is impossible to pinpoint the absolute truth, I can strive to be honest with my reader, indicating how I arrived—in terms of my own values and experiences—at a conclusion.

Oral historians are a helpful group of people, perhaps the most helpful of my colleagues in history. I am grateful for help given me by Sally Smith Hughes at the Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, California; Paul Buhle, director of the Oral History of the American Left, Tamiment Library, New York University; Jane Adams, Department of Anthropology, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale; and Linda Shopes of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Each of these generous scholars has read several chapters and given me perceptive criticisms. Ronald Grele, director of the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University, critiqued the first chapter. Carl Ryant, of the Oral History Program at

the University of Louisville, read the chapter on public history; James Findlay, director of the State Oral History Project at the University of Rhode Island, read the chapter on ethics. They have all given me the benefit of their reflections. Especially enthusiastic thanks go to Charles Morrissey, director of the Oral History and Archives Office of the Baylor College of Medicine, for reading the entire manuscript. With his usual good humor and sharp critic's eye, he has made invaluable suggestions. I must, of course, accept responsibility for this book's shortcomings, but without these scholars' help, there would have been even more deficiencies. And I wish to take this opportunity also to thank my students at the University of Rhode Island and Northern Illinois University for their enthusiasm and interest and for good times in our class oral history projects.