OHA Principles and Best Practices

Principles for Oral History and Best Practices for Oral History

Adopted October, 2018

These documents replace the OHA's previous Principles and Best Practices, which were revised and adopted in 2009.

Introduction

The History behind Our Work, 1966-2009, by Sherna Berger Gluck[1]

This 2018 version of the Oral History Association's Principles and Best Practices, like each one before it for the past fifty years, is a product of its time. Since the initial 1968 Goals and Guidelines was issued, the theory and practice of oral history in the US has become more complicated and nuanced, influenced by both the expanding base of its practitioners and shifting intellectual paradigms in a host of disciplines. The trajectory of the theory and practice of oral history itself has moved apace in what Alistair Thomson has identified as four paradigmatic shifts, each of which is reflected in the various revisions of OHA's standards and guidelines.[2]

Despite differences in focus, the early stage of the oral history movement in the Anglophone world focused on oral history as data, what Thomson referenced as "the renaissance of memory as an historical source.[3] Reflecting this thinking, the Goals and Guidelines adopted in 1968 by the academic historians and archivists who founded the OHA displayed an empirical/positivist bent, with underlying assumptions about objectivity.[4] While the basics remained unchanged, in 1979 an Ethical Guidelines document was adopted that basically provided a useful checklist to help those engaged in the various stages of oral history process.[5]

With the increased visibility of a new and more diverse generation of oral history practitioners both inside and outside the academy, and the growing influence of cultural studies and feminist practices, oral history took a new turn in the 1980s. As a coeditor of one of the earliest anthologies noted: "Now a debate emerged in the profession over the purpose of oral history: was it intended to be (1) a set of primary source documents or (2) a process for constructing history from oral sources?" [6] These kinds of debates, fueled by the work of a new generation of oral historians in both the US and Europe, flourished during the late 1970s

and early 1980s, reflecting what Thomson called "post-positivist approaches to memory and subjectivity."

As early as 1979, then president of OHA Waddy Moore had taken note of the changing nature of oral history, suggesting that a proverbial corner had been turned and that the OHA was ready to enter what he called "the second stage of self analysis."[7] Nevertheless, it was not until 1988-1990 that the next (third) of Thomson's paradigmatic shifts was evidenced in public OHA thinking: "the subjectivity of oral history relationships – interdisciplinary approaches."

Under the stewardship of immediate past president Donald Ritchie, four committees were formed in 1988, charged with revising the 1979 Evaluation Guidelines. In the course of their work, it became apparent that a new statement of principles was needed, and following the adoption of the 1989 Ethical Guidelines, a new committee was convened. The newly crafted Principles and Standards adopted in 1990 broke new ground. For the first time, the interactive and subjective nature of oral history was introduced; sensitivity to the "diversity of social and cultural experiences and to the implications of race, gender, class, ethnicity, age, religion, and sexual orientation" was specifically referenced; and ethical concerns were extended to include concern for the interviewee's community

By and large, the 1990 Principles and Standards and Ethical Guidelines stood the organization in good stead until the approach of the new millennium, when the vast implications of the digital revolution could no longer be ignored. Responding to the new challenges it posed, and engaging with the fourth paradigm transformation ("the digital revolution in oral history"), a Technology Update Committee drafted new guidelines that were adopted at the 1998 OHA conference and were incorporated into what became the 2000 edition of the OHA Standards and Evaluation Guidelines.[8]

Rather than respond to a paradigmatic shift, a committee was convened in 2008 to work on streamlining the OHA standards and guidelines, which, as Donald Ritchie noted, had become unwieldy and "more of a mini-manual than a statement of core principles."[9] Additionally, the various documents had not yet fully spoken to the changing constituency of the organization. The new revision, which for the first time used the terms *narrator* and *interviewee* interchangeably, was adopted at the 2009 Louisville conference.[10]

The regular reassessment of the values/principles and practices of oral history over the past fifty years has demonstrated a responsiveness of OHA to the paradigm shifts in oral history and in the various disciplines from which we draw insights. It has also helped to keep oral history practitioners sensitive to the impact and ethical implications of social and technological changes. -For those who have spent countless hours on revising these documents over the past fifty years, it has been a labor of love and a commitment to promote the highest standards of our craft.

2018 Principles and Best Practices Overview, by Troy Reeves and Sarah Milligan

For the development of this iteration of the Oral History Association's Principles and Best Practices, OHA President Todd Moye (2017-2018) convened a task force of twelve members under our stewardship, with an intentional inclusion of backgrounds from historical societies, community organizations, independent scholars, and academic historians from diverse

geographical regions, with representation from a variety of age, gender, and racial demographics, and experience.

We worked to blend the large committee work with a combination of video chats, email correspondence, and small group work, initially talking through reactions to the historical documents, bringing inspiration for various logistical and language approaches from related fields, and finally settling on priorities for what could be accomplished over the course of a year. We also grappled with what this document could and should be as a text living on the Web with a multitude of targeted audiences, most with their own specific need for direction. Early in the process, we decided to think of this less as a single statement of Principles and Best Practices, but rather a suite of statements and guides addressing multiple perspectives and needs.

We identified four core documents to prioritize from our initial discussions with the task force members: (1) a core values statement defining our foundational beliefs, (2) a best practices statement to outline the work of an oral historian, (3) an ethics document to define ethical work in our field, and (4) a decoding document for participants interested in understanding their rights in ethical oral history work. There are definitely more documents that should go into this suite, and as we have worked through this process and received feedback from our task force and other OHA members, we have compiled recommendations for the OHA executive council of work that needs to continue in the coming year(s).

Moreover, this version of our principles and practices, among other things, reaffirms not only respect for narrators and their communities, but also the importance of being attentive to those who are especially vulnerable; it reemphasizes the dynamic, collaborative relationship between interviewer and narrator, with a commitment to ongoing participation and engagement and sensitivity to differences in power, constraints, interests and expectations. These principles have been incorporated into four documents listed above (Core, Ethics, Best Practices, and Participant's Rights), as well as a glossary to help define more deeply some of our terms.

Two final things to conclude: First, as noted above, there is more that could and should be done. During one phone call, we referred to this work as "scaffolding." While we will take pride in, and responsibility for, our efforts, we understand, even relish, seeing the additions that our work will inspire and bring forth. Last, we feel the best idea in these documents comes from the Ethics piece, which asserts that the ideas in it "represent the beginning of the path toward becoming an ethical oral historian, rather than its culmination." So, too, all the thoughts and ideas in all the other documents serve as the starting points to becoming an oral historian.

We are more than grateful to the task force members—Ryan Barland, Doug Boyd, Adrienne Cain, Sherna Berger Gluck, Erin Jessee, Calinda Lee, Rachel Mears, Martin Meeker, Tomas Summers-Sandoval, Liz Strong, Sady Sullivan, and Anne Valk—who remained engaged throughout the year of this work and who volunteered their time and expertise to ensure these documents represent who we strive to be as oral historians.

---

[1] Gluck's introduction draws on both Don Ritchie's excellent, earlier "History of the Ethical Guidelines" (https://oralhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/History-of-the-Evaluation-

Guidelines.pdf) and her experiences as a 2018 OHA Principles and Best Practices Task Force member.

[2] Alistair Thomson, "Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History," *Oral History Review* 34, no.1 (Summer/Fall 2006): 49-70. For a longer historical account of oral history, see Rebecca Sharpless, "The History of Oral History," in *Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Thomas Charlton, Lois Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless (Lanham, MD: AltaMira, 2006).

[3] Thomson, "Four Paradigm Transformations," 51.

[4] In reporting on the adoption of Goals and Guidelines in 1969, the leadership of OHA noted "an opportunity and obligation on the part of all concerned to make this type of historical source as authentic and useful as possible"; *Oral History Newsletter* 3, no. 1, 1969.

[5] The Ethical Guidelines document came out of a gathering of OHA leadership at Wingspread Conference Ground in Racine, Wisconsin. See Ritchie, "History of the Ethical Guidelines."

[6] David Dunaway, "Introduction: The Interdisciplinarity of Oral History," in *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, 2nd ed., ed. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 1996), 8-9.

[7] Waddy Moore, editorial, *Oral History Newsletter,* Spring 1978

[8] Participants at the Buffalo meeting where the technological update was adopted recall the long, spirited—and sometimes testy—discussion that took place in two separate sessions. After the first lengthy discussion, the committee was sent back to incorporate the changes that had been suggested, and following another long discussion, the new guidelines document was adopted.

[9] Ritchie, "History of the Ethical Guidelines."

[10] The question of what to call the person being interviewed had been debated from the inception of the OHA, and although no consensus emerged from the 1967 discussion, the default designation until 2009 became *interviewee*; *Oral History Newsletter* 1, no. 1, 1967. Because there was insufficient opportunity to reach consensus on the revised document, it was dubbed a beta version—that is, still in process.